

“The Association for Urban Transition: Civil society and mass housing in post-communist Bucharest” by Vera Marin

(Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urban Planning/ATU Urban Transition Association)

Introduction

This paper reports on a recent research initiative which attempts to devise strategies for the regeneration of the vast built legacy of the mass housing programmes of socialism within Bucharest. But before attempting remedies, the first necessity is for survey and analysis of what has been built.

As of 2002, around 79% of the population of Bucharest lived in the apartments of the housing ensembles built during the communist period: 84% of the housing stock. Yet ‘there is very little documentation or historical analysis on mass housing in general, and on collective housing in Bucharest city in particular’. (Peter Derer, *Urban Housing*, 1982) To attempt to remedy this lack of information, a very brief chronological approach may be of some help in situating the mass housing districts’ urban form in the reality of contemporary Romanian cities. This is a vital task, since nowadays, it is almost impossible to define Bucharest or many other Romanian cities without considering this mass: the housing ensembles impinge on the whole city.

A brief chronological overview of postwar Bucharest mass housing

1950s:

The first variant of mass housing to appear in postwar, socialist Bucharest was the cvartal, representing the Soviet socialist realism style. The architecture of these collective dwellings follows the line of the traditional city scale, and we can still speak about a balance between public

and the private space.

1960s:

The 1960s brought in their train a relaxation to some extent, which affected all areas of existence, be it political, social, economic, etc. In architecture, there was a certain opening towards the Western type of rationalist urbanism promoted through the principles of the functionalist urban planning. Blocks of flats were built in the peripheral zones of the city, on the free grounds near the newly built industrial areas.

1970s:

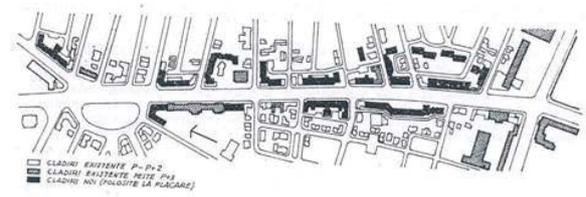
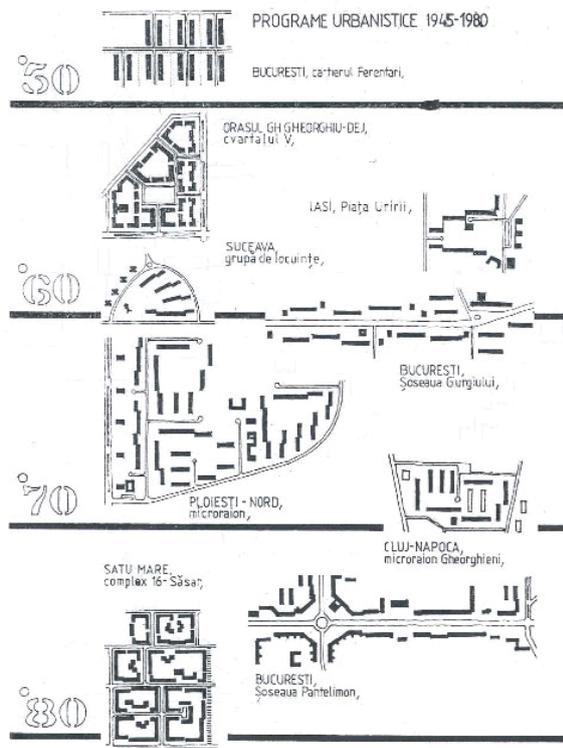
Around 1975, a new idea began to emerge: why not make the boulevards more important by flanking them with rows of ‘street’ blocks, ten floors high? A 1977 earthquake devastated Bucharest and the damage provided a good enough reason to start a calculated program of urban demolition. This eventually affected most of the city, no matter the real necessities.

1980s

In the ’80s, more and more blocks of flats were built, largely of poor quality both in their construction and in their urban setting.

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Diagram of apartment block layouts (from various Romanian cities) from successive decades:



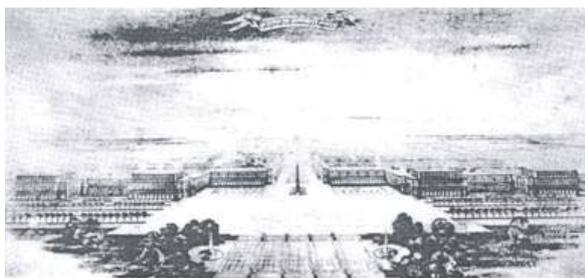
Above: boulevard redevelopments of the 1980s:

Demographic Trends

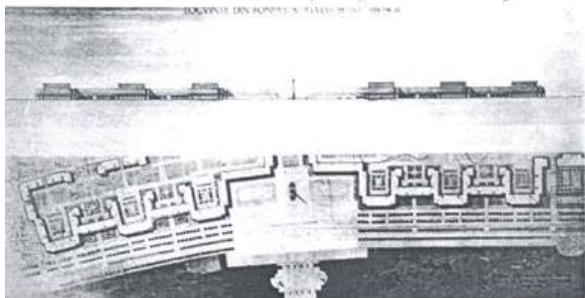
A significant chart in a World Bank report shows that around 1970, the people who migrated from the rural areas to towns constituted a major percentage of the total migrations around the country

“the migration rates [...] were highest among those between twenty and twenty-four and 60% of those arriving in urban areas were between fifteen and twenty-nine years old.”

Nowadays, however, the majority of the population residing in the peripheral ensembles of Bucharest, built during the communist years, are the first generation to live in the city (from rural areas). They continue to live in blocks of flats in these districts, as the housing stock has hardly been improved after 1989. Their neighbours - the people born in the city - are the ones who had



Cvartal - Bd. Muncii - perspective and plan



Above: 1950s cvartal

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their homes demolished in the city’s transformation processes after 1977.

Survey data - and its absence

“One fundamental issue is that there has been no survey of the physical conditions for the housing stock built during the communist regime and therefore there is no firm knowledge of their scale and extent, nor of the costs of rectifying them..” Economic Commission for Europe, Geneva, ‘Country Profile on the Housing Sector, Romania’, United Nations, New York and Geneva, 2001.

The lack of survey information is staggering: there is nothing official, other than overall census data that indicate that mass housing accounts for 35% of the total housing stock for the whole country (urban + rural!) in 2002. But that tells us nothing about what sorts of housing is involved. PhD research is underway on constructing a typology of buildings for Bucharest sector 3 area – but what is the current state of these buildings? A thermal rehabilitation program has been underway since 2001, targeting their very low level of performance.

The logic of construction of these ensembles relied on pure quantity: their quality became poorer and poorer by the end of the period. During the communist regime, an extremely centralised political will encouraged a strong standardisation of buildings and apartments, and economy of resources for public equipment.

Since their very beginning these areas have had



problems regarding both their architectural design and construction, and their urban setting. Having steadily worsened over time, these problems now constitute a very difficult heritage today. The housing areas built during the communist regime in Bucharest and everywhere in Romania face serious problems today owing not only to the physically difficult conditions but also to the lack of management and communication skills of the new owners.

Almost two decades ago, when the tenants of these apartments could buy them at very low prices, it was not so obvious that this also involved taking on a package of responsibilities for a building which was already somewhat degraded. In a typical example: one homeowners’ association formed by 80 households took over a single collective block of flats built in 1970 and situated at the northern entry of the city of Bucharest, without regard for its location in a massive housing complex.

ATU: Studies and Surveys

In an attempt to address these problems of fragmentation and ignorance, a newly founded NGO

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of urban planners, ATU (Asociația pentru Tranziția Urbană – the Association for Urban Transition), carried out in 2004-5 a Preliminary Study for Improving the Living Conditions in Collective Housing Complexes. The aims of ATU are to foster a general civil-society ethos of information and dialogue, and to pursue more specific knowledge tasks, of devising new planning and policy instruments for mass housing regeneration.

ATU’s Preliminary Study had two main strands:

Firstly: an attempt to stimulate dialogue among concerned urban actors.

Secondly: a pursuit of-specific competence for diagnosis and search for solutions in housing regeneration.

A distinctive and vital aspect to the project is that it was a Romanian-French collaborative venture. It made available within Bucharest the benefit of the long French experience in the housing rehabilitation domain, chiefly through the partnership with an NGO from Lyon, ‘Villes en Transition’.

The Preliminary Study led to a further specific pilot initiative:

REHA: Preliminary Study for a Pilot Project: Improvement of Collective Housing, Sector 1, Bucharest.

This addressed not only the physical aspects of housing regeneration, but also the social and legislative measures that could facilitate or impede

any intervention for improving living conditions.

Its aims were the following:

- to assess the current institutional and legal framework on housing in condominiums both in France and Romania;
- to identify the specific problems of condominium housing in Romania; and
- to review case studies on good practices of intervention on condominiums both in France and in Romania.

A concomitant field survey project set out to implement the following aims:

- develop partnerships with and among local actors;
- Carry out a socio-economic survey of a local community, and summarize a technical diagnosis of the pilot area;
- evaluate the requirements for intervention and develop a strategy for the pilot area; and secure potential sources of financing for carrying out works requested by the residents.

Within the Pilot Project, the following benefits resulted:

The owners secured important support for better understanding of possible ways to improve their living conditions, and to correctly evaluate their responsibilities and their objectives.

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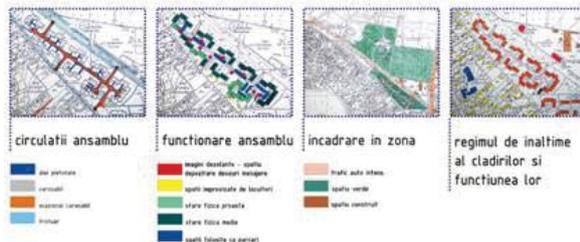


Left and Above: images of the Pilot Project



REZULTATELE DIAGNOSTICULUI TEHNIC

starea zonei



starea blocului



proiecte-model de reabilitare termică (Iasi, Piatra Neamt) au demonstrat ca se poate reduce cu aproape 50% consumul total de energie pentru încălzire și apa caldă menajeră - în urma intervențiilor de modernizare termică a unor blocuri de locuințe colective.

The Romanian Ministry of Construction declared its intention to initiate a further pilot-project aimed at experimenting on a limited scale with an operational framework suitable for subsequent replication as a guideline framework at larger scales.

The development of the pre-operational approach (diagnostic, objectives, participation and dialogue with inhabitants) gave local authorities a rough guide that they could re-use in other situations and which could assist in developing fully-fledged procedures.

The research, largely carried out by postgraduate students of urban design or urban planning, avoided any temptation to present specific visual scenarios to the residents, in order to avoid seducing them with images: the aim was to let them establish their own objectives.

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Our survey helped fill in the gaps caused by the absence of any official data on residential mobility at the overall level of the city of Bucharest. Our case-study questionnaire showed the following results, in reply to the question, ‘For how many years have you been living here?’

Over 30 years: 38%;

20-30 years: 20%;

10-20 years: 11%;

5-10 years: 9%;

1-5 years: 22%

The survey also helped establish whether there was any correlation between the obvious physical proximity in these collective housing ensembles and the social cohesion of a group living with such a density. Conducted as a socio-economic diagnosis, the survey showed that the majority of the residents have lived there since the repartition of the apartments, and that some neighbours have known each other for more than 30 years. However, the post-1989 economic change brought some differences in the levels of income, and hence a certain degree of envy and suspicion between neighbours.

It seems that although people who meet every day in the common areas of their building all experience the same dysfunction of that building (which was somewhat badly built and hardly ever maintained), they nevertheless do not interact in any search for solutions to their common problems. The effective implementation of small-scale democracy in the decision making process at homeowners-association level has proven a very

difficult task. Residents’ behaviour has evinced a strong tendency of inertia, waiting for solutions to come from outside, from the local authority, the State, or from any external agency at all.

Characteristic resident behaviour-patterns and reactions include the following:

- Opposition to partnerships with private investment firms (“we don’t want them to become rich by building on our terrace”)
- Strong criticisms of the few who come with ideas of intervention
- Low level of participation in the association’s meetings
- Domination of meetings by the same people, especially elderly people who have the time to organize and to attend them
- An unclear division of responsibilities and tasks among the association members

The inhabitants of mass housing, as ‘urban actors’ are in a learning process as to the most effective role they can adopt. Their adjustments take time and generate some tensions, not least in dealings with communal services suppliers who frequently provide poor quality services and at increasingly higher prices. Relations are often fraught with the local council departments, especially with the bureau for liaison with homeowners associations, with the urban planning department (responsible for building permits), and with the central adminis-

tration, tasked with setting the rules of the game.

Sometimes they succeed in overcoming these long lists of obstacles, and they put in practice some initiatives to improve their living conditions.

To maximise the chances of success, certain key prerequisites stand out:

- A good leadership, capable of showing both authority and enthusiasm in convincing the members of the homeowners association
- Specific knowledge of some residents who are professionals in various fields, such as civil engineers, lawyers and economists
- Information on access to material and information resources

Conclusion

Unless the issues of the mass-housing condominiums are addressed, Romania faces the prospect of emerging ghettos of poorer households literally trapped as owners or tenants of unsuitable properties that they cannot afford to maintain. Many households are investing money in improving their own apartments; but investing in the jointly-owned building structure or utility infrastructure is often impossible because either some resident households cannot afford to contribute or because cooperation within the homeowners' association, if there is one, is poorly developed.

What future is there for collective housing ensembles in Bucharest? The obstacles to a well-

managed outcome are numerous:

- almost 100% private property
- aging of prefabricated panels that were designed for 30 years' life
- proliferation of parked cars that makes life impossible in areas not designed for high levels of car ownership
- fewer and fewer well-off households who decide to stay
- a functionalist urban design composition often ruined by densification in the '80s or new buildings inserted on the former green spaces of these ensembles (on parcels that have been retrocessed or sold by the municipalities as constructible land)

Certainly, documenting has a place – in building arguments for urban regeneration policies.

Conserving is a more doubtful aspiration – maybe it should target a selected few estates.

Comparisons are essential - to allow a better understanding of differences and similarities.

The patterns and problems revealed by recording include:

patterns of tenure: 100% private ownership for apartments, but condominium issues for moderate-income groups.

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location: mostly created through urbanization schemes of greenfield development, but, when it affects 84% of the housing stock, what are the implications for the relationship between periphery and centre?

functionalist building patterns and urban design, but moving further and further away from functionalist principles from the end of the 1970s.

ATU Projects:

ATU & VeT project, ‘Preliminary Study for Improving Living Conditions in Collective Housing Complexes’, 2004-2005

REAL: research project financed by Romanian Ministry of Education: 2005-2008

DEGRACO: research project – part of URBAN NET Resilient City: 2009-2010

REHA database, 2002

Architectural PhD researchers: Zina Soceanu, Claudiu Runceanu