Letters, Plans, and Walls: Architects and Archaeologists in the 1960s Bucharest

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The letters

At the end of December 1962, a copy of a document that was neither dated, nor signed landed on the desk of the then-president of the State Committee for Architecture and Systematization (SCAC) in Bucharest, Romania. The original letter had been forwarded by the vice president of the Central Committee for Culture, directly subordinated to the Council of Ministers, which had received the original document. The text stood as an open accusation against two important institutions within the network of the socialist system of urban planning: 1) the Department for Historical Monuments (*Direcţia Monumentelor Istorice*, DHM henceforth), and 2) the "Project Bucharest" Institute of Architectural Design and Planning (*Project Bucharest*), both subordinated to SCAC. The letter-writers incriminate the two institutions for having critically endangered a major historical site of Bucharest: the ruins of the Old Court, a location that had been the residence of the princess of Wallachia during the 16th and 17th centuries.

The letter described the situation of the Old Court's ruins, which had been "caught" within, and thus incidentally preserved by, the newer architectural landscape of the area. After the dismantling of the Court at the end of the 18th century, the older walls of the Princely Palace became gradually incorporated into the new buildings erected on the site. The letter came in fact as an immediate reaction to the plans for remodeling Union Square, one of the major squares of Bucharest that neighbored the Old Court area. The letter accused the architects working for *Project Bucharest* of ignorance on the topic of local urban history. The writers proposed instead the establishment of a separate commission that would work under the direct supervision of the socialist state's supreme body: the Council of Ministers. The writers asked that the approach to monument preservation be radically redefined by being taken out from the institutional umbrella of SCAC and hence of architecture as a disciplinary field. Also, the writers requested a special commission that would supervise a "unique museum in the country," an open archaeological site/historical reservation that differs from other archaeological sites of national importance. In other words, through remaking the Old Court into a reservation, the Museum would have achieved much more visibility among the city's institutions and thereby potentially acquire more privileges and resources from the center.

Obviously, the letter stirred up a hornet's nest within the State Committee for Architecture. As I will show, the response drafted by the latter aimed therefore to restore a political hierarchy and series of alliances potentially threatened by the first letter. This written exchange, mediated by the Central Committee for Culture of the Council of Ministers as the

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direct recipient of both letters, not only concerned a strict access to resources, but also aimed at securing and assigning political legitimacy to certain networks and forms of expertise.

These fiery debates over the historical value of the Old Court site must be set within the wider process of remaking disciplinary and professional boundaries in a newly centralized institutional network of the socialist state. In this network in which the resources distributed by the center became scantier, the various professional groups had to fight harder to assign stronger political meanings to their specific research interests if they wanted to obtain further funding. The struggle over the meanings of the Old Court—ranging from representing a historical site of national importance for archaeologists, to being dismissed as ruins buried underground by Project Bucharest's architects working on the remodeling of the area—points out the more complex mechanisms of the struggle for resources through diverging disciplinary visions on what the past is and where it can be found. To understand those mechanisms, we must first examine the two operations underway in the middle of the city as interconnected projects. The radical transformation of the city landscape entailed a double process of unearthing the city's grounds while building its socialist future. I will first discuss the plan of remodeling Bucharest into a socialist capital, to focus then on the reconfiguration of professional and political alliances under way in the background. More specifically, I examine the tense relationship between the architects employed to redesign the urban texture of the city and the archaeologists called upon to produce a (new) history for the same city. I approach the two groups as part of the new socialist regimes of expertise, which were called upon to endorse particular representations of "the past" and "the future." Moreover, we should situate the debates on the aesthetic form and historical meaning of the Old Court within the broader discussions over the aesthetic options available in the architectural field in a post-socialist realist time. Far from being merely technical or professional considerations, those debates were thoroughly saturated with the negotiations of the political moment.

A growing body of work on Soviet culture and history has been approaching architecture as a particularly relevant domain to analyze the changes in the models of aesthetic representation that accompanied shifts in the internal and external policy of the Soviet state. Paperny (2002 [1996]) offers a binary analysis of architecture and arts in Soviet society, in which Culture One expresses the "fluidity" of the Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s and a democratic horizontality in architectural vocabulary, while Culture Two represents the freezing absolutism of Stalin's epoch, whose hierarchy and authority come to be architecturally represented by the seven Stalinist skyscrapers. Paperny's view is challenged by Boris Groys, who argues that the tenets of the 1920s avant-gardes directly informed Socialist Realism, in that "the production of images in Socialist Realism served above all to depict the utopia of a happy future," in the form of "a new public with new eyes" that the avant-garde artists always imaged as consumers of their art (2003:22-23).

This utopia was soon to be exported abroad. In Romania of the early 1950s, under the direct "guidance" of the Soviet councilors, architectural expression became a major aesthetic and technological means to represent the future as well as to visually ground a symbolic geography

of the soviet bloc. According to Stalin's own tenet, any architectural project in the new satellites of the Soviet Union had to be "national in form and socialist in content." With the Romanian leaders becoming increasingly preoccupied with the application of this principle and the institutionalization of Socialist Realism in the architectural field, it may seem that the last thing they could think about was the preservation of older buildings and sites—the "architectural monuments." However, to some specialists, those buildings appeared as possible sources of inspiration for autochthonous searches for stylized expressions of "national content."

The official interest in the historical preservation of architectural monuments had dramatically diminished after Stalin's death in 1953. No longer having the tenets of Socialist Realism as the main guiding schema, the architects in the satellite countries became largely confused and maintained this confusion for a number of years. (In Romania, for instance, this aesthetic confusion was visible up to the late 1950s [Răuță and Heyden 2009].) Khrushchev's rise to power in 1954 led then to a relative political "thaw" that gradually allowed an assimilation of the architectural modernist forms of the postwar Western world into the socialist bloc (Popescu 2009). This openness was mostly dictated by economic reasoning, as a (moderate) modernist expression seemed to offer the key to economic efficiency and rapid industrialization expected by the socialist leaders. The shift from socialist realism to modernism was however monitored by the Party ideologues, who were wary that a bolder modernist vocabulary would endanger the "socialist architecture" (with the notable exceptions when architects succeeded in "reconciling political loyalty with modernist ideas" (Răuță and Heyden 2009:28)).

However, architects in the socialist bloc found ways to work around the "directives" given by the political center, especially in a context of more frequent and vibrant dialogues with their Western colleagues (Popescu 2009). The architecture emerging in Romania in the early 1960s illustrates these quests for novel means of expression (see, for instance, the radical modernism of the industrial sector (Popescu 2009), or the shift from kvartal to microraion, indexing a new model of imagining collectivity (Maxim 2009)). Moreover, earlier agendas came to underlie these quests. Maxim (2006) points out that the architecture of socialism in the 1950s and 1960s came to be heavily influenced by the interwar tenets of the modernist movement—such as, the focus on standardization and technology, and on the city as the new unit of production—and earlier attempts to adapt those tenets to the local environment.

The leaders therefore resisted the investment of much funding in the restoration of old built structures, favoring instead two other interventions in the urban landscape: 1) the development of archaeological excavations, and simultaneously 2) the remodeling of the urban fabric according to the Master Plan. At the insistence and pressure of a group of specialists, and under the influence of the revival of heritage preservation occurring in the USSR after the Second World War, this shift of interest did not mean a full cancellation of the funds channeled into the restoration and preservation of historical buildings. It entailed, however, a significant reduction of funding for an already radically shortened list of the buildings officially recognized as "historical monuments."[1]

Moreover, in the post-1953 period, when calls for finding "nationalist forms with

socialist content" shifted to officially encouraged quests for a modernist repertoire, those buildings became relegated to a peripheral zone within the socialist bureaucratic apparatus. However, after 1960, under a systematic policy of distancing from the Soviets and searching for national autonomy, the question of history in architecture becomes once again important. We encounter in the period a forced shift to "authenticity" and "national traditions" in architectural design, already increasingly articulated during the last years of Dej's regime (Ioan 1996; Popescu 2009; Zahariade 2004). Under these new circumstances, the preservation of architectural monuments received more attention and the question of their potential political employment reappeared.[2] Even though most of those sites carried histories that could not easily fit a purified official historical narrative, there were still some of them that could potentially ground a "national past." However, such sites represented palimpsests of various kinds—an architectural monument could also hide an archaeological site, and often both of them could be considered historically important and artistically valuable. This was the case with the site of the Old Court.

What does the story of the Old Court, its emergence out of "nothing," tell us about the larger political shifts occurring at that time in Romania? I suggest that the debates among architects, and then between architects and archaeologists over the forms in which the Old Court must be preserved and displayed, should be understood through a dichotomous framework that the socialist leaders aimed to endorse, one separating "the past" from "the future" (with "the present" being only a transitory stage towards the socialist future). That is, architecture and archaeology were regarded as two distinct technologies of producing social reality, to validate an institutional and epistemological framework, within which those domains were assigned complementary temporal frameworks and historical spans. This political vision was to be spatially imprinted—in the case that I analyze, onto Bucharest' urban surface and underground. However, like any form of totality, it ended up being challenged by various institutional actors, who employed the very categories endorsed by the state only to turn them on their head. In fact, the 1962 conflict around the Old Court, a conflict issued between architects (employed by the State Committee for Architecture) and archaeologists (working either for the Institute of Archaeology, or, very likely, for the Museum of Bucharest), signaled a larger debate. It literally brought to the discussion table of the new leaders (the Council of Ministers) the following question: How could "the past," still dormant underground in the center of Bucharest in the form of the ruins of the Princely Palace at the Old Court, be unearthed in order to coexist spatially with "the future," depicted under the form of a totally remodeled city center of a "socialist capital?"

All that followed, with twisting and tweaking, stretching and turning the ground in a central area of Bucharest, with the endless discussions and negotiations amongst and within the two professional groups (the architects working for different institutions in Bucharest, carrying distinct visions and interests, and the archaeologists, carrying in turn their own interests) signaled a major conundrum for the socialist leaders. The story of the Old Court stands as yet one more proof that their attempts at imprinting their political vision onto the urban space, by clearly

separating this space into concentrated sites of the past and widespread spaces of the future, carried at heart the seeds of its own failure.

Plans and walls

The plan for building "the socialist city of the future" had begun to be drafted as early as June 1949, but only in November 1952 was a ministerial decision issued to start "the construction and reconstruction of the cities and the organization of the architectural activity" (Zahariade 2003). By setting forth an agenda of bringing radically new urban forms into a city depicted as being like "a spider web of skewed and narrow streets," a city whose "3/4 of its total surface is currently occupied by hovels," the political actors of the new regime praised a centralized aesthetics of order that informed the modernist tenets of the socialist architecture (Transcripts of the Politburo meeting on November 25, 1953, ANIC). The new architectural dogma focused on extending the city vertically via several-story buildings instead of allowing for the city's horizontal development into extraterritorial areas.

Dismissing earlier plans of modernization of the city as inherent failures of a capitalist order, those politicians regarded the new vertical city as the radical urban form representing the socialist revolution—that is, a total reordering of space that would accompany and enforce that of social and political forms. The Party appropriated the discourse of "order" to present it as an intrinsic element of the socialist project. Order was to come in the city in multifarious forms—spatially and temporally. Everything that was disordered had to be ordered, disciplined, tamed down. Under these circumstances, the role of the architects among other categories of local bureaucrats grew significantly, which allowed them to carve out a special niche of expertise that became indispensable to the Party.

The initial letter, which provoked much ado among the staff of the State Commission, came as an unexpected factor of variation into a seemingly well-planned experiment—the socialist remodeling of a major square of Bucharest. One of the first reports on the results of the excavations proudly announced that the archaeological digs that simultaneously opened in three central sites of Bucharest in 1953 marked the initial phase of a "scientific study of the history of the Capital, from the earliest times to these days." However, the local political apparatus did not envision the digs to remain forever open in central locations in the city. Indeed, their first role was to search for possible historical traces that would help elucidate the city's origins. But their other role, equally important, was to "clean out" the ground in order to close it down for good and thereby allow for Bucharest's landscape to be molded into a final and total socialist urban product. Such a ground, cleansed of significant material traces of history, was to become the pristine basis for laying out a new urban form representative of the grandiose project of socialist urban planning.

Given the key role that the remodeling of the city center was to play for the legitimization of the new leadership, how was it then possible that a bunch of archaeologists from the City Museum could eventually secure such an exceptional status for a site whose

historical value had been relatively ignored? The area's historical importance was resuscitated under the post-1945 new political regime, when the Old Court came to occupy a central point in the network of archaeological digs opened in the city center.

At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, during the peak times of Bucharest's urban growth, the main economic role of the Lipscani area as the city's major commercial center partially effaced the historical significance of the grounds onto which it developed—the Old Court. At the beginning of the 18th century, the ruined walls of the Old Court were taken down and the ground leveled to leave room for the new one- or two-story houses built by prosperous traders. The largest market of the city (*Halele Centrale*, the Central Market) was later established there, while the site was expanded to form an urban square (later named Union square, *Piaţa Unirii*). During the interwar debates on city development, the Lipscani area and the Central Market came under scrutiny as the crux of corruption, illegal or petty commerce, immorality, and urban chaos—in other words, everything that the urban elites rejected. Not surprisingly, the interwar elites' fears and loathing against the city's seemingly uncontrollable, chaotic development continued to lay at the core of the Master Plan, now translated as socialist planning principles. In fact, the urban remodeling of the area represented a project of not only spatial, but also moral ordering, as the architects aimed to do away with the shabby buildings in the area to erect the modernist future of socialism.

However, the area's historical importance was resuscitated under the post-1945 new political regime, when the Old Court came to occupy a central point in the network of archaeological digs opened in the city center. The results of the successive excavations—the unearthing of the walls of the court and some rooms of the royal palace—led the archaeologists to lay new claims over the site. I suggest that an argument about a new history of Bucharest, to be written on the basis of "pristine" artifacts, played a crucial role in sustaining their case. However, this sole claim would not do, as many other archaeological sites opened in the city's center also provided important data for a local history. The case needed then a complementary element—and this was the description (in fact, the making) of the Old Court as a major feudal site for national history.

The first digs that were opened in the center of Bucharest in 1953 had explicitly followed the model of the excavations already pursued by the Soviet archaeologists in medieval Russian towns (Ionaşcu 1954: 410). To have a history of feudalism rewritten on the basis of archaeological findings was a crucial political issue all across the Soviet bloc in the 1950s. The Russian and then Soviet archaeologists had attempted to build the field of medieval (or feudal) archaeology as an institutional framework in order to promote the theory of pan-Slavism (Trigger 1989: 210). By adapting a previous discourse on Slavic (linguistic and ethnic) brotherhood that legitimized the Russian foreign policy of expansion in Europe in the late 19th century, the Soviets sought to resuscitate the myth of Slavic kinship in order to ground a socialist transnationalism with the USSR at its core (Dolukhanov 1993: 150). They gave a new twist to the "Slavic connection" by deeming it a crucial element for proving the ancient pervasiveness of the Slavic culture across the Central and East European region, a perspective informing all of the

archaeological research pursued in the Soviet bloc during the late 1950s and 1960s (Curta 2001 and 2005).

Searching for feudalism and thoroughly documenting it was a key strategy to justify the existence and necessity of the socialist project, according to a Marxist historical paradigm. As historian Elizabeth Brown points out,

> By incorporating "the feudal mode of production" into their design, [Marx and Engels] endowed it with seminal significance. Their followers came to view the feudal stage as a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of socialism, and socialist scholars and activists sought traces of it throughout the world. [feudalism. (2009). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved January 17, 2009.][3]

Moreover, such a view was called upon to attest to the "superior development" of an early Slavic culture in comparison to those emerging in "the West." Archaeology and its findings were then to directly play a part in a Cold War competition, rooted in an early modern political geography of separation between the west and east, and employed anew to justify contemporary distributions of global power.

Apparently then, searching for the feudal origins of the major cities that were to be transformed into the socialist capitals of the new Soviet satellites emerged as a key political task for the archaeologists working in the Eastern bloc. In Romania, the city of Bucharest, as the capital of the country and thereby a would-be pinnacle of socialist urban development, was to play the principal role in this operation. According to the first reports on the excavation carried out in the city's center,

> An extremely important issue [was] the expansion of the themes of archaeological research….Whereas before August 23, 1944, there had been sporadic archaeological research, only within the domain of the primitive and slavery-based social orders, the popular democratic state gives special attention to archaeological research on the migratory period and the feudal order, as well as to the forging of a strong collective of specialists in feudal archaeology. [Şantierul arheologic Bucureşti,1954:287]

In comparison to the interwar period, when "heritage" had been mostly represented by old built structures, the socialist state of the 1950s began to amass archaeological artifacts in order to create a different form of heritage. The artifacts represented a different kind of materiality, one that was both "new" and often more mobile (being thus able to be inscribed and displayed as state property). In addition to the major operations of nationalization and collectivization, this process of agglomerating artifacts stood as another form of channeling resources to the center—the key strategy by which the communist state aimed to consolidate its power.

Archaeologists could enjoy significant institutional support as early as 1951, when the Museum of Antiquities, "the national authority of the archaeological research during the interwar years," became included in the newly established Institute of History and Philosophy of the Academy (Anghelinu 2003:178). In 1953, the first network of archaeological sites was opened in the central area of Bucharest, being first set under the supervision of the Institute's researchers. As soon as the City Museum of Bucharest was officially opened in 1958, the current and future archaeological sites as well as the supervision of the archaeological research to be conducted on the area of Bucharest were transferred to the Museum. (However, the Institute of Archaeology, as the most powerful institution in the field, remained at the core of a highly centralized system of archaeological research, benefiting from institutional and symbolic privileges throughout the socialist period (Anghelinu 2003: 178)).

In other words, the establishment of feudal archaeology in Romania of the 1960s, far from grounding a history of regional feudalism set under a pan-Slavic influence, favored in fact stronger arguments about an earlier emergence of the Romanian nation. We come to understand then why the Old Court offered a great promise to archaeologists and local politicians alike of supplying the material evidence to prove the continuity of the Romanian presence in the city from early medieval times until the present day. The image of a medieval Bucharest, encapsulating a history that the Museum was to promote and protect, became then a pivotal currency for the different groups of specialists working on, under, or with the city's territory. This image, a stamp of Bucharest of the 17th century, became very popular in many accounts of Bucharest's history published in the 1960s and 1970s.

Conclusion

The letter that landed on an official desk at the end of 1962 was only the first document of a large correspondence involving all the institutional actors discussed in this paper. The parts reached an agreement in August 1969, when after long debates, the Council of Ministers officially declared the Old Court "a historical reservation." The site became then a concentrated representation of the city's past—the place memory of the old Bucharest—being advertised as such by the brochures, guides, and scientific reports published by the Museum of the city. The Museum of the Old Court was officially opened on January 27, 1972, set under the supervision of the City Museum.

An increasingly stronger association of the image of a medieval Bucharest with the site of the Old Court played an important role in the tense negotiations over the area between the different factions of archaeologists and architects, formed within or even crossing over disciplinary niches. I suggest that the discovery of (a part of) the original walls of the Princely Palace buried in the ground contributed significantly to the creation and maintenance of this association. The walls, as signs of a political past of a medieval Bucharest, turned out to be a more powerful form of artifact than others. Unlike the easy-to-misdate pottery or fleeting coins, the walls offered, through their immobility, a promise of monumentality that further enticed

specialists and larger audiences to envision an old Bucharest that was more similar to popular images of (Western) medieval towns. Those latter images became all the more ubiquitous in architectural journals since the mid 1960s, following the movement on the preservation of historical cities in Western Europe against modernist urban planning. This movement advocated a rehabilitation of the "historical district" of a city, a district that architecturally represented a palimpsest of the city's development around the medieval loci of power (the town hall and the market). This imagery of a unifocal, circularly developing site as the initial core of a future European city was highly embraced by some architects occupying key positions within the professional hierarchies of Romania of the 1960s.

From an archaeological site of secondary value and through a cunning strategy of employing the discourse of the Nation together with some manipulation of the archaeological data, the archaeologists working for the Museum of the City of Bucharest could then reposition the Old Court as the historical core of the city. Its recently unearthed walls came to be restored and displayed as invaluable material forms encasing the history of the city as a whole. Moreover, as the memorandum stated, the Old Court site could have potentially been even more important than those other archaeological sites. That is, given their remoteness, no museum would have ever been opened in those areas that could teach the "true history of the nation to the working people." The Old Court, via its centrality and thereby its accessibility, represented the ideal location for such "a museum of national importance."

If the site had not appeared as such from the beginning, then some of the specialists of the Museum invested serious energy, imagination, and political clout into making the Old Court appear increasingly historically important and "unique" during the 1950s and 1960s. By allegedly setting walls and artifacts within the same historical time—the feudal era of Bucharest—the specialists of the Museum produced a smooth, uninterrupted historical framework for "their" Old Court portrayed as the feudal core of the socialist city. This description perfectly fit the socialist state's frenzied interest in feudalism, which came to offer the key to inquiries on the origins of the Nation as well as of the current socialist state.

By portraying the excavations as unique tools for the discovery of the past, archaeology as a method of scientific inquiry became also a political strategy that directly helped the socialist state to carve out a new historical map of the city. This map was perfectly laminated onto the teleological view of history advanced by the doctrine of dialectical materialism, which presented the socialist state as a pinnacle of progress. As such, the re-codification of the past proposed by archaeology enabled the state to retroactively carve out its own history into the urban development of the city, a history perfectly fitting the state's current agenda.[4]

Notes:

[1] According to historian Andrei Pippidi, the official list of historical monuments published in 1955 included a drastically reduced number of sites in comparison to the interwar (unofficial) record of monuments. He mentioned however that, despite the difficult conditions, the architects working for the Direction for Historical Monuments (DHM) managed to pursue a significant number of preservation and renovation projects all across the country. (Interview with Andrei Pippidi, Bucharest, June 2008.)

[2] See, for instance, the first national congress on historical monuments, organized in 1963 by the Department of Historical Monuments and the Institute of History of the Academy, where the vice president of the State Committee for Construction, Architecture, and Systematization pointed out that "the research of historical monuments must not be a goal, but rather a means for finding more accurate techniques for their preservation."
"Sesiunea de comunicări a Direcției Monumentelor Istorice," *Arhitectura*, 82, no.3 (1963), 60.
During the period 1960-1963, the specialists of the Department conducted complex research in the historical cities in Transylvania, thereby acquiring a solid research portfolio. The local architects later relied heavily on this body of research, produced by the specialists in historical restoration and preservation, in order to fight off the more radical plans of systematization of those cities' historical centers.
For a review of a more systematic approach to historical preservation, see Victor Bilciurescu, "Unele probleme de restaurare a monumentelor istorice," *Arhitectura*, 80, no.1 (1963), 54-55.

[3] Brown shows that the problematic tendency of confining a variety of political and social forms of organization existing in a Europe of the Middle Ages under one conceptual umbrella of "feudalism" originated in the historical episteme of the 18th century. She points out that British and French writers alike were more interested in

> …the system, the construct, instead of investigating the various social and political relationships found in medieval Europe….The writers of the eighteenth century, like those of later times, assigned different meanings to the term féodalité, or, in English, 'feodality.' Some used it to designate a system of government, some to refer to conditions that developed as public power disappeared. By 1800 the construct had been launched and the expression "feudal system" devised; by the mid-nineteenth century the word 'feudalism' was in use….Since the middle of the nineteenth century the concepts of feudalism and the feudal system have dominated the study of the medieval past. [1974: 1064-65]

In other words, Marx's major concern with "the feudal mode of production" only reflected a more general interest in "feudalism" across the 19th historiography of the medieval Europe.

[4] I owe this point to Oana Mateescu.

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