



# EUI Working Papers

MWP 2012/23  
MAX WEBER PROGRAMME

IMPENETRABLE PLANS AND POROUS EXPERTISE: BUILDING A  
SOCIALIST BUCHAREST, RECONSTRUCTING  
ITS PAST (1953-1968)

Emanuela Grama



EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE  
MAX WEBER PROGRAMME

*Impenetrable Plans and Porous Expertise:  
Building a Socialist Bucharest, Reconstructing Its Past (1953-1968)*

EMANUELA GRAMA

This text may be downloaded for personal research purposes only. Any additional reproduction for other purposes, whether in hard copy or electronically, requires the consent of the author(s), editor(s). If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the working paper or other series, the year, and the publisher.

ISSN 1830-7728

© 2012 Emanuela Grama  
Printed in Italy  
European University Institute  
Badia Fiesolana  
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy  
[www.eui.eu](http://www.eui.eu)  
[cadmus.eui.eu](http://cadmus.eui.eu)

**Abstract**

The paper analyzes the urban modernization of socialist Romania during the 1950s and 1960s with an eye to understanding the reconfiguration of professional and political alliances in the post-war socialist bloc. I argue that immediately after Stalin's death in 1953, the government started to pursue a regime of reduced dependence on the USSR in those domains that the Party held to be the most important, such as urban planning. Instead of relying on Soviet planners, Romanian officials employed architects and engineers trained during the interwar years in order to create a national network of technological expertise. This discussion sets the political framework for a better understanding of a particular enterprise that began in Bucharest in 1967. I analyze how an attempt to transform a central quarter of the city (the area defined by the Old Court and Lipsicani Street) into a historical conservation area provoked tense arguments and wildly diverging viewpoints among architects, urban planners, and local politicians. My analysis of the 1967 debate shows that the process of constructing a socialist Bucharest was later accompanied by a parallel enterprise, that of geographically defining an old Bucharest and transforming it into an architectural conservation area. I suggest that the main goal of the latter enterprise was to offer a concentrated as well as a politically purified historical narrative of the city.

**Keywords**

Early socialism, architecture, politics, nationalism, modernization.

*Emanuela Grama*

*Max Weber Fellow, 2011-2012*



## Introduction

For Bucharest's inhabitants, compared to other people living behind the Iron Curtain, 1953 meant something more than the year in which Stalin died. It also marked the beginning of a massive project to radically transform the city landscape. The plan to construct "the socialist city of the future"<sup>1</sup> had begun in draft form as early as June 1949, but only in November 1952 was a ministerial decision issued "on the construction and reconstruction of the cities and the organization of architectural work."<sup>2</sup> By setting forth an agenda to bring radically new urban forms into a city depicted like "a spider web of skewed and narrow streets," a city where "3/4 of its total surface is currently occupied by hovels," the political actors of the new regime supported a centralized aesthetics of order that was to stretch upwards into the city skyline while forbidding horizontal development of the city into extraterritorial areas.<sup>3</sup> Dismissing earlier plans for modernizing the city as the inherent failures of a capitalist order,<sup>4</sup> those politicians hoped to construct, as soon as possible, a vertical city; to them this was the modernist urban form that represented architecturally the socialist revolution—that is, a total reordering of space that would accompany and re-enforce those of social and political forms. The new regime encouraged a critical assimilation of modernist principles into socialist architecture (progressively developed after 1954), as such projects stood as an immediate and visually powerful "showcase", signaling not only the cutting-edge creativity of Romanian architects, but also the competence and political openness of the new leadership itself.<sup>5</sup>

In order to examine how the Party leadership envisioned a socialist modernist Bucharest and how they went about achieving it, I briefly examine the transcripts of one of the first Politburo meeting concerning the master plan for Bucharest and its further development. This offers not only a more refined understanding of the Party's priorities at that time, but also a glimpse of the internal conflicts among the key political figures and the architects directly involved in drafting the plan. This discussion sets the political framework for a better understanding of a particular enterprise that began in Bucharest in 1967. I set out to analyze how an attempt to transform a central quarter of the city (the area defined by the Old Court and Lipscaeni Street) into a historical conservation area provoked tense arguments and wildly diverging viewpoints among architects, urban planners, and local politicians. My analysis of the 1967 debate shows that the process of constructing a socialist Bucharest was later accompanied by a parallel enterprise, that of geographically defining an old Bucharest and transforming it into an architectural conservation area. I suggest that the main goal of the latter enterprise was to offer a concentrated as well as a politically purified historical narrative of the city. More specifically, this "purified" history was to be visually represented by the buildings of the Old Court quarter, which, according to the "renovation" project, were to be redecorated with elements deemed to represent "authentic Romanian architecture", at the expense of the more eclectic style prevailing in the area. Relying on archival materials and secondary sources, I offer a close reading of the debates surrounding this project. I ask in what manner and to what extent the changes emerging in

---

<sup>1</sup> 'File 220/1949', in *Fond CC al PCR- Cancelarie*, The National Archives, Bucharest, 2.

<sup>2</sup> A. M. ZAHARIADE, 'New Buildings and Forms [*Locuința și Orașul Socialist*]', in T. SANDQUIST -- A. M. ZAHARIADE (eds.), *Two Books, The Communist Dream & Dacia 1300. Fragments of an Architectural Landscape in Dacia 1300 – My Generation* (Bucharest: Simetria, 2003), 68-79.

<sup>3</sup> Pompiliu Macovei in "Proces verbal al ședinței Prezidiului Consiliului de Miniștri și Biroului Politic al Comitetului Central PMR din 25 Noiembrie 1953." *Stenogramele ședințelor Prezidiului Consiliului de Miniștri și al Biroului Politic al Comitetului Central al P.M.R. (Partidului Muncitoresc Român) din luna noiembrie, 1953* [Transcripts of the meeting of the Council of Ministers and the Politburo, November 25, 1953] (henceforth, *Transcripts November 1953*). ANIC, Fond: Cabinetul Consiliului de Miniștri, File 9/1953, 209. Henceforth, I will refer to this document as *Transcripts, November 1953*.

<sup>4</sup> ANIC, Fond: *CC al PCR- Cancelarie*, File 220/1949, 2.

<sup>5</sup> C. POPESCU, 'Looking West: Emulation and Limitation in Romanian Architectural Discourse', *The Journal of Architecture*, vol.14 (1): 109.

the post-1953 political context, analyzed in the first part of the paper, informed the arguments and positions surrounding the debate on the renovation of the Old Court more than a decade later.

The documents examined here must be read against a political context that was itself under radical change. From the installation of a socialist government in 1947, the issue of political control appeared as a *sine qua non* for the development of any grand project under socialism. During the period prior to 1953, this control was directly exerted from Moscow, with the technical help of different Soviet councilors.<sup>6</sup> Following the triumph of Gheorghiu-Dej over the Pauker group, and especially after Stalin's death, this form of direct and total control of Moscow over Romania's internal affairs shifted to a more mediated one; it was no longer required to automatically refer diverse forms of planning and other significant projects to "Soviet specialists," nor was it necessary to seek the endorsement of Soviet councilors.<sup>7</sup> This shift of the ultimate center of decision making from Moscow to Bucharest occurred simultaneously with—or, perhaps, due to—a wider interest within the USSR to engage in a more systematic economic and cultural exchange with Western Europe after Stalin's death. Moreover, the search for relative political autonomy from the USSR led the regime in Bucharest to start their own form of "Thaw" by allowing specialists—in our case, the architects—to search for innovative and more daring technical solutions.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, with an increasing awareness of the relative lack of highly trained specialists, the regime made another radical shift. It turned to a particular group as an alternative pool of highly qualified labor; the "disenfranchised" who had been stripped of their possessions, rights and jobs, the majority of whom had been marginalized or thrown into political prisons during Romania's Stalinization (1947-1953). At the same time, the question of how to keep the socialist project uncontaminated by the "old beliefs" of this category of experts lay at the heart of official discussions at the time. As the 1953 transcripts show, the immediate solution was an increasing centralization, which then became enhanced by another form of control, an appeal to the revived discourse of the Nation.<sup>9</sup> As such, an analysis of those documents helps us grasp the broader historical questions as well as local tensions and conundrums underlying the regime's attempt to lay the foundations of the grand project of "building socialism."

## The Master Plan

As early as June 1949, the Council of Ministers set up a Provisory Committee for the Capital, charged with outlining "the systematization plan for the capital and its zone of influence." "Systematization" became one of the crucial terms, continually used by politicians and specialists alike, to describe in one word "the standardization and rationalization of both the design and building process,"<sup>10</sup> over

---

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of the role of the Soviet councilors in the Romania of the 1950s, see *Raportul Final al Comisiei Prezidențiale pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România*, București, 2006, 121-129.

<sup>7</sup> In June 1952, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the Party's secretary and a key figure in the underground Romanian Communist Party in its pre-war days, succeeded in getting rid of three members of the Politburo (Ana Pauker, Teohari Georgescu, and Vasile Luca, among whom Ana Pauker figured prominently). Dej, with the help and approval of the Soviets (that is, Stalin), managed to oust this group in February 1953 by putting Pauker under house arrest, and throwing Luca and Georgescu into jail. V. TISMĂNEANU, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> V. TISMĂNEANU, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel*, 82-83.

<sup>8</sup> The "Thaw" refers to the relative economic flexibility and political openness towards the Western Europe and the US that followed Khrushchev's 1956 speech denouncing Stalin's massive repressions and the cult of personality. The de-stalinization policies led not to the full abolishment of censorship, but rather to more subtle forms of cultural and political control.

<sup>9</sup> See V. TISMĂNEANU, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (New York: The Free Press, 1992) and K. VERDERY, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> J. MAXIM, *The New, The Old, The Modern. Architecture and its Representation in Socialist Romania, 1955-1965* (Massachusetts Institute Of Technology, Dissertation) Boston, 2006, 52. Steven Sampson points to the inextricable relationship between economic planning and urban socialist development, with *sistematzare* being approached as a just another form of the centralized economy.



which the state intended to exert a full monopoly. The Provisory Committee's main task was "to put order into the city via the development plan of the Capital."<sup>11</sup> The enterprise was already understood as a vast one, as "a prestigious project for the local council and as an act of great importance for the current political moment."<sup>12</sup> The urban remodeling of the city represented the material proof of "the transformation of our Fatherland into a socialist country."<sup>13</sup>

A detailed overview of this remodeling went public in November 1952, when the Council of Ministers issued its decision over the reconstruction of the city of Bucharest.<sup>14</sup> This established a separate institution, the State Commission for Architecture and Construction, charged with the supervision of the systematization of all cities in socialist Romania. Architect Nicolae Bădescu, one of the loyal members of the communist party before 1945 and professionally trained by the best interwar architects, was elected president of the new commission, holding the rank of a minister in the Council.<sup>15</sup> The resolution set out the main elements that were to be pursued in most of the systematization plans to follow. It limited the perimeter of the city as well as its population, to a maximum of 1.7 million inhabitants. The resolution introduced a "novel model of urban development": the *kvartal*.<sup>16</sup> Imagined as economically self-sufficient residential districts formed of 6-story residential buildings and aligned by 8-story buildings on the main arteries, these new social units were to be replaced by 15-story superblocks in the second stage of the project.<sup>17</sup>

The 1952 resolution laid out two long term goals: 1) to smooth out the striking difference between the center of the city and the periphery and 2) to bring order into the city. One of the key words constantly employed to describe the current state of the city was *chaos*. Bucharest's chaotic development had already been a topic pondered over during the interwar debates on modernization, which led to the formulation of the 1935 master plan. However, this plan was now deemed "a dead piece of work, with no technical and economic foundation."<sup>18</sup> Consequently, "the city [had] continued to develop anarchically and conform to the interests of the dominant class."<sup>19</sup> By denying then the previous attempts to shape the urban form according to a western ideal of modernization, the party appropriated the discourse of "order" to present it as an intrinsic element of the socialist project. Order

(Contd.) \_\_\_\_\_

S. SAMPSON, *National Integration through Socialist Planning: An Anthropological Study of a Romanian New Town [East European Monographs, Boulder]*, New York, 1984, 75.

<sup>11</sup> ANIC, Fond: CC al PCR- Cancelarie, File 220/1949, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> The decision was endorsed by Resolution 2448/November 1952 of the Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party of Romania (later the Socialist Party of Romania) and published under the title: *Cu privire la planul general de reconstrucție socialistă al orașului București* (Concerning the general plan for the socialist reconstruction of the city of Bucharest). In J. MAXIM, *The New, The Old, The Modern*, 2006, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Nicolae Bădescu was elected the president of *Comitetului de Stat pentru Arhitectură și Construcții* on December 15, 1952. Eugenia Greceanu talks about Bădescu's competence and "bright ideas," but she condemns him for "having bowed in front of the system," which explains his rapid rise within the political structures after 1947. E. GRECEANU, "Sovietizarea învățământului de arhitectură" [The Sovietization of the Architectural Education System], in Viorica Iuga CUREA (ed.), *Arhitecți în timpul dictaturii--Amintiri [Architects under Dictatorship--Remembrances]* Uniunea Arhitecților din România, Bucharest, 2005, 116 and 124.

<sup>16</sup> See A. M. ZAHARIADE, "New Buildings and Forms", and J. MAXIM, *The New, The Old, The Modern*, 42-46. Both authors point out that the *kvartal* as an architectural form should be understood as a continuation of interwar modernism rather than a break from it.

<sup>17</sup> The Institute of Architectural Design and Planning appeared as an immediate product of the 1952 resolution launching Bucharest's master plan and directly following the establishment of the State Commission for Architecture and Construction (SCAC), in charge of the supervision of the systematization of all cities in socialist Romania. It later developed into the Institute of Architectural Design "Project Bucharest," and came to occupy the center of a network of regional institutes of urban planning and design, established in the main cities in the country, subordinate to SCAC and locally supervised by the local councils.

<sup>18</sup> H. MAICU, "Probleme de sistematizare a capitalei [Problems of Systematization of the Capital]", *Arhitectura R.P.R.*, 90/5 (1964), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

was to come to the city in multifarious forms—spatially and temporally. Everything that was disordered had to be ordered, disciplined and tamed down.

The city of Bucharest was then to be conceived as an autochthonous socialist product. Three-quarters of its buildings were to be demolished, as they did not meet the standards of an economical use of space and modern comfort. The socialist master plan did not take the past into account in any form. On the contrary, as had been agreed at the meeting, “the preparation [of the blueprint] on a scientific basis did not take into account an understanding of the historical development of the city.”<sup>20</sup> That is, technology and mass scale industrialization had to facilitate the employment of prefabricated materials in the production of serial residential units, an operation that Dej had already outlined at the end of the meeting:

We must gradually move to the industrialization of constructions. We also should know which technology we need and what kind of architecture. [we must know] how much of the built space is for practical use and how much is used for pure embellishment. For there are some who assign 30% for effectively utilized space, and 70% for beauty. We must forgo this approach.

With this subtle criticism of the socialist realist approach, Dej anticipated the doctrinal shift in architectural practice that would be announced by Khrushchev a year later. At the Conference of Builders and Architects in December 1954, Khrushchev overtly rejected the costly and gratuitous embellishment of the socialist realist architecture of the Stalin era and endorsed the standardization of construction techniques and materials as the solution for a rapid increase in the mass of “more economical and functional housing.”<sup>21</sup> This famous speech marked the official endorsement of a new phase in the architectural practice of the Soviet bloc. More specifically, it allowed—in fact, encouraged—the architects on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain to “critically” engage with the principles of post-war Western modernism in their projects.<sup>22</sup> In her discussion of the occurrence and consequences of this shift in the architectural discourse, Carmen Popescu points out the particular chronology that these changes took in the Romanian context. She observes that in fact, the first criticism of “Socialist Realism’s excesses” occurred at the IInd Plenary of the Union of Romanian Architects in July, 1954—something that she describes as a “paradoxical” occurrence, a “precocious reflection,” since it preceded “by fourth months” the USSR Conference of Builders and Architects in Moscow. Even though the criteria of economy and efficiency had already been addressed in earlier discussions in the journal *Arhitectura RPR*, Popescu notes that the novelty of the debates in the IInd Plenary was the “enhanced emphasis on this approach [functionality and efficiency instead of gratuitous beautification], presented as the direction to be followed.”<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> *Transcripts, November 1953*, p. 220. This comment came from Iosif Chișinevchi, “the chief inquisitor of Romanian Stalinism,” as Tismăneanu describes him. Chișinevchi will be ousted from the Party by Dej in 1957, together with Miron Constantinescu. If Constantinescu lives long enough to be socially and politically rehabilitated by Ceausescu, Chișinevchi will live his last years at the social periphery. V. TISMĂNEANU, *Fantoma lui Gheorghiu-Dej [The Ghost of Gheorghiu-Dej]*, Bucharest, 2008, p.133.

<sup>21</sup> Anatole Senkevitch, Jr. offers a summarized description of the shift produced by Khrushchev’s speech. He writes:

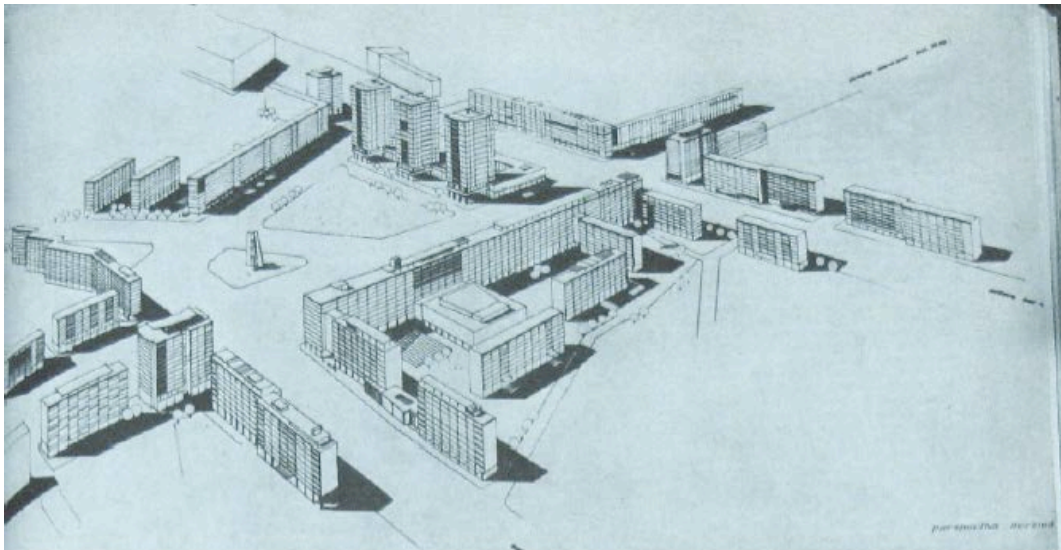
The shift from extolling to repudiating the design validity of the Stalinist skyscrapers came in short order with Khrushchev’s denunciation of the decorative excesses in recent Soviet architecture in a speech to the All-Union Conference of Builders and Architects on December 7, 1954. Proclaiming that Soviet building had urgently to adopt industrialized mass construction techniques in order to erect greater numbers of more economical and functional housing, Khrushchev denounced the Moscow skyscrapers for epitomizing the trend of individualized rather standardized design. [...] It was the excessive cost of constructing these elaborate buildings, rather than their artistic content per se, that proved the central focus of Khrushchev’s campaign. (Nikita S. Khrushchev, *O shirokom vnedrenii industrial'nykh metodov, uluchshenii kachestva i snizhenii stoimosti stroitel'stva*, [Moscow, 1955], 20).

In A. SENKEVITCH, Jr., ‘Art, Architecture, and Design: A Commentary,’ *Slavic Review*, Vol.37, No. 4 (Dec., 1978), p 587-594, note 11.

<sup>22</sup> As it happened at the 4<sup>th</sup> UIA congress in 1955. C. POPESCU, ‘Looking West,’ 109.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

A close reading of the transcripts of the Council of Ministers meeting in November 1953 situates the discussions of the IInd Plenary of Romanian architects in a different light. In fact, I suggest that the debates occurring at the Plenary, during which the leading figures in Romanian architecture (including Pompiliu Macovei) overtly criticized the socialist realist approach and promoted instead modernist solutions as the “new” norm in socialist architecture, could not have happened had the Party leadership not already endorsed this significant shift in November 1953. A reassessment of the modernist principles appeared in fact as the only solution to the call for efficiency launched by Dej at the closed-door meeting of the Council of Ministers. More importantly, the November discussions indicate that the Romanian leaders (that is, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej) strongly desired that the development of a master plan for Bucharest be pursued by relying as much as possible on autochthonous resources and expertise. Under the guise of (objective) praise for cheaper and more functional architecture, which would meet the housing crisis more efficiently, Dej’s rejection of the socialist realist architectural choices signaled a more pervasive change in his political agenda. His precocious push for a more efficient and function-oriented strategy of urban development simultaneously stood as a statement that, despite his stated loyalty the USSR, he no longer wanted any further stylistic influence or any other form of “guidance” from the Soviets.<sup>24</sup>



*The winning project of the 1959 competition for the remodeling of Union Square. Architectura, 62, no. 1 (1960): 15.*

<sup>24</sup> This reading of Dej’s directives, as they were recorded in the 1953 transcripts, challenges an earlier interpretation of Dej’s position towards the changes in the architectural field in Romania in the early 1950s. In their analysis of the emergence of a “second wave of modernism” in socialist Romania, Răuță and Heynen argue that it was only in 1958 that Dej, in response to Khrushchev’s radical move and as an attempt to secure his position as the Party leader, retrospectively claimed his full support for the reforms and the influences they had in architecture. They argue that Dej drew upon examples from the architectural field, such as Cezar Lăzărescu’s holiday houses, to support his claim that “destalinisation was already achieved and that his personal leadership was in line with Khrushchev’s reformism.” R.A. RĂUȚĂ, H. HEYDEN, ‘*Shifting Meanings of Modernism: Parallels and Contrasts between Karel Teige and Cezar Lăzărescu*,’ *The Journal of Architecture*, 2009 (1): 30.

Two issues must be addressed here. First, Dej secured his position in 1956, when he (and the Party leadership) played a Janus-like role for the group of Nagy Imre, the reformers of the Hungarian Communist Party who sought refuge in Romania after the 1956 Hungarian revolution had been silenced by Soviet tanks. Dej in fact proved his political loyalty to the new regime in Moscow by handing Imre and the others over to the Soviets. At the same time, however, as Tismăneanu and others had already argued, and the 1953 transcripts prove one more time, Dej tried to achieve relative autonomy from the USSR. Behind the closed doors of the Council of Ministers, having already got rid of the Pauker group, Dej had already been preparing the steps for an indigenous destalinization way ahead the “big brothers” in Moscow. This quest for autonomy however opened a Pandora’s box, since the immediate need for experts and highly qualified specialists in urban planning and design brought some of the “older” architects, marginalized until then, back to work.

At the Politburo meeting in November 1953, Dej agreed with Miron Constantinescu's suggestion that the Institute of Architectural Design and Constructions be supplemented with new personnel, especially with the architects currently holding positions where their expertise "could be not fully utilized."<sup>25</sup> Constantinescu insisted on having older architects among those new employees.<sup>26</sup> His comments point to a significant shift in the regime's official attitude towards the pre-1945 specialists:

The employment of older architects has started this year [1953, the year when the first wave of political prisoners had been released and brought back "into the labor field."]. [...] [However], there are architects of great talent and experience who are still very little used/exploited by the Institute Project Bucharest. I think that the comrades in the Committee of Architecture must improve their methods of work and of engaging [others].<sup>27</sup> There is a certain sectarianism here, which must be jettisoned. We must engage the highly experienced engineers and architects, however, [set them] under the supervision and line of the Party and the government, and not under their old beliefs.<sup>28</sup>

Constantinescu's comments alluded to a much larger problem, which the new political regime had been struggling with since its formation; the lack of "qualified cadres," that is, of professionals who could meet both criteria—that of being "politically correct," or having "healthy social origins," faithful and committed Party members, and being simultaneously highly qualified, especially in scientific and technical domains.

The Party leaders became increasingly aware of the difficulty of "developing cadres" simultaneously with engaging in a speedy process of "building socialism." Under these circumstances, the Council of Ministers was much more willing to accept the recruitment of more experienced architects for Bucharest's systematization—a crucial project for the Party. However, if this threshold (between the "new" and "old", marking the "sectarianism" that Constantinescu mentioned) was to be broken, then control had to be reinforced under novel forms. Finding new modalities to increase political control at the very moment of expanding the professional circles appears the main concern underlying Gheorghiu-Dej's concluding remarks. Dej asked that the State Planning Committee be the main supervisor and responsible for the plan, before the Council of Ministers. He insisted on stronger centralization and a better organized distribution of tasks, under a strict schedule and a detailed set of deadlines.<sup>29</sup> He suggested that the work on the plan be organized like that of a "military unit" and gave clear orders:

We need to search [for specialists] not only in Bucharest, but also in other parts of the country. Bucharest is the heart of the country, workers, constructors, engineers and architects should be brought in from other regions, and older cadres should also be employed.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> *Transcripts, November 1953*, 219.

<sup>26</sup> At that moment, Miron Constantinescu was "one of the best-educated members of the Rumanian leadership," having occupied key roles in the Party apparatus. Having joined the Party in 1936, Constantinescu became a member of the Politburo and the CC in October 1945. He was eventually ousted by Dej in March 1957. Relatively rehabilitated under Ceaușescu, Constantinescu benefited from a comfortable political position until his death in July 1974. Radio Free Europe Report *Death of Miron Constantinescu*, August 12, 1974. Open Society Archives, 300-8-3, <http://www.osaarchivum.org/files/holdings/300/8/3/text/52-2-162.shtml>

<sup>27</sup> In Romanian, "metode de muncă și atragere", a key term in socialist newspeak, used to describe the process of "developing cadres" by (sometimes forcefully) persuading them to become faithful to the Party and the communist ideals.

<sup>28</sup> *Transcripts, November 1953*, 219.

<sup>29</sup> *Transcripts, November 1953*, 233.

<sup>30</sup> *Transcripts, November 1953*, 234-235.

## **The New Meets the Old**

However, Dej's unexpected willingness to follow Miron Constantinescu's advice to bring back the "older elements" announces the further changes that were about to come about in the social and political landscape of post-1954 Romania. It was in the mid 1950s that an increasing number of intellectuals joined the Party, so that they could enter the central institutions and the institutes in the making. "Many of them were 'liberals' whom it would later prove difficult to dislodge."<sup>31</sup> Among such "liberals," there was also a number of architects, already well established in the interwar period, who were now suddenly allocated a (sometimes peripheral) role in the central bodies supervising the design of Bucharest's master plan. As a number of recent studies have already pointed out, the aesthetic debates that had occurred in interwar Romania ended up steadily percolating into the architectural culture of the earlier socialism (especially the 1954-1967 period).<sup>32</sup> As such, the socialist attempt to articulate a radically novel urban form turned out to be an impossible project. Under the appearance of novelty, the attempts to create a coherent architectural form of socialism—be that one directly drawing on Socialist Realism or a solution that would meet both criteria of "economic efficiency" and "local (and later, national) specificity" in post-1954 Romania—drew on earlier (even though diverging) quests for representations of "the modern" in interwar Romania.<sup>33</sup>

It was in the interwar years that both the "National Style", an architectural movement that focused on a decanted inclusion of local heritage in urban architecture, as well as a moderate modernism, had emerged as answers to autochthonous calls for modernization.<sup>34</sup> However, as Popescu has pointed out, such influences were adamantly denied during both stages of "reinventing tradition" in a socialist style — during the short flourishing of socialist realism and in the post-1965 emergence of 'Lyrical Nationalist' architecture.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, as much as it had been repudiated as a "bourgeois" expression during the Stalinization period, modernism came to be resuscitated as the only viable solution to the call for efficiency launched by Dej in November 1953 in the Council of Ministers, and later in the public arena after Khrushchev's speech. Maxim, with insight, argues that "the 'modern' under socialism oscillated constantly between the two extremes of the New and the Old, at once promising perpetual renewal and in the act of fulfilling that promise, becoming a mere repetition of a previous self."<sup>36</sup> Obviously, such an influence could not have occurred if the Party had not lessened the ideological constraints after 1955. As Popescu writes, "when the change of direction was initiated, the effects of censorship became more discreet, being presented as a doctrinal debate, a 'critical' reading of Western influence."<sup>37</sup>

In fact, the moderate modernism of the interwar period, brought back by the "older" architects, coincided paradoxically with the Party's support of a "critical adoption" of much more radical forms of modernism emerging in the post-war Western world.<sup>38</sup> Through the strategic move of bringing the older architects back into the picture, the Party leadership in fact—perhaps unknowingly—maintained

---

<sup>31</sup> K. VERDERY, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 111.

<sup>32</sup> For instance, see A. M. ZAHARIADE, "New Buildings and Forms", J. MAXIM, *The New, The Old, The Modern*, and M. R. POPA, POPA, MARIA RALUCA, *Restructuring and Envisioning Bucharest: The Socialist Project in The Context of Romanian Planning for a Capital, a Fast Changing City and an Inherited Urban Space, 1852-1989. An Exercise in Urban Imaginary, Collective Memory and Planning History* (Central European University. PhD Thesis), Budapest, 2004. Carmen POPESCU discusses those changes in detail in her 'Looking West: Emulation and Limitation in Romanian Architectural Discourse', *The Journal of Architecture*, 2009, 14 (1).

<sup>33</sup> C. POPESCU, "A denied Continuity: the Shift of 'Heritage' as Ideology in Romanian Socialist Architecture," *Blok*, 2004/3, 11-31.

<sup>34</sup> C. POPESCU, 'Looking West,' 114.

<sup>35</sup> C. POPESCU, "A denied Continuity: the Shift of 'Heritage' as Ideology in Romanian Socialist Architecture," *Blok*, 2004/3, 11-31.

<sup>36</sup> J. MAXIM, *The New, The Old, The Modern*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> C. POPESCU, 'Looking West,' 117.

<sup>38</sup> C. POPESCU, 'Looking West,' 109.

a stronger control over the new aesthetic forms emerging in architecture, as the members of the latter group could temper the younger architects' desires to pursue more radical solutions offered by the experiments occurring at that time in Western Europe and the USA.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, since some of those specialists had been at the core of the architectural debates occurring in pre-1945 Romania, they came to challenge and transform to a certain extent the architectural field of early socialism.

As a reaction to the strong impact of socialist realism that had frozen any other alternate forms of expression, some of the interwar debates resurfaced in the late 1950s and became more acute during the 1960s, during the relative "Thaw." Popescu points out that "several examples of the Romanian architecture designed after 1955 restored the dialogue with the production of 'National Style' in the 1930s."<sup>40</sup> Some of those debates were being brought back, on occasion by the very actors who had initiated them during the interwar years. Among the architects who joined the state institutions after 1953 were not only those who had been actively engaged in the development of interwar modernism, such as Richard Bordenache (1905-82), Horia Teodoru (1894-1976), and Paul Emil Miculescu (1901-1994). There were also others, much more interested in the "national question", who had already shown a propensity for identifying a coherent "Romanian style" in their earlier projects, such as Constantin Joja (1908-1991), and who managed later to find a niche for themselves in a socialist architecture increasingly captured by a hegemonic nationalist discourse.<sup>41</sup> These distinct perspectives resurfaced later in the debates occurring during the 1960s, when, under the delusory impression of political relaxation, some of those architects engaged in arguments over what "historical preservation" was and how they should (could?) engage in such preservation while constructing the modern socialist city.

One illustration of this process is represented by the heated arguments between Joja and his supporters, on the one hand, and the group of architects associated with interwar modernism (such as, Bordenache and Miculescu), on the other, with regard to the restoration of the older houses in the Old Court/Lipscani area. One of the central areas of Bucharest, this location was circumscribed by the Old Princely Palace, built at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and abandoned a century later, and the commercial quarter (also known as the Lipscani area) that had been formed around the Palace at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and developed throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The dispute came as a result of the 1962 digs, conducted by the City Museum, when the archeological team discovered some of the original walls of the Princely Palace that had been incorporated into the Manuk Inn, one of the inns built on the ruins of the Palace during the period of commercial growth at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Such "spectacular" findings triggered a chain reaction, as the anticipated redesign of the Union square, which might have entailed the demolition of some of the older buildings in the area, had to be brought to a halt. These "new" old walls of the court became very important not only for the archeologists working in the city, but because they also stood as symbolic resources for others. The People's Council of the city immediately designated the area of the Old Court as a "historical conservation area," which was to be renovated within "an urban arrangement in a period style and atmosphere."<sup>42</sup> A special committee, including specialists from the Institute of Art History, the Department of Historical Monuments, the Institute of Architectural Design "Proiect București", the Museum of History of the city of Bucharest, and the Institute of Architecture, was nominated by the

---

<sup>39</sup> C. POPESCU, 'Looking West,' 115-16.

<sup>40</sup> As POPESCU writes, "rather, the new regionalism was seen as an emanation of modernist architecture in its attempt to adapt itself to the site." "A denied Continuity: the Shift of 'Heritage' as Ideology in Romanian Socialist Architecture," *Blok*, 2004/3, 22.

<sup>41</sup> For two detailed and insightful analyses of the interwar politics of the "Romanian style", see A. IOAN, "Arhitectura interbelică și chestiunea identității colective [Inter-war architecture and collective identity]", *Echinox Notebooks*, 3 (2002), 80-91, and C. POPESCU, *Le Style National Roumain. Construire une Nation à travers l'Architecture*, Rennes, 2004.

<sup>42</sup> More specifically, the site designated the area "circumscribing the old administrative and commercial center of Bucharest within the perimeter delimited by 1848 [boulevard], Șelari, Smîrdan, Gabroveni streets." Resolution 2410/24 August 1967, Sfătul Popular al Capitalei. File 2159, Vol I, 1962-1970, the Archives of the National Institute for Historical Monuments, Bucharest (AINM). (Henceforth, File 2159/1962-170, vol. I, AINM)

city council to produce a study of urban design of the area.<sup>43</sup> Within a few months, this committee, led by architect Constantin Joja, produced an remodelling plan of the Old Court area, which was submitted to the Technical Office of the city council. The mark of Joja's rhetoric about the uniqueness of "a Romanian urban architecture" and his endeavor to bring this architectural form back to life via the renovation of the Old Court quarter bears powerfully upon this study.<sup>44</sup>

Joja offers a detailed overview on his overall vision on the renovation project:

One certainly could reckon from documents as well as from the buildings existing in Bucharest and other cities in the country, that the Romanian architecture to be found in the civil constructions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by closed or open verandahs.[...]  
Generally, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century urban Romanian architecture developed along two lines: architecture drawing upon village architecture, on the house with a closed verandah, and courtly architecture. Since we want Romanian architecture to be displayed in its full value in the area [of the Old Court], the renovation project will center on the adoption of the urban civil constructions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>45</sup>

The project was immediately and without any reservation approved by the Technical Committee of the People's Council of the city of Bucharest. In fact, this final version of the project proposal, endorsed by the city council, offered a more detailed description of Joja's intentions. The first stage of the project was to entail the "restoration of the façades of 92 currently degraded buildings...according to the most authentic [architectural style] of the epoch."<sup>46</sup> Moreover, some of the new constructions in the area were to be treated in a similar manner, by being aligned to the height of the existing buildings, and "having their façades treated in the style of the Romanian architecture of the 18<sup>th</sup> century ([with] opened and closed verandahs)."<sup>47</sup> The most interesting element appears at the very end of the document: the author(s) suggests that a preliminary study of other "older" buildings in the city, which presumably display a "Romanian specific," could identify those elements of "Romanian urban style" and then "transplant" them into the Old Court area. Those elements could be brought in so as to enhance the "authenticity" of the renovated façades in the Old Court quarter.<sup>48</sup> The aesthetic vision underlying Joja's proposal was not at all new, as it directly referred to earlier (interwar) debates that opposed "a genuine Romanian aesthetic form" to various "foreign influences."<sup>49</sup> The diverging

---

<sup>43</sup> Studiul detaliului de sistematizare al zonei "Curtea Veche," AINMI, File 2159/1962-1970.

<sup>44</sup> Joja, who was designated the project manager, signed the study, together with architect N. Nedeleescu. "Studiu detaliu de sistematizare, Memoriu general", not dated, 5 pages. The document precedes *Aviz 2*, January 15, 1968 of the Technical Office of the SPOB, approved by the president of the executive committee, Ion Cosma. AINMI, File 2159/1962-1970.

<sup>45</sup> Memoriu general, page 2, AINMI, File 2159/1962-1970.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, page 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Aviz 2*, January 15, 1968 of the Technical Office of the SPOB, signed by the president of the executive committee, Ion Cosma, approving Studiul detaliu de sistematizare al zonei Curtea Veche, 5 pages. (The quotation could be found on the second page of the document). AINMI, File 2159/1962-1970.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, page 5.

<sup>49</sup> There was however an irony behind Joja's claims that the Old Court area should be "renovated" according to a neo-Romanian stylistic framework. The architectural style developing at the end of the 18th century, which Joja deemed to be "Romanian civil architecture," is in fact a product of a historical period (the Phanariot period) that is considered *not* to be representative for the national historical narrative. The interwar and then socialist historiography depicts the "Phanariot" period (1711/1716-1821) as a time of economic and cultural decline, set under a strong Ottoman influence. During the "Phanariot epoch," the Ottoman empire attempted to strengthen its control over the Romanian principalities by anointing foreigners (especially well to do Greeks from the Fanar quarter of Constantinople) as temporary princes. These negative depictions should be understood within "the antithetical models of Good Romanian and the Evil Phanariot which shape the Romanian historiography after the 18th century." Mihai Chioveanu, "Echoes of the 'Phanariot Century'. Shaping National Identity and Historical Culture in Modern Romania," *The Romanian Journal for Society and Politics* 2, no. 4 (2004).

positions of architects involved in these debates took the form of distinct expressions in interwar architecture: the National style movement and (a moderate form of) modernism.<sup>50</sup>

Joja's proposal raised eyebrows among some architects, and even caused consternation among others. Richard Bordenache, at that time (1965-71(?) the director of the Department for Historical Monuments, operating then under the CSCAS, and Paul Emil Miculescu, who also worked for the Department at the time, adamantly opposed Joja's plan. A long series of correspondence started between the Department of Historical Monuments and the People's Council regarding the renovation of the Old Court area. Following the decision of the People's Council to assign the status of "historical conservation area" to the area circumscribed by the Old Court and Lipscani (with Joja as the project manager)<sup>51</sup>, Bordenache called upon the help of Gustav Gusti, then the vice president of the State Committee for Architecture. Based on an assessment written by Bordenache and Miculescu, in late March 1968 Gusti issued a resolution approving the decision only on the condition that the transformation of the area would observe a set of prerequisites.<sup>52</sup>



Propunere de reconstrucție a unei clădiri de pe str. Lipscani

*Proposal for the remodeling of Lipscani street.* Constantin Joja, *Arhitectura*, 113, no.4 (1968): 18.

Only a month later, in April 1968, the diverging views underlying those tense exchanges reached a much larger audience, when a public debate on the reconstruction of the "old historical center of the capital" was organized at the Architects' House of Bucharest. Joja presented the project by stressing his innovative perspective on the area's restoration. He mentioned first that

[i]n the past, when they discussed Romanian architecture, specialists and non-specialists alike had in mind especially religious architecture and boyar houses. Later on, village architecture raised interest; however, [it was discussed] in a manner that downplayed its aesthetic dimensions. Urban architecture was never mentioned, [because] it had never been noticed. [...] This urban architecture, which was widespread in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ended up being regarded as a [form of] 'Balkan architecture' and [therefore] it was never researched, its motifs had never been exploited by any great architect of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> C. POPESCU, *Le Style National Roumain. Construire une Nation à travers l'Architecture*, Rennes, 2004.

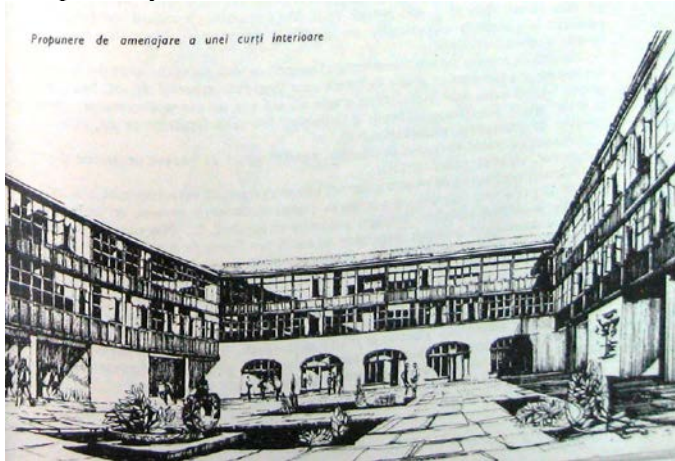
<sup>51</sup> Resolution 2410, August 24, 1967 of the People's Council of the city of Bucharest (Sfatul popular al orasului București. Comitetul executiv.) AINMI, File 2159/1962-1970.

<sup>52</sup> Letter issued by the State Council for Constructions and Architecture (Consiliul de Stat pentru Construcții, Arhitectură și Sistemizare, CSCAS), addressed to the People's Council of the City, document 5430/26.03.1968, signed by Gustav Gusti, vicepresident of CSCAS. 5 pages. AINMI, File 2159/1962-1970.

<sup>53</sup> C. JOJA, "Punerea în valoare a unei vechi arhitecturi urbane românești" in *Discuții: Sistemizarea zonei "Curtea Veche"*, București, *Arhitectura*, 4/1968, XVI (113), 17.



He continued by pointing to the “originality” and “authenticity” of the closed verandahs, “which do not appear anywhere in the Balkans.”<sup>54</sup> What was more important about this architectural vocabulary was, in fact, its modernity, “the continuous rhythm of the windows, a genuine curtain of glass that mediates between the interior and the exterior, [represents] exactly the form of modern architecture.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, he stressed, “Romanian architecture—even village architecture—is not picturesque, as has been argued, but is in fact a monumental architecture, whose unity of volume, rhythm, and motives [...] bring it close to the classical vocabulary.” At the same time, paradoxically, he claimed that “urban Romanian architecture had neither occidental nor oriental influences, [which makes it] exceptionally authentic.”



*Proposal for the remodeling of an interior courtyard.* Constantin Joja, *Arhitectura*, 113, no.4 (1968): 23.

It was this claim—that the element of the closed verandah could simultaneously symbolize “tradition,” “authenticity,” and “originality”, on the one hand, and “modernity,” and even “monumentality,” on the other—that must have struck some sensitive chords among the technocrats of the time. Not only did the city council seem to be persuaded by Joja’s vision of the reconstruction of the Old Court area, but also the architects at the core of the political system—such as Gheorghe Curinschi—appeared to agree with his claims. By calling upon what he called an “innovative approach to restoration,” Curinschi supported Joja’s decision to make the closed verandah the main element of the renovation project. He argued that the employment of a single element of 19th-century architecture, such as the closed verandah, could offer “a more modern interpretation of traditional motifs.”<sup>56</sup> More importantly, he pointed out that “such a perspective would meet both the principles of ...an innovative approach to restoration, as well as the current pursuit of a contemporary Romanian architecture with a distinctive expression.”<sup>57</sup> Curinschi admitted that such a pursuit was not new, as “the quest for a unique expression characterized the development of the architectural field throughout the modern epoch of Romania’s history.”<sup>58</sup> He mentioned that the first attempt took the form of “the so-called ‘neo-Romanian’ movement,” which, despite “some progressive dimensions”, had been historically limited. As such, “it would be highly unlikely that a reiteration of this movement would be

---

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> G. CURINSCHI, “Restaurare și inovație,” in *Discuții: Sistematizarea zonei “Curtea Veche”, București, Arhitectura*, 4/1968, XVI (113), 9.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

possible.”<sup>59</sup> Instead, he suggested, a quest for a contemporary architectural expression should “regard tradition as a source of inspiration rather than a repertoire of elements.”<sup>60</sup>



*Proposal for the remodelling of a street in the Lipsican neighborhood. Arhitectura, 113, no.4 (1968).*

Curinschi's arguments must be also understood as a critical reassessment of post-war radical modernism, arising along with a resuscitated interest in the nationalist discourse. The paradoxical phenomenon of a socialist nationalism emerged in the post-1965 period, to reach its peak in the 1980s.<sup>61</sup> In architecture, it took the form of a politically-encouraged quest for a revival of “tradition” and “specificity” that would lead to the proliferation of “Lyrical Nationalism.”<sup>62</sup> Even if this shift generated debates that mirrored the arguments about “modernity and specificity in the 1930s,” their resemblance was adamantly denied.<sup>63</sup> In fact, as Carmen Popescu argues, “if ‘National Style’ was denied, if not ignored, it was also due to the influence of historiography in Western contemporary architecture.” As Curinschi's speech demonstrated, the architects, especially those occupying central positions in the political system, aimed to display their “progressive” attitude, by calling upon techniques used in the Western world, while “‘National Style’ was explicitly condemned for being demagogical and obsolete.”<sup>64</sup>

However, in spite of the official take on ‘National Style,’ some voices expressed their appreciation of the movement by calling upon the valuable work of its leaders. These architects responded to Joja's statement that, via the transformation of the Old Court into a historical conservation area, “an authentic Romanian urban architecture, an architecture proving Romanian sensibility, would materialize for the first time.”<sup>65</sup> Aurel Doicescu rejected the introduction of the closed verandah as the main element of the renovation, considering it rather “an improvisation” without the “architectural value” of the originally open, well-proportioned verandahs of the old

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> K. VERDERY, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>62</sup> C. POPESCU, “A denied Continuity: the Shift of ‘Heritage’ as Ideology in Romanian Socialist Architecture,” *Blok*, 2004/3, 11-31.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> C. JOJA, “Punerea în valoare a unei vechi arhitecturi urbane romanesti,” *Discuții: Sistematizarea zonei “Curtea Veche”*, București, *Arhitectura*, 4/1968, XVI (113), 17.

Romanian houses (an allusion to the National Style vocabulary).<sup>66</sup> As for Joja's claim that a closed verandah could be treated as a precursor of the modern glass façades, Doicescu found it too "pretentious." Instead of a "renovation based on imagination," he suggested that the buildings in the Old Court quarter be preserved with the forms and motives that they had initially displayed, as much as they were still in existence; modest, but original."<sup>67</sup>

Doicescu's argument was further developed by Ion Dumitrescu. The latter challenged Joja's perspective that the architectural expressions produced at the beginning of [20<sup>th</sup>] century would represent "distortions of the authentic urban architecture, as works exclusively inspired by elements of religious architecture."<sup>68</sup> In fact, he pointed out, the separation of religious and civil architecture is flawed from the start, given the complex interference of motives from these two domains, and their further development in the works emerging at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To illustrate how those architectural elements represent "a successful adoption of autochthonous architecture," Dumitrescu cited the works of Cristofi Cerchez, inspired by "the baroque forms of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century," and the "compelling creations" of Grigore Cerchez and Nicolae Ghica-Budești (all of them major names of 'National Style'). Sharing Doicescu's arguments, Dumitrescu described the closed verandah as "a decadent derivation" of the originally open verandahs (*pridvor*), initially emerging as intermediary spaces between the exterior and the house interior. Therefore, he argued that "an abuse of façades [redecorated with closed verandahs] would falsify the true character of the architecture of the time/period architecture."<sup>69</sup>

The point of view advanced by Doicescu and Dumitrescu—that of preserving the mix of various historical styles of the buildings in the area—came under harsh criticism in the exposition offered by the architect Nicolae Pruncu, another member of the committee of the renovation project. Pruncu gave a detailed overview of the results of the latest archeological digs in the Old Court area, showing that the best solution would be the preservation of the vestiges of the Princely Palace in their initial location.<sup>70</sup> More specifically, the ruins should be extricated out of the newer constructions, and be displayed within a larger circular area (of 2,5 ha), which would include walkable paths for tourists. More importantly, the ground level of the area should be lowered to the one existing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a procedure that would have a strong impact upon the urban development of the entire quarter.

While pointing out the complexity of the preservation project, Pruncu insisted that such an operation was a must, given the "exceptional archeological, historical and architectural importance" of the recent discoveries. He rebuked the alternative opinions advanced by other specialists (see, for instance, Doicescu and Dumitrescu) of preserving some of the more recent buildings on the site. As Pruncu curtly put it,

Some specialists understand "restoration" by rejecting any clearance of the remains of the later constructions. [This translates] in our case, [with] the refusal to accept the demolition of the constructions [built in] the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which mutilated the palace and which throughout all this time have masked valuable traces of the past. [...] How could we seriously support the viewpoint that the walls of the inns whose construction entailed the mutilation of an ancient monument, be displayed together with remains of tremendous historical value?<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> A. DOICESCU, "Arhitectura cu geamlîc: o improvizație minoră," in *Discuții: Sistemizarea zonei "Curtea Veche"*, București, *Arhitectura*, 4/1968, XVI (113), 22.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> I. DUMITRESCU, "Un alt punct de vedere asupra arhitecturii urbane bucureștene din sec. XIX" in *Discuții: Sistemizarea zonei "Curtea Veche"*, București, *Arhitectura*, 4/1968, XVI (113), 24.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> N. PRUNCU, "Aspecte urbanistice ale restaurării Palatului Domnesc," in *Discuții: Sistemizarea zonei "Curtea Veche"*, București, *Arhitectura*, 4/1968, XVI (113), (113), 25-27.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Only when we read Pruncu's arguments can we begin to understand why Joja's proposal appeared highly palatable to both the central political apparatus (i.e., the People's Council) and the architects well placed therein. The transformation of the houses in the Old Court quarter into symbols of an equally problematic representation of the vernacular architecture of the 18<sup>th</sup> century fit perfectly the needs of the post-1965 socialist Romanian state, a state that needed to come up with an image of history that would fit the ideological requirements of the present. Joja envisioned the transformation of the Lipsicani quarter into an "architectural conservation area" that would function as an extension of the Old Court "historical museum."<sup>72</sup>

Despite his background, the 1967 debates present a Joja who did not see—or, at least, did not admit to—any resemblance between his understanding of "Romanian architectural style" and the earlier quests for a "National Style." As paradoxical as this unawareness might have appeared to his critics, Joja was right, to an extent. The difference stems from the symbolic direction of the two projects; whereas National Style represented a quintessential search for the "modern," by conferring a modern interpretation to vernacular architecture,<sup>73</sup> the renovation of the Old Court, according to Joja's interpretation, would have represented a move back into the past. The site's main role would have been that of a *historical conservation area*, by standing as a symbol of authentic Romanian urban architecture made even more unique and different from the present and thereby contrasting with the modern socialist city center. The site would have represented not only a point of contrast with the socialist present, as a tourist attraction, but also an extension of a "past" that fit the ideological requirements of the present—a pristine past, rescued out of the debris of the "parasitic" 19<sup>th</sup> century, and brought back where it belonged—to the late Middle Ages, the historical period that would soon become a source of pride in Romanian socialist nationalism.

In what ways does this particular debate complicate our understanding of the development of the architectural field in Romania in the 1960s? First of all, it points to the tensions underlying the field, especially at the moment of transition from modernist expression, with its focus on efficiency, to a more acute need for national expression and 'lyrical' specificity. An awareness of (and perhaps, nostalgia for) earlier engagements with such themes seemed to prevail among some architects, especially those who had been directly involved in those disputes in the 1930s (such as Aurel Doicescu). As much as those specialists were "allowed" to express their appreciation of architectural work produced before the war, their views tended to be ignored or even ridiculed by specialists occupying key positions in the system (such as Curinschi or Pruncu). The tone of those debates—and particularly, Pruncu's suggestion that such discussions on the renovation project of the Old Court should be "reserved only to a few who will be directly involved in the research"<sup>74</sup>—reveals the limits of the illusive political openness occurring at that time in Romania. Another telling detail is that the previous debates between Bordernache and Joja—that is, the Department of Historical Monuments (DHM) and the People's Council—had not even been mentioned in the discussions at the Architects' House that were eventually published in *Arhitectura* journal, nor anyone invited to speak on behalf of DHM.

The (highly diverging) visions of the appropriate renovation of the Old Court site and its neighboring quarter illustrate the intricate search for a novel representation of the nation in architecture, an expression that would have to be 'original' and 'authentic', and at the same time 'different' enough to offer an interesting contrasting point to the monumental socialist architecture of the present. Those debates indicate the concerns that the political leaders showed not only about reinventing the social and architectural landscape of the present, but also that of the past. To what extent did they succeed? Between 1967 and 1971, the renovation project and the debates surrounding it continued along with the archeological work at the Old Court site. The restoration of the Princely

---

<sup>72</sup> File 2159/1962-170, vol. I, AINM.

<sup>73</sup> As Carmen Popescu demonstrated, 'National Style' was a fundamentally modern move, trying to emulate in architecture the calls of the time, by simultaneously searching for and attempting to find common expressive grounds for 'authenticity', 'nation', and 'modernity.' C. POPESCU, *Le Style National Roumain. Construire une Nation à travers l'Architecture*, Rennes, 2004.

<sup>74</sup> N. PRUNCU, "Aspecte urbanistice ale restaurării Palatului Domnesc," 27.

Palace led to significant changes in the area; the buildings on Soarelui street were eventually demolished and the walking level on the site lowered in order to leave room for the newly unearthed walls of the Palace, which was opened to the public as the “Old Court” Museum on January 27, 1972. Under Joja’s guidance, the restoration of the Manuk Inn began in 1969, and it was later reopened as a hotel and restaurant. As for Joja’s dream of embellishing all the houses on Lipscani and its neighboring streets with sets of closed verandahs, it never materialized.<sup>75</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to bring together two separate sets of data, 1) the transcripts of the closed-door discussions of the Council of Ministers on the master plan of Bucharest in the early 1950s and 2) the debates that emerged after more than a decade among different specialists and institutions regarding the transformation of the Old Court site into an “architectural conservation area.” The 1953 transcripts reveal a broader and more complex field of political negotiation that had been emerging in socialist Romania immediately after Stalin’s death, illustrated by Dej’s subtle but definite pursuit of a regime of self-sufficiency (that is, non-dependence on the USSR) for those domains that the Party held to be the most important. This strategy was reflected in Dej’s approval of a strategic inclusion of the “older” architects in the process of development of a socialist master plan for Bucharest.

A close reading of these transcripts adds a distinctive nuance to the current arguments about the post-1953 shifts occurring in the architectural field of the socialist bloc. The twisted turns of phrasing employed by Dej, the tensions between Pompiliu Macovei and Miron Constantinescu regarding the “help” that should or should not be sought from Soviet architects, Dej’s cryptic allusions to the gratuitous nature of Socialist Realism, all these elements point to the multiple forms of duplicity underlying the social context of the time. We learn that Dej’s interest in securing his political position in relation to the USSR led to precocious changes in architecture and urban planning in socialist Romania, some of them anticipating the political changes that occurred in the USSR from 1954. Dej appears to have agreed with the return of the “older elements” only because he perceived them to represent a compact group of well-trained specialists, able to offer the best technical solutions and execute what they were told. Along with the new cadres, those architects were to execute the Party’s orders, and pursue the rapid development of a socialist Bucharest Party by “building in concrete and according to highly standardized plans.”<sup>76</sup> They also had to learn to read the ambivalent directives offered by their leaders—they had to start living, together with the others, in a social landscape permeated by duplicity. This ambivalence obviously informed the ways in which the architects related to the changes in their field. Răuță and Heynen note that “between 1954 and 1958 Romanian architecture indeed went through a period of confusion and transition.”<sup>77</sup> Popescu describes this phenomenon as the prevalence of a “double discourse.”<sup>78</sup>

I suggest that this ambivalence, or “double discourse,” stemmed from the encounter between two diverging temporal frameworks, indexing distinct perspectives on meanings and scales of “history.” More specifically, the socialist ideology aimed at redefining not only the meaning of the present, as a time of progress and modernization, but also the form and meaning of the past. Since it could not acknowledge the “bourgeois” period as having represented anything else besides “exploitation,” the forms of modernization that had emerged before 1945 were rejected from the start. From the perspective of the socialist leaders and their technocrats, such attempts could not form a solid basis upon which to construct a socialist modern present. This is what Dej meant when he

---

<sup>75</sup> The documents in the file on the Old Court project stop somewhere in the middle of 1971. Only in 1988 is the project reopened, with Nicolae Pruncu designated to be the project manager. At that time, the discussions were of a different nature, as they pertained to the radical redesign of the city.

<sup>76</sup> R.A. RĂUȚĂ, H. HEYNEN, ‘*Shifting Meanings of Modernism: Parallels and Contrasts between Karel Teige and Cezar Lăzărescu*,’ *The Journal of Architecture*, 2009 (1): 30.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> C. POPESCU, ‘*Looking West: Emulation and Limitation in Romanian Architectural Discourse*’, *The Journal of Architecture*, vol.14 (1): 114.

accepted that the “old architects with talent and substantial experience” could be brought back only on the condition that “they follow the Party line, and not their old convictions.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, those architects had to detach the expertise they had gained in the interwar projects from the aesthetic viewpoints to which they had adhered at that time. They were asked to “forget” their past, including the debates which some of them had initiated or in which they had played a major role, so as to reinvent themselves in the present.

The stir caused by Joja’s unusual take on the renovation project of the Old Court area, shows that the earlier debates of the interwar informed, though in a disguised form, the tight negotiations around the project. Joja’s pre-1945 interest in questions of authenticity and the employment of the vernacular motifs, came to underlie his particular take on “Romanian civil architecture,” which he wanted to revive in the perimeter of the Old Court area.<sup>80</sup> He presented his interpretation of the “historical conservation” of the area as a unique project, one that was fully detached from earlier interpretations of vernacular architecture (such as the ‘National Style’ movement). As such, Joja’s project offered a visual representation of “history” in the form of a revived “historical Bucharest” situated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, represented by the recently discovered walls of the Princely Palace in the Old Court site. The houses were to be turned into extensions of the Palace via their redecoration with a series of closed verandahs, deemed to be the quintessence of Romanian civil architecture. The result would have been a “conservation area” of the “Romanian civil architectural style”—that is, a coherent narrative of the city’s entire history that would have satisfied all of the criteria of the official discursive field; authenticity, originality, and an exclusively autochthonous modernity, represented by a pristine architectural expression that had “neither occidental, nor oriental influences.”

As much as those bold statements seemed to please the local officials, including some of the architects well positioned in the central hierarchies, they came to be rebuked by some of the “old architects,” now resuscitated and allowed to work for the socialist state. The latter took apart Joja’s project piece by piece as they rejected his choices of architectural motifs (such as the closed verandahs), his approach to “historical conservation” and the very concept of “Romanian civil architecture” that he incessantly evoked. They also questioned the claims about the project’s uniqueness, by alluding to the foundational work of the National Style representatives. While subtly placing their criticism within the discursive constraints of the given political context, the participants in those debates reiterated some of the themes—such as the relationship between authenticity (tradition) and modernity— that had lain at the core of the interwar debates. One could say that the “past” of the participants to the debate on renovation of the Old Court, a past that the Party asked them to forget, kept looming in the background, thus making the regimes of expertise that the Party leadership tried to produce gradually became more porous than had initially been envisioned.

---

<sup>79</sup> *Transcripts 1953*, 219.

<sup>80</sup>For a discussion of Joja’s earlier involvement in the autochthonist discourse, represented by his participation in the 1940 competition for a Palace of Culture under the programme “Legionnaire Work of Arts,” and his winning project for Odessa Cathedral in the 1942 project for a Palace of Culture, see A. IOAN, *Power, Play and National Identity: Politics of Modernization in Central and East-European Architecture. The Romanian File*, The Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996: 38-40.

