

There is no Urban Design for the New Post-Socialist Developments

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Abstract

This article tries to raise the issue of the current state identified within the new post-socialist developments regarding the misuse of space and finally, in general, the poor development of public space of these areas. For this to be achieved, the urban design concept is used as an indicator of a certain urban life comfort, going as simple as possible to the root of condition of the minimum requirements for existence: the quantity of public space. The argument uses Leon Krier's views toward the 'good amount of public space', linking its logic to the realities of Cluj-Napoca's public space before and after the change of the 1989's Revolution. The fact that the new post-socialist developments lack of public space determine the lack of urban design in these areas and leads consequently to a doomed way of living for its residents.

Rezumat

Articolul de față încearcă să ridice problema stării actuale identificate în cadrul noilor dezvoltări urbane post-socialiste în ceea ce privește utilizarea abuzivă a spațiului urban și în cele din urmă, dezvoltarea precară a spațiului public în aceste zone. Pentru a realiza acest lucru se folosește conceptul designului urban ca un etalon pentru un anumit confort al vieții urbane, tratat cât mai simplu pornind de la condiționarea minimă a existenței lui: dimensiunea fizică a spațiului public. Argumentul folosește punctul de vedere a lui Leon Krier cu privire la proporția potrivită (bună) a spațiului public într-o anumită zonă urbană, logică legată de realitățile spațiului public din Cluj-Napoca, înainte și după schimbările de regim din anul 1989. Faptul că noile dezvoltări post-socialiste duc lipsă de spațiu public determină și lipsa designului urban în aceste zone, ce duce în consecință la un mod de viață urban precar al locuitorilor săi.

Keywords: public space, built environment, urban design, urban development

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1. Introduction

This article can be viewed as an episode following our previous articles presented at the *Questions? International Workshop*, dealing with the same concerns and problems regarding the public space of our post socialist cities and towns.

If in the other articles [1] the emphasis was more centered on the theoretical perspective of public space and urban design, this article refers to a more pragmatic and precise problem that stands at the core of our *public space problems* or can be viewed as a background condition for a certain urban life comfort.

The title of the article consists of a statement that will be proved right in regards to our particular case of Cluj-Napoca's developments after the communist rule of our country.

The two entities that come in question here are *the urban design* and the *new post socialist developments*. If the new post socialist developments can be easily defined by the period in which they have appeared, having certain features that can be physically determined, the urban design realm has a much more theoretical approach that finally could be transferred in forms and patterns of the built environment.

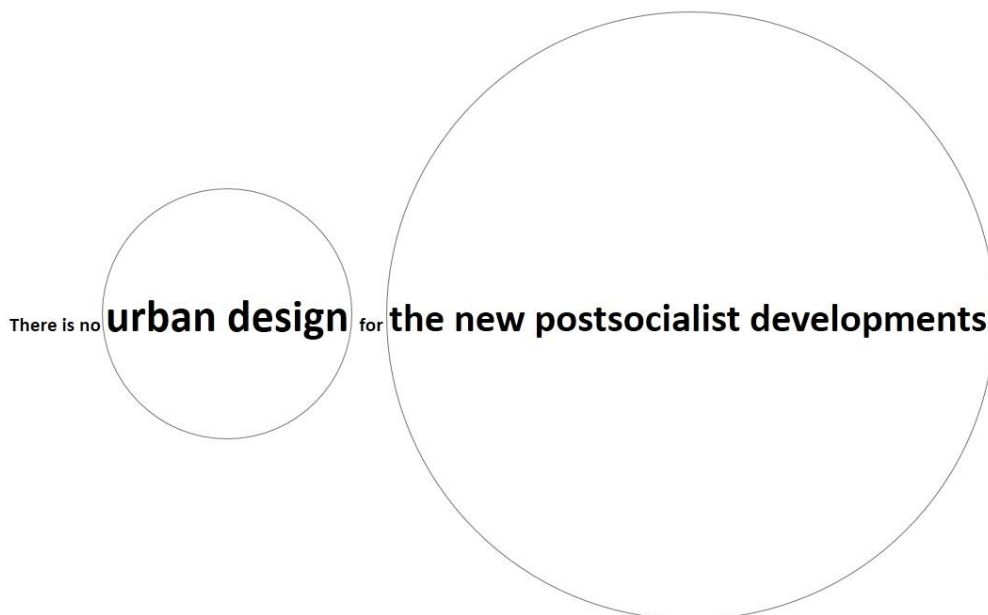


Figure 1 – Building the argument

2. Building the argument

2.1. Brief theory of Urban Design

Urban design, first of all, deals mainly with the public domain or public space.

Urban design draws together the many strands of place-making, environmental responsibility, social equity and economic viability (Llewellyn-Davies, 2000: 12) [2].

It also stands for a holistic approach to manage the built environment, being viewed today as an embodiment of the sustainability principles. This is the more general level in which urban design can be conceptualized.

Urban design should be taken to mean the relationship between different buildings; the relationship between buildings and streets, squares, parks and waterways and other spaces which make up the public domain... in short, the complex relationships between the elements of built and unbuilt space (DoE, 1997). [3]

So, urban design has this physical dimension that can be dealt with in terms of spatial measurements and arrangements of built elements into space. This approach is used in this article for argument of the headline statement.

There are also a wide series of perspectives that enriches the verbal collocation of *urban design*, mentioned by Alex Krieger in *Territories of Urban Design*. [4]

These different perspectives vary to a wide range that were summed up by Krieger in some categories as follows:

The bridge between planning and architecture – this particular perspective can be easily defined by the scale at which urban design operates (Fig. 2). It clearly embodies elements that transcends the two more formal scales – the architecture scale and the urbanism scale.

A form-based category of public policy – particular case situations can be interpreted in regulation policies that can be applied in similar situations in different urban settings, urban design being the physical expression of urbanism.

The other perspectives are: *The architecture of the city, Urban design as restorative urbanism, Urban design as „place-making”, Urban design as „smart growth”, The infrastructure of the city, Urban design as „landscape urbanism”, Urban design as visionary urbanism, Urban design as community advocacy (or doing no harm).*

Leon Krier, Christopher Alexander, Jane Jacobs, Camillo Sitte, William H. Whyte, Colin Rowe, Gordon Cullen, Kevin Lynch, Jan Gehl are just a few personalities that have contributed to the current perception of urban design.

In recent years the *Urban Design* meaning has evolved to an enriched complexity comparable to that of *Sustainable Development*.

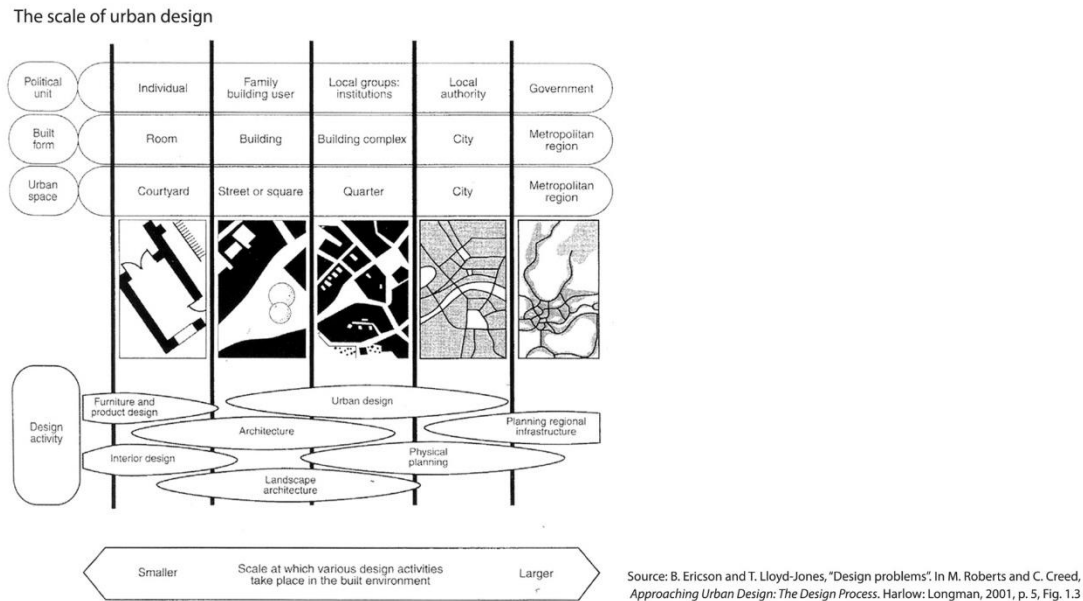


Figure 2 – The scale of urban design

2.2. The new post socialist developments

To somehow explain the new post socialist developments' urban form we can trace some of its features in the nowadays historical urban forms of capitalist era and socialist era of our Romanian cities.

To sustain the link between these urban forms (those of the past and those of the present) we can use a system of comparing the characteristics of urban pattern using these 500 by 500 meters *urban fragments*, in which the shape and size of the public domain is emphasized (Fig. 3).

As stated before [5], the public space of the new post socialist developments can be defined by a hybrid between pre-socialist public space (a capitalist form) and the indifference characteristic to the socialist public space (Fig. 4).

In the beginning of the 20th century our country was ruled by a capitalist order, been on the same path as the other western European countries despite our geographical position. This fact has traces in the urban textures resulted by projects realized at that date, that nowadays are some of the best appreciated places to live in Cluj-Napoca – Andrei Mureșanu Neighborhood and Grigorescu Neighborhood. The socialist era, using some of the principles of modernist urbanism and Athens Charter (1933) organized the city as a composition of volumes placed in voids (green space), but where the public space cannot be well defined and consequently cannot gain a certain identity. This is the reason we named this attitude *indifferent* towards *the resulted* public space. On the other hand, the pre-socialist developments had clear elements used in the fabrication of urban public space: a network of well-defined streets, squares and green areas, each of these elements with a certain recognizable identity marked by their shape and by the disposal of the buildings that defined them.

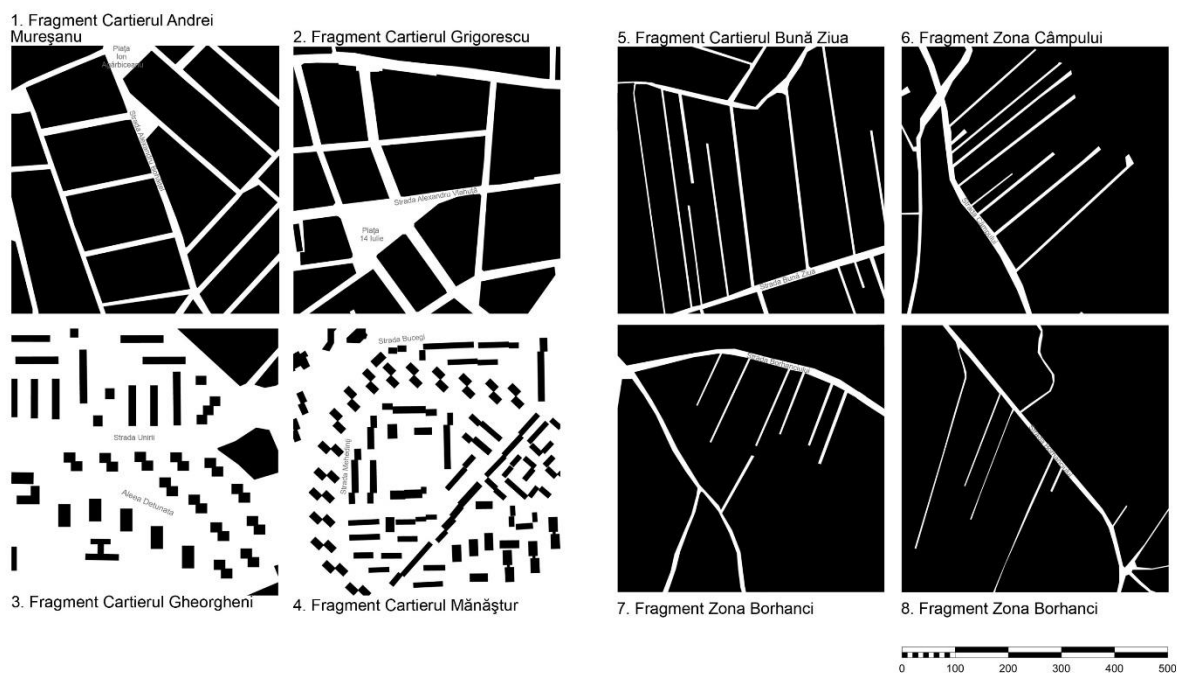


Figure 3 – Fragments of Cluj-Napoca characteristic for the last century and today developments [6]

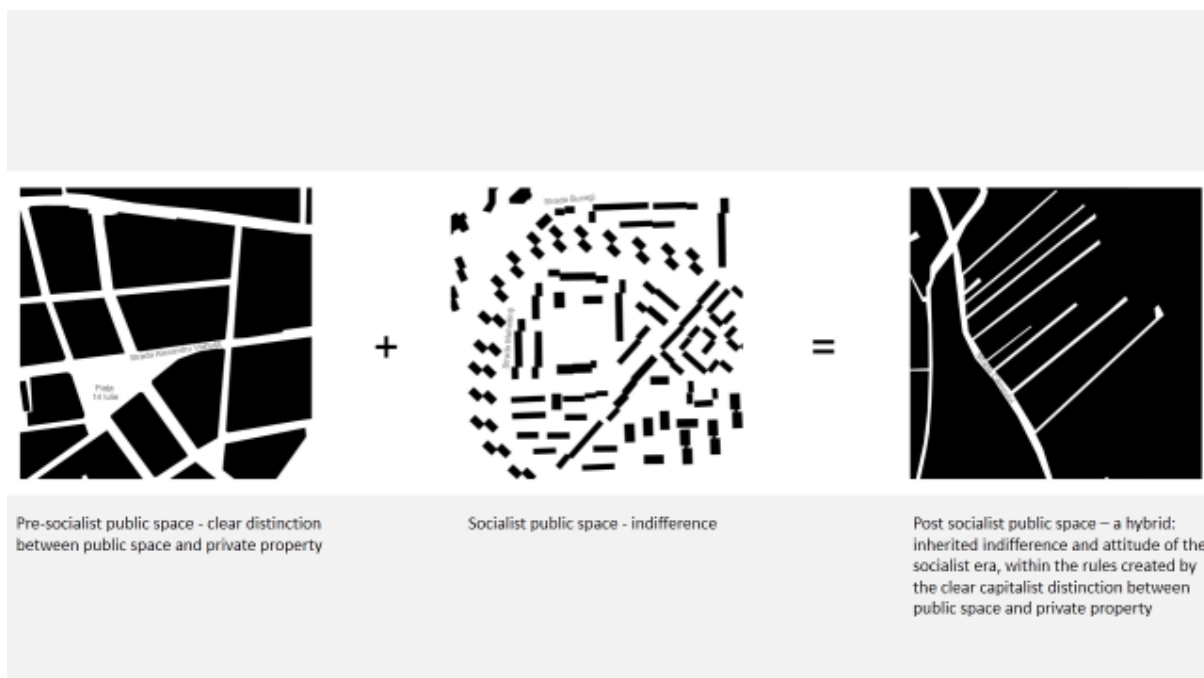


Figure 4 – *The hybrid* [7]

2.3. Relative quantity of public space

Referring to the relation between the amount of public space and private space within a certain area, Leon Krier states the fact that there is a certain ‘optimum’ proportion that could be the foundation which ignites a certain urban life comfort, or at least makes for a part of the hypothesis which, by adding other factors, could lead to that desired urban life comfort. [8] (Fig. 5)

These relative proportions (Fig. 5) are linked by the author to historical periods of time ranging from mid XIXth century to late XXth century, adding the desired optimum proportion of 25 – 35 % of public space within a specific area of urban fabric. What is interesting regarding this intuitive thesis is that Leon Krier identifies the fact that there is such thing as ‘too much public space’, fact disregarded by the practicing and theoretical urban planners in the socialist era. The socialist space being ‘too much’ lacked quality having a very confusing identity or none whatsoever.

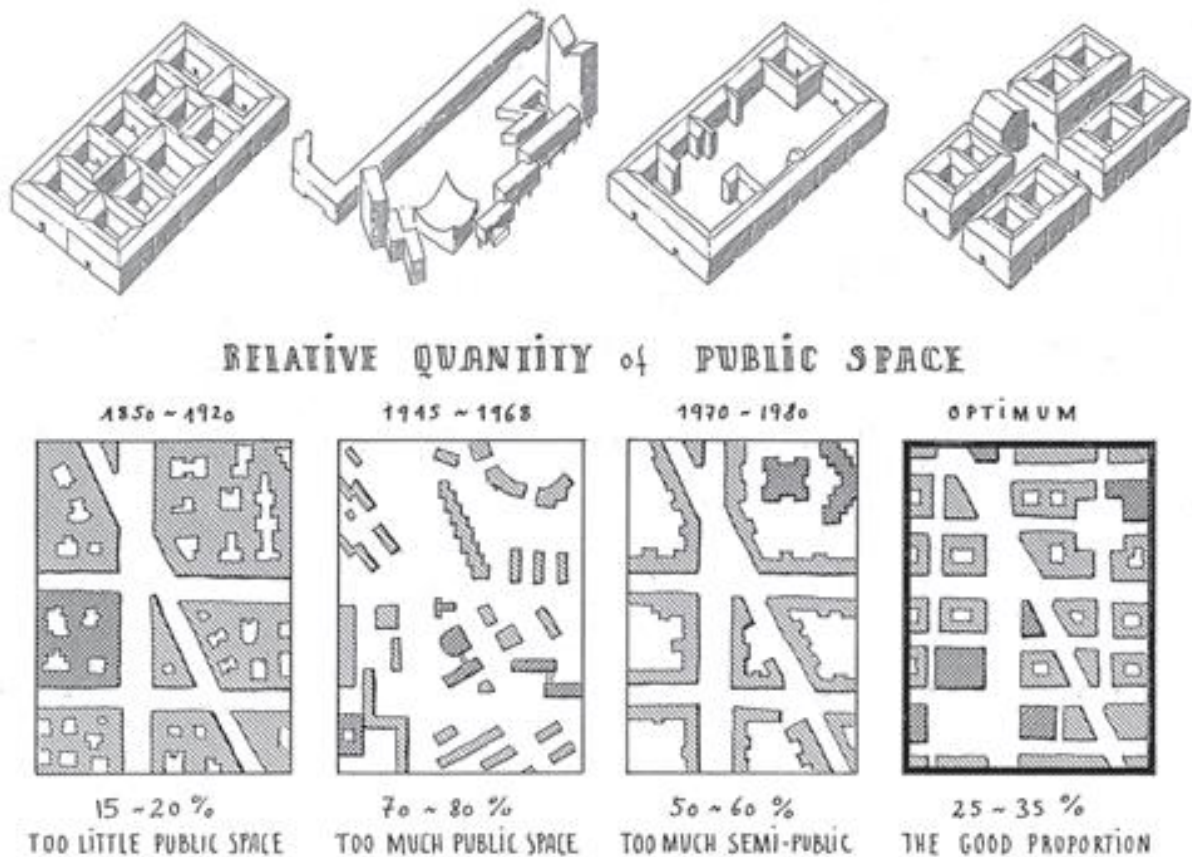


Figure 5 – Relative quantity of public space, Leon Krier, (2009), *The architecture of community*, Island Press, Washington, p. 169

These stages of progression/regression of the proportions of public/private spaces could be identified in Cluj-Napoca’s urban development history: 1st – beginning of the XXth century, 2nd - first wave of socialist developments, 3rd – second wave of socialist developments

(densification of existing developments and new neighborhoods), and 4th stage which is specific to the former socialist countries turned capitalist in the early 90^s (not represented in Krier's drawing) - the *'hybrid development'* (Fig. 4).

The quantity of public space is not the singular condition to achieve a certain quality of public space. The quantity of public space can be seen as a necessary but not sufficient variable. This necessity is overviewed by our policy decision actors, architects and urban planners as well, leaving no future possibility for managing and design of the physical public realm. All of the public space is determined by the minimum size requirements of automobile access or transit.

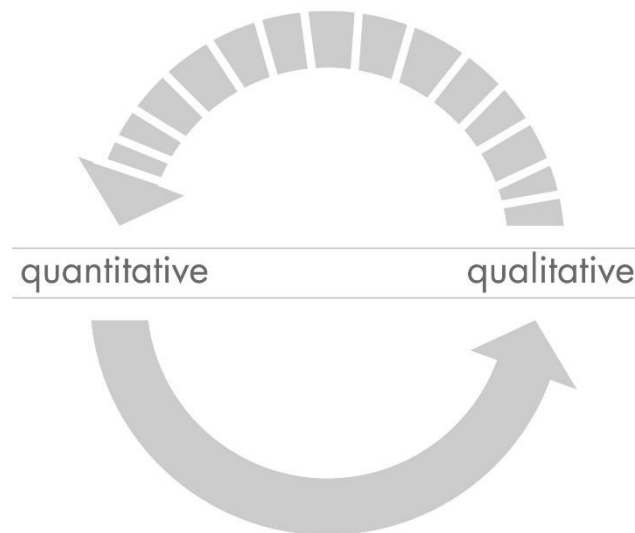


Figure 6 Quantity of public space is the basic condition for developing quality public space

3. Local context

With this simple but eloquent theory in mind we can focus on the same fragments of urban fabric used in the previous article and identify the precise relation between the amount of private space and public space existing in these areas. (Fig. 7)

So we have the first two fragments studied (from Andrei Mureșanu neighborhood and from Grigorescu neighborhood) with 17,6 % and 26,1% amount of public space which is close to the lower limit of Leon Krier's 'good proportion' of public space in certain area of urban fabric; and 3rd and 4th fragments specific to the socialist developments (Gheorgheni neighborhood and Mănăștur neighborhood) with 78,7% and 80,2% amount of obviously too much public space.

To further visualize the impact of these relative quantities of public space specific to the selected areas of urban fabric analyzed, Figures 8, 9, 10 and 11 present aerial views of the areas – the quality of the specific spaces can be identify by the economic value of properties expressed by the preference of people living in certain areas of the city.

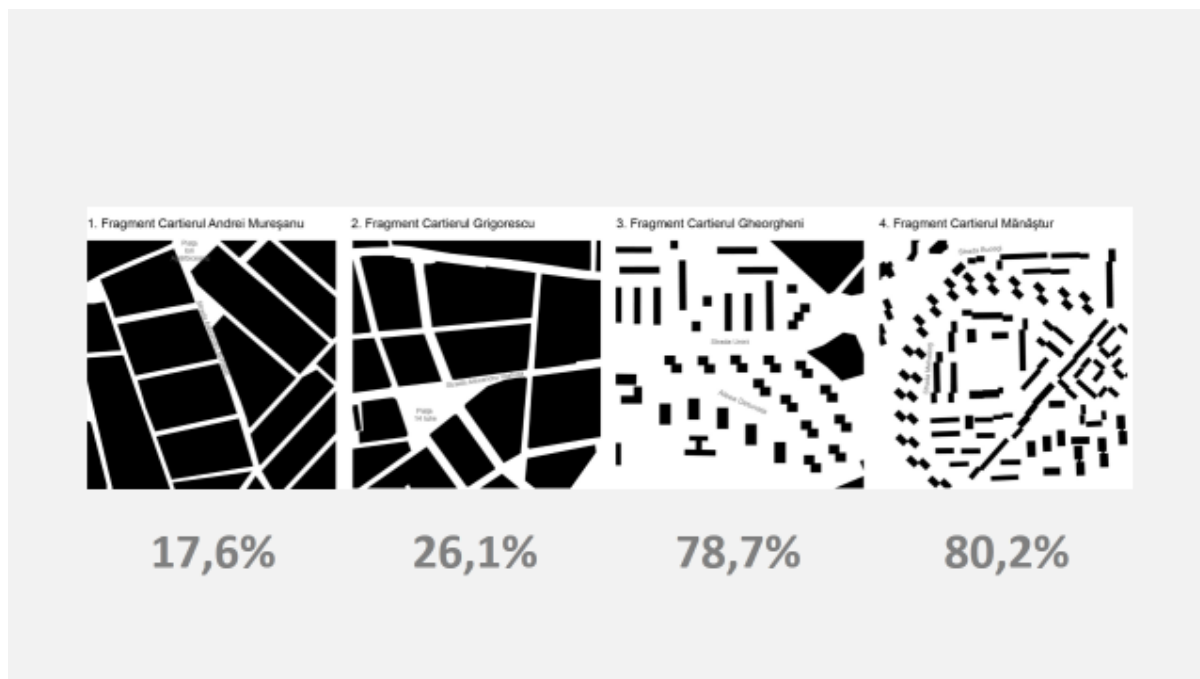


Figure 7 – Amount of public space in the studied areas of urban fabric



Figure 8 – Aerial view of the Andrei Mureșanu fragment of urban fabric

The Andrei Mureșanu neighborhood falls short from the ‘good proportion’ with its 17,6 % amount of public space, which can be explained by the dominant typology of single family detached house for which this area was planned. Recent years faced the area with the economic pressure of building denser typologies of housing due to the high prices of land.

These high prices (one of the highest in the city) are the combined effects of position relative to the historical center, and maybe the most important, the quality of public space and of the urban fabric (urban islands formed by a relative high density of streets with great identities, well designed and comfortable dimensions).



Figure 9 - Aerial view of the Grigorescu fragment of urban fabric



Figure 10 - Aerial view of the Gheorgheni fragment of urban fabric

The studied area which comes closest to the ‘good proportion’ of Leon Krier’s language is the fragment of Grigorescu neighborhood. Here, besides the relative good dimensions and frequency of streets, we can identify another element of public space – a green public space

(14th of July Park). The presence of the park makes the proportion of the public space to be within the Krier's 'good proportion' interval.

The Gheorgheni fragment falls short under the Mănăştur fragment regarding the amount of existing public space, even though the built environment appears less denser than of the other 'socialist cousin'. This can be explained by the fact that a lot of the green area situated to the south of the neighborhood is without general public access, thus with less public space.



Figure 11 - Aerial view of the Mănăştur fragment of urban fabric

One of the densest built areas of Cluj-Napoca is represented by this fragment of Mănăştur neighborhood. The amount of public space is 80,2 %. All of this public space is made up by space with very low identifiable places, and thus a very confusing space.

On the other hand, *the hybrid*, represented by the post-socialist developments of various parts of the city area, is characterized by some values that are not even considered by Leon Krier's idea of amount of public space of a city, falling under the 'too little public space' of 15 – 20 %. (Fig. 12) Some of these areas still have some chance of improvement still being under development, but some like Bună Ziua neighborhood, being almost fully built areas, are doomed to a ghettoize way of living.

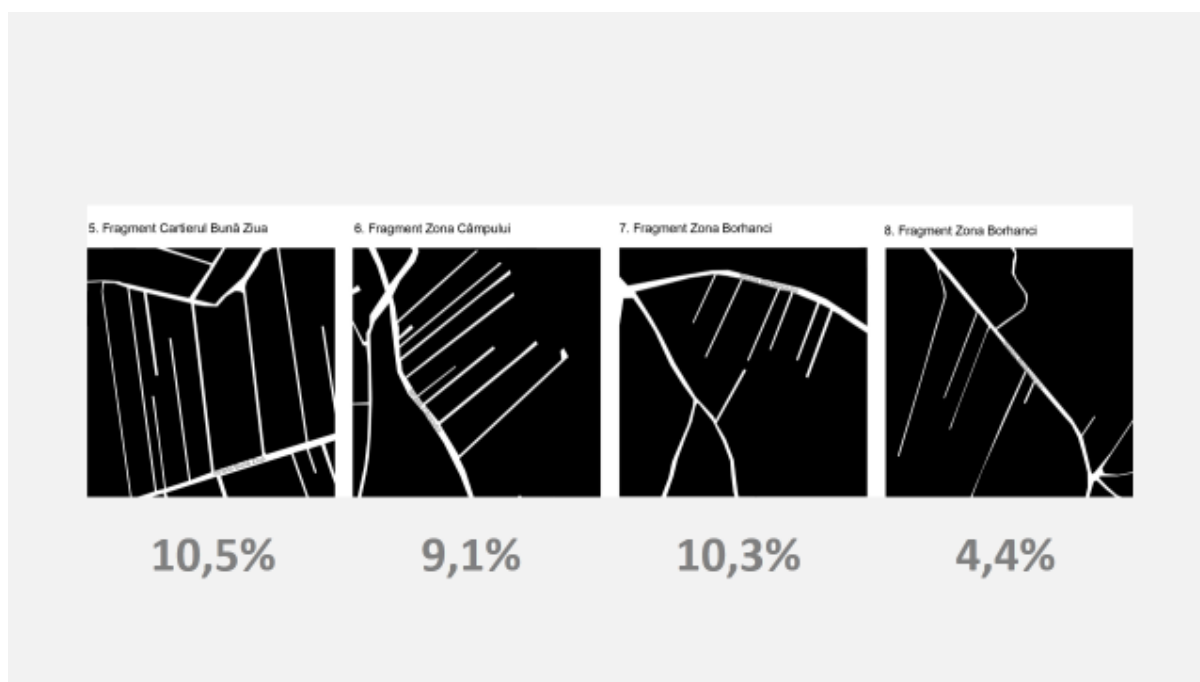


Figure 12 - Amount of public space in the studied areas of urban fabric – post-socialist areas



Figure 13 - Aerial view of the Bună Ziua fragment of urban fabric

The Bună Ziua neighborhood fragment has a 10,5 % amount of public space being almost fully developed (the aerial view presents an older situation, nowadays the built environment is more developed but the street fabric is the same). The restructure of the area to a more

comfortable way of urban living will be very difficult due to the path of this indifference toward the public space.

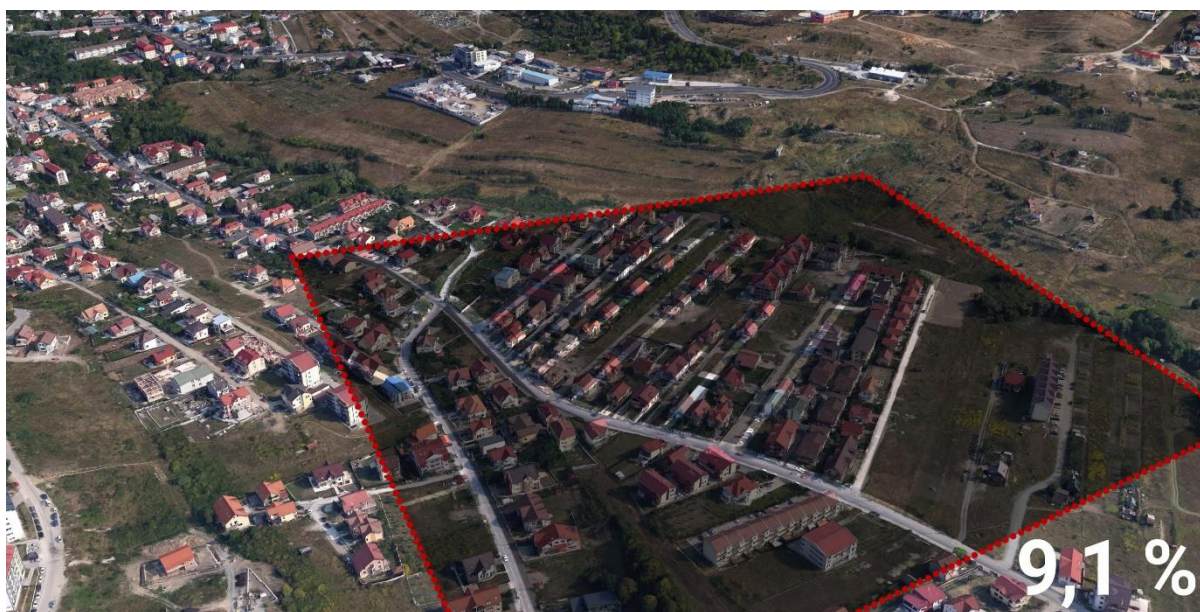


Figure 14 - Aerial view of the Câmpului fragment of urban fabric

The Câmpului fragment has the same characteristics regarding the public space as Bună Ziua neighborhood fragment – also difficult even to think about increasing the amount of public space to at least a 20 % value.



Figure 15 - Aerial view of the Borhanci fragment of urban fabric



Figure 16 - Aerial view of the Borhanci fragment of urban fabric

The Borhanci studied fragments, being less built, at least have the small possibility of reconfiguring towards an organized neighborhood with more public space. This possibility is decreasing day by day by the fact that the way we develop our cities is on this destructive path of short term perspective (private economic gaining) and not a long term perspective of environmental and social gaining.

The attitude of the post socialist developments towards the public space cuts down from the root even the chance of future generations to reorganize certain parts of city, the only foreseeable possibility being the demolition of big parts of the previously built elements.

4. There is no urban design for the new post socialist developments

We have seen that urban design deals mainly with the configuration of public space. Using Leon Krier's language we have seen that there is a certain amount of public space that makes the good proportion of public space within a certain urban fabric. We have also seen that the amount of public space characteristic to the post-socialist developments of Cluj-Napoca falls under the amount of 'too much little public space' of 15-20 % considered by Krier's intuitive logic. This small amount of public space, only configured for the minimum requirements of motorized transportation cannot come even in the range of public space characteristic to traditional urban patterns, therefore we can assert that the public space (as a place for socializing, interaction, spending free time etc.) doesn't even exist in these new socialist developments. If the public space isn't there, urban design which is based on the configuration and organization of public space loses its primary material and ceases to be considered. (Fig. 17)

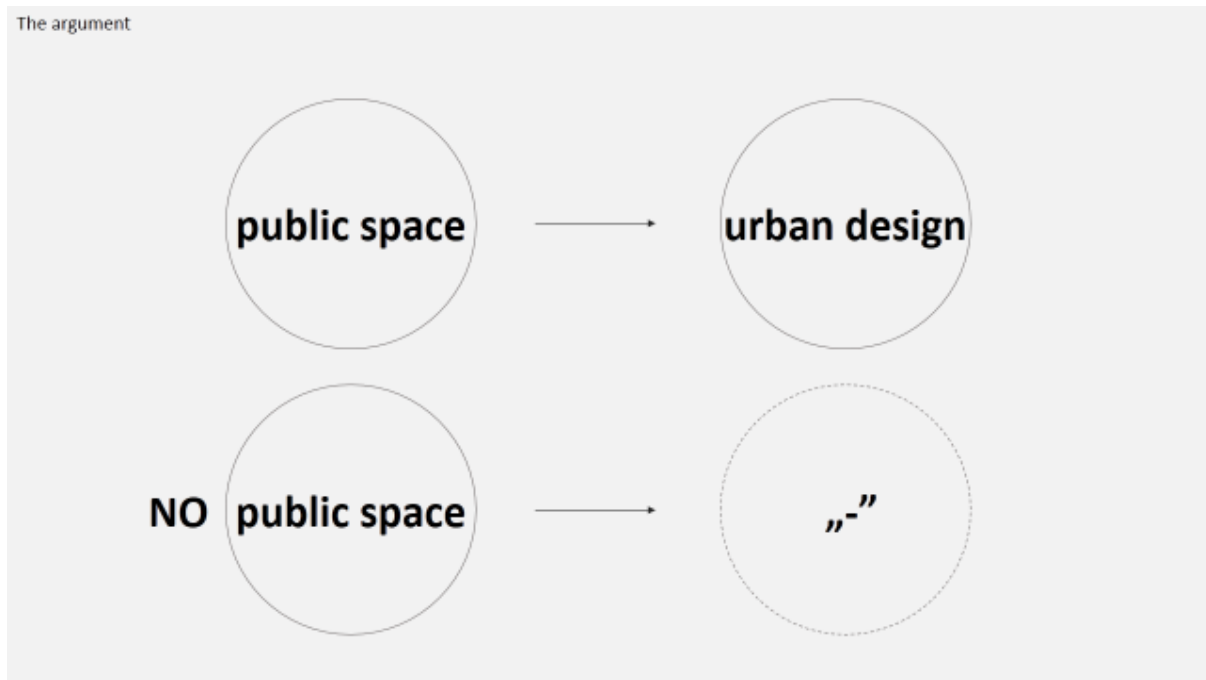


Figure 17 – the argument

The consequences are terrible not only for these areas in particular, but for the whole city. Here we can trace some of the generators of the car traffic due to the great distances to all the facilities needed within a neighborhood or community.

So, for the new post-socialist developments the fact that there is *no public space* cannot lead to *urban design* but something else. It's less space for green spaces, less space for public squares, less space for streets with personality.

It is less everything that makes a city urban.

5. References

[1] *Urban Design* (Questions? 2013), *Substantiation Survey - Analysis of Urban Structure* (Questions? 2014), *Public Space as a Sustainable Built Environment Feature* (Questions? 2015)

[2] Lang, Jon, *Urban Design: A Typology of Procedures and Products*, Elsevier, Oxford, p. 6, 2005

[3] idem

[4] Krieger, Alex, William S. Saunders, (editors), *Urban Design*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p. 113, 2009

[5] In the article „*Public Space as a Sustainable Built Environment Feature*”, Acta Technica Napocensis: Civil Engineering & Architecture (Special Issue: Sustainable Development and the Built Environment. QUESTIONS 2015), Vol. 58, No. 4

[6] Olănescu, Octav Silviu, Mihaela Ioana Agachi, (2015), „*Public Space as a Sustainable Built Environment Feature*”, Acta Technica Napocensis: Civil Engineering & Architecture (Special Issue: Sustainable Development and the Built Environment. QUESTIONS 2015), Vol. 58, No. 4, p. 41

[7] Ibidem, p. 42

[8] Krier, Leon, *The architecture of community*, Island Press, Washington, p. 169, 2009