



Socialist heritage – the politics of past and place in Romania

by Emanuela Grama, Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2019, 268 pp., £23.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-253-04483-9

Cristina Clopot

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BOOK REVIEW

Socialist heritage – the politics of past and place in Romania, by Emanuela Grama, Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2019, 268 pp., £23.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-253-04483-9

Emanuela Grama's monograph essentially presents a familiar story for most heritage researchers, arguing once again that there is an indelible link between heritage and politics. Moreover, it indirectly engages with Stuart Hall's very early reflections on the contents of Heritage with a capital 'H' (Hall 1999), of who is allowed to belong and be represented in a national narrative and who is left out. The volume presents a nuanced analysis of material heritage and its strategic use during the socialist period in Romania's capital city Bucharest and its continued legacy today.

What is refreshing in this book, apart from the careful documentation and wealth of archival sources consulted, is the fact that the author brought together sources from fields that are not seemingly directly connected to heritage studies. Grama gracefully moves across different areas through with her use of secondary sources, bringing together urban planning, political studies, economic and social analyses. Grama also brings together key anthropological research studies on Romania, both national and international.

Further to the introduction, which presents the main argument on the strategic use of state authorities and 'authorised' (Smith 2006) heritage agents of the key area of Bucharest city's Old Town, the monograph is structured chronologically. It thus follows the webs and flows of political, social and economic transformations that Romania has seen from the establishment of a communist regime in 1947. The chapters cover the early urban planning reform of the 50s and 60s and the later efforts of the 70s to impose a standardised and largely invented Romanian style in the Old Town, for instance.

The interesting case study of the ruined walls of the Old Court (former royal palace in Bucharest's Old Town) stands out. Initially disregarded completely, the archaeological complex was then 'salvaged' by archaeologists, and the strategic dating and interpreting of artefacts were given different layers of meanings in relation to political aims of the moment, either to prove Slavic roots and thus connection with the URSS, later on as a 'protochronist' proof of Romanians' importance at a global scale.

From the start the Old Town is presented as a place of Othering and exoticism, starting well before the communist period, stereotypes of the Old Town travelled across the city. Its mixed activities of small traders and diverse population, formed by different ethnic groups, was a sore point for authorities and some xenophobic intellectuals. This undesirable heterogeneity hindered plans for a 'clean' national story. At the beginning of the communist period thus the early efforts of architects and state authorities were focused on reconfiguring Bucharest as a socialist capital. Through this process they also aimed to mitigate for some of the shortcomings of fast urbanisation which led to unplanned and unregulated building constructions.

Fast forward to the present, another particularly resonating section of the book is the one which covers the post-socialist period. A persuasive argument is presented that the Old Town was kept in a deplorable state of disrepair to prevent property prices going up on the one hand, and favour questionable property retrocession processes managed by state authorities on the other. Grama introduces the concept of 'strategic disregard' (p. 23) to reflect on the authorities' deliberate actions of prolonging rehabilitation projects unnecessarily or ignoring appeals from people living in dilapidated houses in the Old Town either as owners or lodgers. With properties in a state of

disrepair, public service representatives strategically assigned retrocession and allowed privatisation when convenient.

I also found refreshing Grama's clear analysis of the intricacies of the main political events of the second part of the 20th century as well as their links with important heritage agents: architects, archaeologists and urban planners. At each point during the historical analysis these actors become complicit with top level authorities rather than stand up for the disregarded lower classes and vulnerable occupiers of Old Town residences.

Grama's volume brings under scrutiny the notion of heritage itself, from the point of view of her interlocutors rather than that of authorised agents. Her ethnographic vignettes highlight the hollowness of this concept for local residents of the Old Town, when they are forced to live in properties that are not structurally safe or miss essential facilities. She presents a sobering analysis of the Europeanisation processes of the 2000s in this area, where external intervention aimed to impose new aesthetic sensibilities. Some efforts were made to persuade local poor residents of these properties' heritage values but such outsider interventions did little to empower locals to claim their rights or force authorities to intervene and repair these buildings. This was further complicated by the recent gentrification processes and the transformation of the Old Town into the centre of Bucharest's hospitality sector and nightlife economy.

There are important lessons thus taken from Grama's monograph that, although not grounded in the literature that we are most used to in heritage studies, are nonetheless pertinent for us all. Most poignantly, a lesson on the malleability of heritage, and the strategic use of the past to push forward narratives in the present comes across. Moreover, the clear political use of heritage is expertly and vividly analysed throughout the monograph, as Bucharest's Old Town and its residents became targets and victims to the authorities' manipulations of time and their reinterpretations of place.

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Cristina Clopot

University of Hull, UK

 cristina.clopot@gmail.com

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