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Between Europe and the East – draft on architectural landscape of Bucharest

Introduction

Bucharest – the capital city and the most important center of industry and services in Romania – is in many respects an exceptional city compared to other Central European metropolises. One of the most interesting aspects of Bucharest is its architecture and the land-

scape created by it. Its beauty defies conventional aesthetic criteria, creating a special *genius loci*. This paper presents an outline description of this extraordinary landscape and the factors which affected its development.

“Savage hotchpotch”

This is how Ferdinand Lassale – the 19th century socialist activist – described Bucharest and its social inequities in his writings from Romania. This comment seems correct also in regards to the spatial plan of the capital city. What distinguishes that city is the exceptional diversity of its architectural elements. Bucharest’s architecture is a melting pot of contrasts of scale, shapes, style and function (Fig. 1). The city’s architectural forms are grandiose. The local characteristic features are spectacular and they include eccentric forms and abundance of details. *The architects of Bucharest always wanted to create something exceptional. The most daring attempts were not only typical of eminent masters, but a standard of architectural designs. [...] Bucharest drew without any qualms from all sources and adopted all patterns only to astonish and show diversity* – wrote the Romanian architect, Marian Celac [1, p. 14].

The origin of this special surrealism lies in the specific Romanian culture developed as a result of mixture of the motifs of the East and the West over the centuries. Bucharest’s urban plan and architecture demonstrate

a myriad of directions which formed under the influence of Western European ideas. On the other hand, the picturesque disorder of Bucharest and the magnificence



Fig. 1. Neo-Romanian style, modernism and eclecticism in architecture of Piața Romăna (photo: W. Januszewski)

Il. 1. Styl neorumuński, modernizm i eklektyzm w zabudowie Piața Romăna (fot. W. Januszewski)

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Fig. 2. Diversified architecture of Bucharest center (photo: W. Januszewski)

II. 2. Zróżnicowana zabudowa śródmieścia Bukaresztu (fot. W. Januszewski)

of architectural forms resemble the spirit of the Levantine cities (Fig. 2). The specific natural features of the city also affect its special landscape. An increased seismic activity of that area results in a faster technical degradation of the city structures. The buildings which were damaged, or the ones which did not meet the growing needs, were replaced with bigger or more imposing ones – erected in line with currently fashionable stylistic conventions.

Despite the complexity of the architectural landscape of the city, it is possible to analyze and systematize it. In the seemingly chaotic architecture of the city, there can be distinguished a few main “layers” such as indigenous style, architecture of the “Little Paris,” modernism and socialist realism. This division is rather stylistic than chronological in its character because these layers often overlapped and mixed in time, creating hybrid forms or they reappeared as “neo-styles.”

Indigenous style

The original Romanian architecture is an account of the complex historical process which shaped the culture of Romania.

In this respect 106 AD is an important turning point when the area of Romania, inhabited at that time by Indo-European tribes Thracian by origin – Getae and Dacians – was conquered by Emperor Trajan. Consequently, Romania was incorporated into the Western culture. In around the 9th century, after the period of the Barbarian Invasions, the lands by the Danube became part of the Bulgarian state and the Thracian-Roman people inhabiting that area were converted to Eastern Christianity and subjected to the influence of the Byzantine culture.

In the 14th century, two independent Romanian principalities were founded: Moldavia and Wallachia. In the 15th century, after the fall of Constantinople, they fought against Turks but lost and accepted the suzerainty of the

Ottoman Empire. The first mention of Bucharest dates back from that time (1459). Until the middle of the 19th century, the city was the capital of Wallachia and the seat of hospodars (*local rulers*) [2].

The peak development of the Romanian national style is associated with the reign of Constantin Brâncoveanu (1654–1714) who became famous as an excellent political leader and patron of the arts. Consequently, that style is often termed the Brâncovenesc style. A number of buildings in the Brâncovenesc style have been preserved in their original form – especially orthodox churches and monasteries from the 17th–18th century scattered over the area of the center of Bucharest (Fig. 3).

At the beginning of the 20th century, after a period of uncritical fascination with the Western European patterns, these buildings inspired the architects who wished to express the national ideas (Fig. 4). One of the most prominent repre-



Fig. 3. Kretzulescu Orthodox Church (1720–1722) in the Revolution Square (photo: W. Januszewski)

II. 3. Cerkiew Kretzulescu (1720–1722) na placu Rewolucji (fot. W. Januszewski)



Fig. 4. Town Hall in Bucharest (1906–1910) designed in the Neo-Romanian style by Petre Antonescu (photo: W. Januszewski)

II. 4. Ratusz w Bukareszcie (1906–1910), zaprojektowany w stylu neorumuńskim przez arch. Petre Antonescu (fot. W. Januszewski)

sentatives of that group was Ion Mincu (1852–1912) who first designed a series of public buildings, townhouses and other Neo-Romanian houses.

The Brâncovenesc style and its Neo-Romanian interpretation use artistic motifs of various origin. That architecture features the Renaissance harmony of elements, rhythmic articulation and frequent repetition of arcaded loggias and porticos. The Byzantine motifs are visible in the forms of full arches, short columns – sometimes with spiral twisted shafts – and abundant floral decorations of archivolts and friezes. Some Islamic motifs such as Moorish arches and stone ornamented openwork in balustrades are also used. The style's characteristic feature adopted from the Medieval Romanian architecture is its "defensiveness": a stable main body of the building, strengthened base course and the presence of oriels and towers. However, the most characteristic element is the steep roof with overhanging eaves [5].

The indigenous style has numerous variations which vary depending on the moment of origin and the architect's ingenuity. Apart from academic examples of the Neo-Romanian school, the indigenous elements were introduced selectively into eclectic architecture and even modern designs from the 1930s (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. In the foreground, Neo-Romanian city house; in the background, modern building with details inspired by indigenous style (photo: W. Januszewski)

Il. 5. Na pierwszym planie dom miejski w stylu neorumuńskim, w głębi budynek modernistyczny z detalem inspirowanym stylem rodzimym (fot. W. Januszewski)

Architecture of the "Little Paris"

The turning point in the growth of the city was the incorporation of Wallochchia with Moldova in 1859 and then the emergence of the Kingdom of Romania in 1881 with its capital in Bucharest. Romania broke free from the political influence of Turkey. The second half of the 19th century was the period when Romania widely opened to Western Europe. This is when the European patterns were adopted in many aspects of life. The re-latinization of the language, consisting in replacing the words with Slavic, Hungarian, and Turkish origin with the words borrowed directly from Italian or French, was symbolically significant and it was supported by the authorities [2].

Consequently, it is not surprising that the expansion of Bucharest, triggered by the necessary modernization of the capital city, followed the then popular French patterns. Specifically, the plans made by Georges Haussmann for Paris were applied. The design included broad avenues going north-south (N. Balcescu and C. Brătianu boulevard) and east-west (Regina Elisabeta and Carol I boulevard) crossing at the "grand intersection" (grande croisee) at the University Square (Piața Universității) [1] (Fig. 6).

Over the last two decades of the 19th century, a number of representative buildings of public utility and government administration were erected in the area of the



Fig. 6. Eclectic architecture of Piața Universității (photo: W. Januszewski)

Il. 6. Eklektyczna zabudowa Piața Universității (fot. W. Januszewski)



Fig. 7. City house with rich decorations from the period of the "Little Paris" (photo: W. Januszewski)

Il. 7. Dom miejski o bogatej dekoracji z okresu „małego Paryża” (fot. W. Januszewski)

new center. They were designed by Romanian architects educated in *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris and often by French designers themselves.

The buildings from that period are monumental and they feature sophisticated details as well as impeccable workmanship. The style of the new buildings was cosmopolitan and generally followed the trends popular then in French architecture. The dominant conventions included

neo-classicism, eclecticism, and French neo-renaissance as well as Art Nouveau around 1900.

The expansion of the city, which was carried out on a grand scale, followed the idea of transforming Bucharest into "Little Paris." The fashion for imported architecture affected not only huge public investments but also individual buildings such as palaces of aristocracy and rich bourgeoisie, townhouses and city houses [6] (Fig. 7).

Modernism

The next stage of the city's rapid growth was the period between the wars when Bucharest was the capital of so called Great Romania which significantly expanded to include new territories. A new literary and art movement inspired by the ideas of European avant-garde played an important role in the

cultural life at that time. Its advocates gathered around *Contimporanul* – a magazine published between 1924 and 1934. It was a forum for the young generation of designers who adopted the ideas of architecture of the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier or de Stijl. Hundreds of new buildings in the



Fig. 8. Modern architecture of Boulevardul Magheru – ARO insurance building from 1929 – designed by Horia Creanga (photo: W. Januszewski)

II. 8. Modernistyczna zabudowa Boulevardul Magheru – budynek towarzystwa ubezpieczeniowego z 1929 r. – arch. Horia Creanga (fot. W. Januszewski)



Fig. 9. Coexistence of modernism and eclecticism (photo: W. Januszewski)

II. 9. Współistnienie modernizmu i eklektyzmu (fot. W. Januszewski)



Fig. 10. Examples of modern houses in Bucharest (photo: W. Januszewski)

II. 10. Przykłady modernistycznych domów w Bukareszcie (fot. W. Januszewski)



Fig. 11. Modern body of the building and historicizing detail (photo: W. Januszewski)

II. 11. Modernistyczna bryła i historyzujący detal (fot. W. Januszewski)

International style, including monument office buildings, residential buildings and houses, were designed in Bucharest especially in the middle of the 1930s, when, after the great crisis, the building investments became the best means to save the capital [4] (Fig. 8, 9).

Despite the fact that the Romanian modernism was an imported idea, the avant-garde architecture of Bucharest is extraordinary on the European scale and its modern designs are remarkable. It is surprising how easily the interwar society adopted the completely new style of architecture. On the other hand, the activities of the state in respect of social housing – so typical of modern ideas – were insufficient. The new style was mainly applied in private building. Modernism was perceived separately from its original, social principles and consequently it was only a kind of fashionable modern costume (Fig. 10, 11).

That is why the specific features of Bucharest avant-garde focus on the external form of the buildings.

Architects freely and skillfully used all resources of modern formal means. New architecture used asymmetrical composition, horizontal rhythms, band and round windows, loggias and balconies, brise-soleil, ship balustrades, rounded corners resembling the designs by Erich Mendelsohn, etc. The minimalist solutions were not popular – on the contrary – the buildings were composed of many sections and they had a lot of details (cornices, frames, etc.) [3].

This way modernism of the capital city falls in line with the long tradition of extravert and decorative architecture of Bucharest. Frequently, this continuity can be perceived literally when the functional architecture includes pointed arches, Byzantine columns or pseudo-Moorish bars as well as warm colors. These surprising deviations from stylistic purity testify best to the uniqueness of the Romanian avant-garde (Fig. 11).

New Socialist City

The modern movement ended with the outbreak of the Second World War which resulted in the substantial destruction of the city. After 1947, Romania became a Socialist Republic. New authorities considered avant-garde bourgeois formalism and it was doomed to artistic void. Instead, there was a return of the spirit of neo-classicism. It did return but in a distorted form.

This is when socialist realism began, which was also known in other countries of so called Eastern Bloc. The temporary turn towards so called socialist modernism in the 1960s–1970s did not stop an urban catastrophe. The huge earthquake in 1977, which did a lot of damage in the historic fabric of Bucharest, became a pretext for party decision makers led by Nicolae Ceaușescu to implement the plans to remodel the capital city and turn it into a propaganda flagship of socialist Romania. In 1980, the cleaning of the area for the “new socialist city” which was planned on the south side of the existing city center by the Dâmbovița River in the area of the oldest medieval part of Bucharest began. In order to execute that undertaking the area of about 7 km² of the city, that is about 1/3 of the area of the city center, was leveled. About 40 000 residents were relocated. The old street network, the hummocky landscape, a dozen or so of orthodox churches and monasteries as well as numerous other valuable, historic buildings were completely destroyed [1].

The plan of the new design was based on extremely simplified layout. It had two main elements: the “People’s House” and the “Avenue of Victory of Socialism” (Fig. 12).

The construction of the People’s House – one of the biggest buildings in the world, which was built in the years 1984–1989 according to the plans prepared by a team of a few hundred architects – required a lot of effort. The complex which was built reminded the Babylonian zikkurat in its proportions and Versailles in its architecture. The scale and grandeur of the structure defies all classification.

The “Avenue of Victory of Socialism” is a five-kilometer-long axis, a few dozen meters longer – which was a source of its builders’ pride – than the Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Paris. A number of government and apartment buildings were designed with rows of trees and tens of fountains along the sides of the Avenue. The monumental Unirii Square with commodity warehouses was located in the area where the Avenue crosses the existing south-north axis.

The schematic and monumental architecture of these buildings is a combination of socialist realism, a sort of Ricardo Bofill’s European post-modernism and the style of official building in North Korea, with which the dictator maintained close relations (Fig. 13).



Fig. 12. The Palace of the Parliament (former People’s House) at the closing of the viewing axis (photo: W. Januszewski)

Il. 12. Bryła Pałacu Parlamentu (dawniej Domu Ludowego) na zamknięciu osi (fot. W. Januszewski)



Fig. 13. View of former "Socialist City"
(photo: W. Januszewski)

Il. 13. Widok dawnego „Miasta Socjalistycznego”
(fot. W. Januszewski)

Ceașescu's activities resulted in irreversible changes in the face of Bucharest. The diverse historic landscape of the city was replaced with a monotonous and oversized urban design. The only remains of the destroyed district are its historic orthodox churches and monasteries which for ideological reasons were blocked by new buildings or hidden inside the quarters (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14. Historic Orthodox Church hidden among socialist architecture
around Piata Unirii (photo: W. Januszewski)

Il. 14. Zabytkowa cerkiew ukryta wśród socjalistycznej zabudowy
w okolicy Piata Unirii (fot. W. Januszewski)

The present

In December 1989, Bucharest became an arena of bloody clashes as a result of which the Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship was overthrown. The revolution stopped the building program of the regime in its prime. The construction of the People's House was not fully completed.

The buildings from Ceaușescu's time have remained useless and unfinished in Bucharest until today.

Romania adopted the market economy. The People's House – currently the Palace of the Parliament – became tourist attraction and former commodity warehouses were



Fig. 15. Controversial investments by the Catholic Cathedral and Armenian Church (photo: W. Januszewski)

Il. 15. Kontrowersyjne inwestycje przy Katedrze Katolickiej i Kościele Ormiańskim (fot. W. Januszewski)



converted into shopping centers. The huge walls of the former “socialist city” are covered today with motley advertising banners.

Today’s Bucharest suffers from a lot of problems connected with the maintenance of its heritage. Its existing urban fabric, which demonstrates high architectural value, often deteriorates because of neglect of conservation work or intentional devastation.

The city lacks an effective space planning policy. The face of the capital city is heavily affected by powerful investors who force construction of more and more high-rise buildings, usually with no regard to their surroundings. Public opinion was on many occasions appalled at suggested locations of commercial architecture. In 2008, street protests were held during the debate on the shape of one of the most symbolic places in Bucharest – Revolution Square in the vicinity of the Royal Palace. The construction of skyscrapers right next to such temples as the Catholic Cathedral or by the historic Armenian Church caused huge scandals (Fig. 15). Paradoxically, free mar-

ket today – just like socialism in the past – causes the degradation of historic sites and devastation of the cultural landscape of Bucharest.

Contrasts have always been the defining elements of Bucharest’s urban landscape and its unique character. However, diversity does not mean complete lack of any principles. The architecture of the capital city of Romania had impassable limits – the limits of human scale – and because of those limits the streets and squares of old Bucharest offer true public spaces. However, since the second half of the 20th century, this natural border has been breached more and more often. Glass skyscrapers, just like socialist boulevards, are the most evident examples of that violation. New architecture also breaks the limits of schematism beyond which form becomes cliché. The architecture of glass boxes whose presence in Bucharest has become universal today does not match the artistic value of the interwar modernism. Maybe the contemporary builders of Bucharest should learn more from their great predecessors.

Translated by
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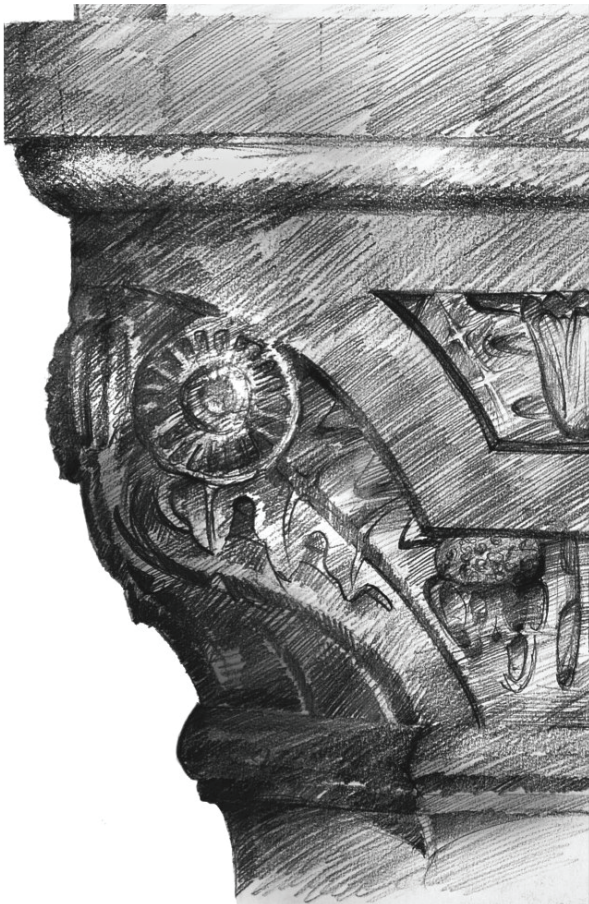
Między Europą a Wschodem – szkic o krajobrazie architektonicznym Bukaresztu

Krajobraz miejski rumuńskiej stolicy stanowi szczególnie interesujące zjawisko w aspekcie urbanistyki i form architektonicznych na tle wielkich metropolii Europy Środkowej i Południowej. Oryginalna kompozycja przestrzenna jest zapisem specyficznych uwarunkowań

kulturowych, historycznych i naturalnych. W artykule przedstawiono zarys warstwowej struktury przestrzennej miasta, tworzonej przez poszczególne grupy stylistyczne: styl rodzimy, „mały Paryż”, modernizm, socrealizm i współczesność.

Key words: Bucharest, urban space, modernism

Słowa kluczowe: Bukareszt, przestrzeń miejska, modernizm



Drawn by Mateusz Olczyk