

“The microrayon: the organization of mass housing ensembles, Bucharest, 1956-1967”by **Juliana Maxim** (University of San Diego)

What constitutes “mass” in mass housing? In the context of this conference and its aim to bring more precision to the notion of mass housing, I will contribute some remarks not so much about the specific building types used to house vast portions of Bucharest’s population in the 1950s and 1960s; but instead, about the organization of these buildings into well-defined architectural ensembles.

Although my discussion is based on the case of Bucharest in the early 1960s, I wish to frame it with a set of interconnected propositions that could concern mass housing in general. My main proposition is that mass housing is best understood not as a series of buildings, but as a strategy to claim, delineate, and organize territory. Mass housing operated as a territorial category as much as a functional or programmatic one. In the context of the Eastern Bloc, the notion of microrayon illustrates clearly how the research and debate about mass housing was situated firmly at the city scale, and how these highly structured territorial units were considered more than a series of buildings, and instead architectural artifacts of their own.

Secondly, the shift in scale I am proposing from buildings to territorial units goes to the heart of one of the difficulties of the historical inquiry in socialist contexts: the fact that the buildings themselves seem to lack visual appeal – standardized, uniform, blank, serialized across geographies and national contexts, they are, taken individually, rather poor carriers of meaning. However, when considered as ensembles, their arrangements reveal instead formal complexity, variation, and a

search for experiential qualities. In other words, architectural, cultural and social agendas become legible on the territorial level.

Finally, I believe that it is on the level of the planning of the territory (both in the vastness of the territorial intervention, and in the integration of different scales) that the most interesting differences emerge between the socialist and western context. Microrayon, I argue, while formally linked to western developments, is specific to a socialist context. In response to Miles Glendinning’s invitation to establish lines of comparison, I would like to suggest that it is units of territory such as the microrayon, that can best help us trace differences between capitalist and socialist approaches to mass housing.

Romania

Between 1955 and 1960, Romania’s new socialist government commissioned the construction of a staggering 340,000 dwelling units, most of them in the capital, Bucharest, in response to an almost twofold increase of the urban population after 1945 (1&2). The breakneck pace of construction only accelerated in the following 5-year plans. The hundreds of thousands of new housing units, assembled into thousands of blocks of flats, became the defining feature of Bucharest, their recognizable silhouette rapidly transforming the cityscape. Much discussion surrounded the construction technologies and the typologies of these buildings, but the organization of these buildings into coherent ensembles throughout the territory of the city drew an equal amount of

“The microrayon: the organization of mass housing ensembles, Bucharest, 1956-1967”

by Juliana Maxim (University of San Diego)



*Fig. 1: Aerial view of a microrayon in the Balta Albă housing district, Bucharest, Romania, ca. 1963. Photograph (uncredited). Illustrated in *Arhitectura R. P. R.* 83, no.4 (1963): 34.*

attention, both in professional and political circles. By 1960, the particular notion of the microrayon had become the planning device of choice in Romania, as it had also in the entire Soviet Bloc.

What was the microrayon? The word is a Soviet technical term (*mikrorayon*), adopted into Romanian (and, I suspect, into the professional vocabulary of other languages of the Soviet Bloc) to indicate the smallest administrative unit in the socialist reorganization of the urban territory. Throughout the 1960s, it constituted the planning device of choice in Romania’s territorial policies, and was repeatedly touted as a socialist spatial answer to the ideological and practical imperatives of a new society.

It is tempting, when looking at examples of microrayons, with their modernist towers sitting amidst vast green spaces (Fig. 1), to see the notion as but a variation of the CIAM/Radiant City-inspired models that were starting to appear throughout

Western Europe in the 1950s (such as Lyon, 1957, Harlow, 1957). Like many American and Western European models circulating in the 1940s and 1950s, the microrayon is a residential ensemble conceived so as to constitute an organic unity, aimed at connecting its inhabitants through the everyday use of shared social and cultural institutions (among which schools and daycare centers figure prominently) and of parks and green spaces. The microrayon was meant to occupy a clearly defined territory, delimited by streets with intense traffic or by other strong dividing elements. To achieve a certain functional and experiential cohesion, its territory was not to be crossed by important streets, and pedestrian and car traffic were to be, preferably, separated inside the microrayon. The maximum distance between any dwelling, service, and public transportation should not be more than 500 m. The size of the microrayon was not go beyond 10 000 inhabitants, although it could also be smaller numbers (3).

A matter of names

Despite the familiarity of these principles, the microrayon resists a direct, limpid translation into conventional planning terms (such as neighbourhood unit, superblock, urban sector, or, in French, *nouvel ensemble urbain*, *cité neuve*, *grande opération*, etc) or softer terms (such as suburb, neighbourhood). Most of these terms do exist in Romanian, but it is the term microrayon that is systematically used at the time, signaling a desire to differentiate it from seemingly equivalent notions. The aim, here, then, is to track those

“The microrayon: the organization of mass housing ensembles, Bucharest, 1956-1967”

by Juliana Maxim (University of San Diego)

features of the microraiion that are not translatable into a more familiar categories, and which may point to some of the irreducible qualities of socialist experience.

I think the point about the term microraiion is not only its declared connection to soviet practices (though that is important too); unlike neighborhood unit, urban sector, or superblock, microraiion, or micro-district, signifies the existence of larger units of order (the raion). Although the microraiion is similar in size to the neighborhood unit, for instance, the word micro implies planning of a radically different scale, one that engulfs the entirety of the national territory, and of which the microraiion is but one small constitutive part. It functioned as a planning device specific to the territorial policies of centrally-planned economies, and therefore distinct from capitalist applications.

From cvartal to microraiion

In Romania, the microraiion as a term and a technique appears in the late 50s, when architects radically reorient their planning practices from relatively small housing projects called *cvartal* (also a word borrowed from Russian) and towards the organization of the entire territory of the city, a city that is now conceived, planned and developed as a totality. It is as if the scope of planning had shifted from a city made of parts to a city as single entity.

Before the microraiion, the *cvartal* had been a timid attempt to order the chaotic 19th century city. Most of Bucharest’s urban fabric had



Fig.2 Partial view of cvartal: the Floreasca housing district (1956-58), Bucharest. Photograph (uncredited). Illustrated in Arhitectura R. P. R., 6 (1964). 34.

developed organically, without the rationalization of the grid or of the straight axis, and the *cvartal* emerged, in the 1940s and 50s, as a short-lived experimentation with orthogonal, or at least geometrical alignments. Such was, for instance, the small housing development of Floreasca (1956-58), which organized identical apartment buildings into regular patterns aligned with the street grid. But as early as 1960, the discourse shifts from the efficiency and economy of the *cvartal*, to something that could be called a newly found formal playfulness. Larger housing estates appear, characterized by picturesque, unpredictable arrangements of buildings of various heights and footprints. This new norm for urban development functioned as an explicit criticism of the *cvartal*’s uniformity and monotony (Floreasca, for instance, was deemed “monotonous and without personality.” (4)) (Fig. 2)

But much deeper shifts are at work. Another difference between the 1950s – the age of the *cvartal* and the 1960s – the age of the microraiion,

“The microrayon: the organization of mass housing ensembles, Bucharest, 1956-1967”

by Juliana Maxim (University of San Diego)

is that the construction of housing migrates from the existing city toward less-densely built areas around the center, and, with it, the goal of reforming and re-ordering the capitalist city becomes that of an alternative utopia encircling the historic center. There, it seems, the planner could think of urban space as limitless and abstract, and avoid any significant entanglement with the preexisting city, which it seeks to fully replace. This change in scope is implied in the photographs – the cvartal is often photographed from up close; the microrayon, from further afar, with a newly found sense of conquest over the land.

The progression from cvartal to microrayon also seems to mobilize new techniques of enclosure and autonomy from the rest of the city. In that regard, the microrayon functions as the reverse of the cvartal: large streets forcefully mark its perimeter, while the interior develops with great freedom and flexibility. The cvartal, by contrast, rigidly aligned housing blocs with the street grid, ran wide monumental axes through its center, and defined its boundaries with much less clarity. While the microrayon called for a break in the fabric, the edges of the cvartal seem to invite continuity and repetition of the street pattern. The cvartal was formed through the addition of identical elements and therefore could be endlessly extended; by contrast, the microrayon is a fully constituted, unbreakable, and finite entity inside of which each housing bloc stands as a singular, irreplaceable component.

Balta Albă

Finally, the most important point about the microrayon is that it fits within a tightly orchestrated hierarchy of increasingly larger spatial units, which distinguishes it not only from its local precedent, the cvartal, but also from the better-known notions of neighborhood unit and superblock. To illustrate this point, I will use the example of one of the most emblematic projects of the 1960s, Balta Albă (a vast district developed at lightning speed between 1961 and 1966, during which 36 000 apartments, or 1 087 000 square meters of built surface, housing 100 000 inhabitants, were constructed).

The district borders a vast industrial complex to the East, the site of major steel factories that had been built between the wars, and which had played a central role in the modernization and industrialization of Romania well before the advent of the communist regime. After 1948, the factories had become the property of the socialist state, and the regime was eager to symbolically re-code them as belonging to the new political order. Balta Albă as a whole was thus meant to not only supply housing for the workers, but also to provide a new visual and spatial context for the factories; for the thousands of workers streaming in and out, the district would frame everyday life with vast, orderly vistas, lush greenery, and, most important, it would have offered a stark contrast to the small, irregular streets and heterogeneous buildings of the 19th century city that bordered the district on all other sides.

“The microrayon: the organization of mass housing ensembles, Bucharest, 1956-1967”

by Juliana Maxim (University of San Diego)

But Balta Albă was much more than factory housing. Only a quarter of its inhabitants were factory workers, so that the district reached well beyond the needs of the industrial complex. In fact, the district as a whole, and each microrayon in particular, functioned like a small version of the ideal socialist city. It urbanized the workers, many of whom had come from the countryside, by accustoming them to new spatial tropes they would come to associate with socialism. And it operated as a device of social integration, distributing the workers among a larger population, with the aim, so it was thought, of actively blurring class distinction.

It is in the attempt to replace economic class with other, new and spatialized forms of collectivity, that I suggest the microrayon fully finds its specific definition. The district is organized through a gradation of progressively smaller urban units that nest inside each other - with the microrayon as the smallest. Because of this, the settlement pattern in Balta Albă, which, in plans and photographs may seem relatively uniform, in fact offers the inhabitants finely tuned, fully orchestrated spatial and functional steps from small to large scale, and from the familiar to the abstract, and, in the process, trying to replace old elements of reference (such as class, ethnicity, place of origin) with new, physical and visual ones.

Balta Albă, for instance, contained 6 residential neighborhoods (cartiere), each subdivided into smaller microrayons, and all of them served by a cultural and administrative center and a large recreation area around two central lakes.

Although subsumed into larger urban conglomerates, each microrayon enjoyed a significant amount of functional autonomy, with its own small-scale commercial center, nurseries, school, and park. Differences in size, plan, and building types between microrayons suggest a search for a distinct, recognizable character, and a clear stance against visual monotony. These steps in complexity and size were meant to correspond to a similar hierarchy of social relations, so that the district provided the stage for a range of encounters, from the most intimate and everyday, to those occurring in a larger, less familiar community. Within it, the microrayon, which was not too big to be abstract and ungraspable, nor too small to become too intimate, was to function as the realm of basic associations and identification.

The building no longer stands in relationship to a street, but to the neighborhood.

Much of the microrayon's character is determined by the demise of the street as the main place of urban experience; instead, large, collective green spaces that occupy most of the non-built surface now constitute the places of social interaction. Indeed, along with the street itself, the traditional opposition between public space and private property is transformed, and the land surrounding the residential buildings is now no longer private nor public, but of an intermediary, collective, nature.

Socialist planning also revises the traditional relationship between architecture and city, as buildings no longer encounter the city immediately, through

“The microrayon: the organization of mass housing ensembles, Bucharest, 1956-1967”by **Juliana Maxim** (University of San Diego)

street facades, but only through the mediation of the microrayon and the district. It follows that in a socialist microrayon, a single building has little capacity to accrue meaning by itself, but signifies only through larger territorial relationships, and is never understood (or represented) as a single, autonomous entity. The generic, impersonal buildings are not only a direct consequence of industrialized, rationalized building techniques, but correspond to an effort to dislocate signification away from the single architectural object, and towards larger spatial units. It is tempting to find in such ‘collectivization’ of buildings a spatial metaphor for their inhabitants’ own overcoming of individualism.

The city as work of art

The examination of some of the ideas associated with the microrayon – the shift in the scale of architectural intervention in the city, the demise of the street in favour of the organic unity of the architectural ensemble, the agenda of social transformation and integration – has shown that the microrayon was in part a search to enrich, even transcend, the inflexible rationality of standardized mass housing construction. Therefore, the attempt to discuss socialist mass housing as more than grimly functional buildings is perhaps best concluded by pointing at the intense effort, in the theoretical writings on architecture of the late 1950s and early 1960s, to give the socialist housing district the status of a work of art.

Far from being considered a purely scientific, objective product, mass housing was also one of

the most cherished demonstrations of the artistic capacities of architecture. While architecture’s aim under socialism was to satisfy practical needs rather than procure “aesthetic moments,” it was able to surpass its utilitarian definition and reach into the “ideological and artistic realm” through compositions at the city scale. It is by planning and designing large housing ensembles, some architects argued, that architectural practice became an artistic form.

The abstraction of the facades, their lack of decoration and differentiation, the austerity of standardized construction, are easily, and often, perceived as a refusal to signify. But while each residential building, taken individually, might be devoid of affective qualities, it could reach expressive attributes collectively. Aesthetic and ideological content, it was argued, had shifted away from the standardized component, and towards the result of their complex combination. The essays of aesthetic theory published throughout the 1950s, bore titles that militantly stated this idea: “The housing district – a superior step of architectural artfulness,” or “On the aesthetic qualities of mass construction.” Their content is equally clear: “In mass constructions, the dialectical unity between the utilitarian side and the ideological-artistic one manifests itself not in each single construction – which, taken separately, might not be a work of art – but in the comprehensive solution to urbanistic problems” (5). It is also why commentators, by the 1960s, could consider that the views and photographs of Balta Albă possessed uplifting qualities, suggested optimism, and were appropriate for visual consumption.

“The microrayon: the organization of mass housing ensembles, Bucharest, 1956-1967”

by **Juliana Maxim** (University of San Diego)

Among solutions for mass housing, the microrayon aimed to offer its inhabitants an affective experience, to create a new social order, and to arouse a sense of collectivity – in socialist terms, these were the ultimate qualities of a work of art.

Notes

1. G. Ionescu, *Arhitectura în România în perioada anilor 1944–1969* (Bucharest, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1969), p. 57.

2. Alexandru Cebuc, “Aspecte ale evoluției demografice și teritoriale a Bucureștilor în anii puterii populare,” *Materiale*, Vol. 5, 1967.

M. Locar, “Pentru dezvoltarea urbanismului socialist,” *Arhitectura* 4 (July–Aug, 1960): 5.

3. M. Locar, “Pentru dezvoltarea urbanismului socialist,” *Arhitectura* 4, 1960: 5-7, 5.

4. Traian Stănescu, “Noi ansambluri de locuințe în capitală” *Arhitectura* 6, 1964, 14-22: 15.

G. Minervin and M. Fedorov, “Despre calitățile estetice ale construcției de masă.” *Arhitectura* 5, 48 (1958):23-25, first published in *Architecture USSR* 2, 1958.