

THE IN-BETWEEN SPACE

Romanian Mass Housing Public Space as a Playground in the Collective Memory

Romeo-Emanuel Cuc

ABSTRACT: The territorial systematization in Romania in the second half of the twentieth century has profoundly influenced the morphology of the current urban fabric, due to the pace of construction imposed by the socialist regime and related to politically forced industrialization and urbanization, thus contributing to an urban society sensitive to the subject. This paper addresses the ways in which the public space, resulting from the construction of socialist mass housing, was used, questioning how public space can be (re)gained for today's communities by understanding the disparity between the original, ordered socialist vision of housing and more informal appropriation patterns. The governmental approach to the urban development of socialist mass housing resulted in the occurrence of interstitial spaces which, having been of low development priority, were reclaimed by the nearby inhabitants, becoming free places for everyone and no one, territories that generated infinite possibilities for appropriation. Even though socialist mass housing developments were (and still are) associated with a sense of constraint, this situation generated the spontaneity with which inhabitants used the public space. In Romania, in the collective memory of generations, the iconic image of the space between the blocks is that of children playing and people socializing between *grey* buildings. With the fall of the communist regime, the responsibility of maintaining the buildings and the public space in-between was transferred to the new owners by selling the previously state-owned apartments to the population; in Romania, about 96% of homes are now privately owned. At a time when Romanian cities are facing a lack of quality public spaces, the in-between space in the mass housing neighborhoods has become a large parking area. Addressing how the public space can be (re)used must involve a clear understanding of past practices to generate context-sensitive reactions.

KEYWORDS: socialist mass-housing, urban in-between space, appropriation, collective memory, playground

INTRODUCTION: The current form of the built environment of Romanian cities cannot be separated from the story of forced industrialization and urbanization after the Second World War until the Revolution of 1989, a period in which the authoritarian political will of a dictatorial system sought "the construction of socialist society and the gradual transition to the construction of communism" (Gheorghiu-Dej, 1962, p.1). Architecture and urban planning were the instrumental fields that, under the limits imposed by the political context, "in an irreversible process of intense urbanization" (Lăzărescu, 1974, p. 22) led to the socialist reconfiguration of cities.

The architecture of mass housing was seen as a social factor (Ursu, 1976, p.14) in the entire political discourse of the time, and the construction of collective housing was

one of the main architectural programs in which it was invested. Following the logic of urban planning, neighborhoods capable of offering a record number of residential units were built. Omitted from the urban planning priorities (especially after 1975), the space between the apartment buildings is, in the socialist times, a space for everyone and no one, a simple background for the imagination of communities (and, in particular, of children), a territory of freedom to appropriate a place in an oppressive political system.

The paper's subject is also addressed by the author in a broader study on Romanian socialist mass housing. It seeks to discover the nuances in the relationship between the complex political (and legislative) context, the controlled professional context (the intentions formulated in

the architectural and urban discourse), and the social context (the assimilation of the new direction by the population) to open new research opportunities. This offers new perspectives for the socialist neighborhoods by recognizing the qualities of good practice examples from the socialist period (not as a generalization), initiating new discussions regarding the possibility of classifying the socialist heritage of collective housing¹ and opening a reflection on how the public space of the socialist neighborhoods can be used today. To begin, the paper illustrates the ideological and socio-cultural ways in which socialist neighborhoods were formed. It then examines the original intentions of designing the in-between space of collective residential buildings as presented in the architectural discourse during the socialist regime. In other words, the paper addresses these two circumstances – the image of the socialist neighborhoods and the image of the architectural view regarding the design and partial programming of the interstitial space.

The formation process of Romanian cities through the construction of socialist collective housing is often associated with traumas for the traditional structures of the cities, but also the population. Still, these buildings form a large part of residential units in the country today. This impressive socialist urban fabric did nothing but provide an urban framework that was complemented by the human factor, aspects related to the identity of the place, the continuity of practices, improvisation, spontaneity, curiosity, and appropriation. An important part of the research is the illustration of the antithesis between the rigidity of the socialist dwelling and the flexibility of the places domesticated by the inhabitants [FIGURE 01]. The comparative perspective tells a story of spontaneity and imagination born out of constraints in a difficult political context. Furthermore, the paper addresses the contemporary situation of public spaces in socialist neighborhoods at a time when Romanian cities are facing a lack of quality public spaces.

SOCIALIST COLLECTIVE HOUSING – THE STORY

After the Second World War, the change of context meant the transition of a democratic state to a totalitarian, absolute owner involved in all areas of the state economy, including the country's architecture and urban planning, which was oriented towards quantity and uniformity. The development of standardized collective housing projects following typification, industrialization, and systematization had a decisive impact on the shape of the socialist city.

In the publication *Architecture in the communist project. Romania 1944-1989*, architect, historian and theoretician of architecture Ana Maria Zahariade (2011) proposed temporal milestones of the socialist history of

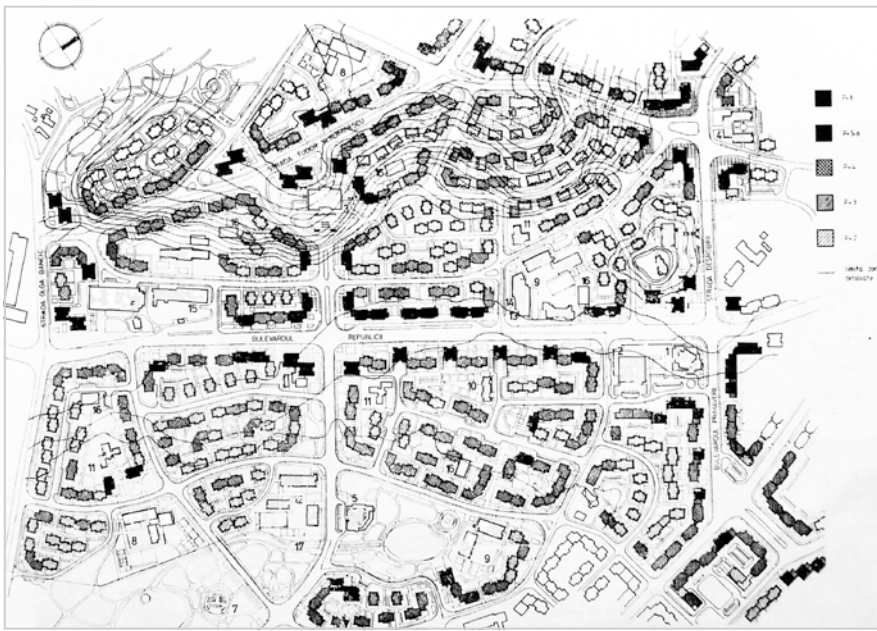


01 Children playing in a socialist neighborhood in Bucharest.
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the architecture in a particular perspective, referring to several stages related to the international context of the time, which she correlated with stages in the evolution of architecture and urbanism in Romania: the reconstruction after the war; the Stalinist *cvartals* that corresponded to the period of socialist realism until after the mid-1950s; the high-rise housing estates and the *microraiion* (residential micro-districts) in the time of an attempt to synchronize with Western architecture in the 1960s until the first half of the 1970s when architectural practice enjoyed a certain openness towards modernism and free urban planning: “modernism was embraced, although the word *modernist* was avoided in political discourse” (Vais, 2020, p. 2) and “the terms modernism, functionalism, international style are never used” (Zahariade, 2011, p. 55); followed by the return to an absolute totalitarian regime until 1989 in a time of decline closely related and initiated by political factors translated through a process of densification.

It should be mentioned that the *Theses from July 1971 - Proposals for measures to improve the political-ideological activity, Marxist-Leninist education of party members, of all working people*, disseminated through the speech that Nicolae Ceaușescu gave on July 6, 1971, marked the end of liberalization through a new cultural revolution based on the Chinese and North Korean models (Stroe, 2015, p. 239). In 1971, Romanian dictator and head of state of the Socialist Republic of Romania from 1967 until the fall of the communist regime, Nicolae Ceaușescu, opened the 3rd Conference of the Union of Architects, and his critical speech was based on economic and nationalist arguments: “(...) the apartment buildings are dispersed randomly, they do not create precise streets and boulevards, in a clear urban planning line (...)” (Ceaușescu, 1971, pp. 3-8).

After the 1971 directives and with visible echoes after 1975 and in the 1980s, the intention to maximize the use of land in the densification process was characterized by the placement of new buildings in the green spaces of previously built neighborhoods, but also by the use of new spatial configurations - housing precincts [FIGURE 02]: “(...)

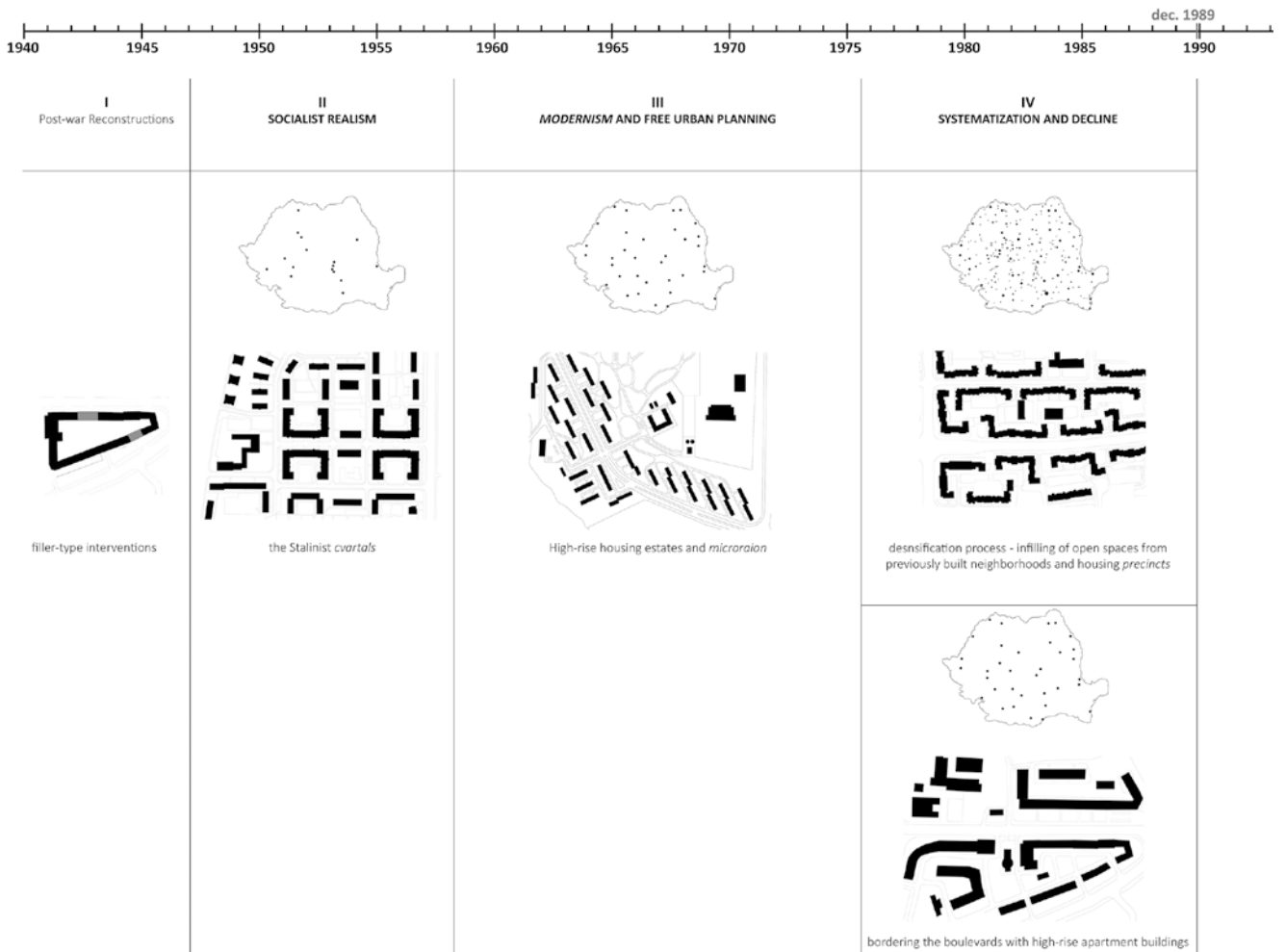


02 Housing precincts in a Romanian socialist city.
© Cristea & Sandu, 2017, p. 35.

paved yards, enclosed by (...) tall buildings constructed from ambiguously shaped segments, creating, with aberrant population densities, empty, deserted urban spaces” (Zahariade, 2011, p. 62). At the same time, mass housing neighborhoods were built in the perimeter areas of the cities, the so-called “bedroom neighborhoods” (Zahariade, 2011, p. 61). Bordering the boulevards with high-rise apartment buildings generated backyards entrenched in the collective memory of the generations that have lived in the socialist mass housing developments

in Romania, an ambiguous, unprogrammed (and sometimes residual) space.

The radical shift away from open-planned *CIAM Modernism* that happened during the 1970s led to a dense systematization pattern involving infilling of open spaces and building apartment blocks along boulevards (Zahariade, 2011), making the Romanian socialist experience (based on the systematization as an ideological/urbanist concept of the *Ceaușescu era*) unique in the socialist block with generally modernist, vast open planning



03 Post-war socialist urban planning in Romania and the national spread of the phenomena associated with it. © Author, 2023.

continuing to prevail in the other Eastern European countries. This has obvious implications for the image of public spaces in Romanian socialist neighborhoods as the in-between spaces bequeathed by socialism differ radically in character pre-1970s and post-1970s. Today, some original open layouts are relatively intact, but others are much infilled and fragmented. For the Romanian case study, the socialist neighborhood is a general urban model at the national level for every urban establishment [FIGURE 03].

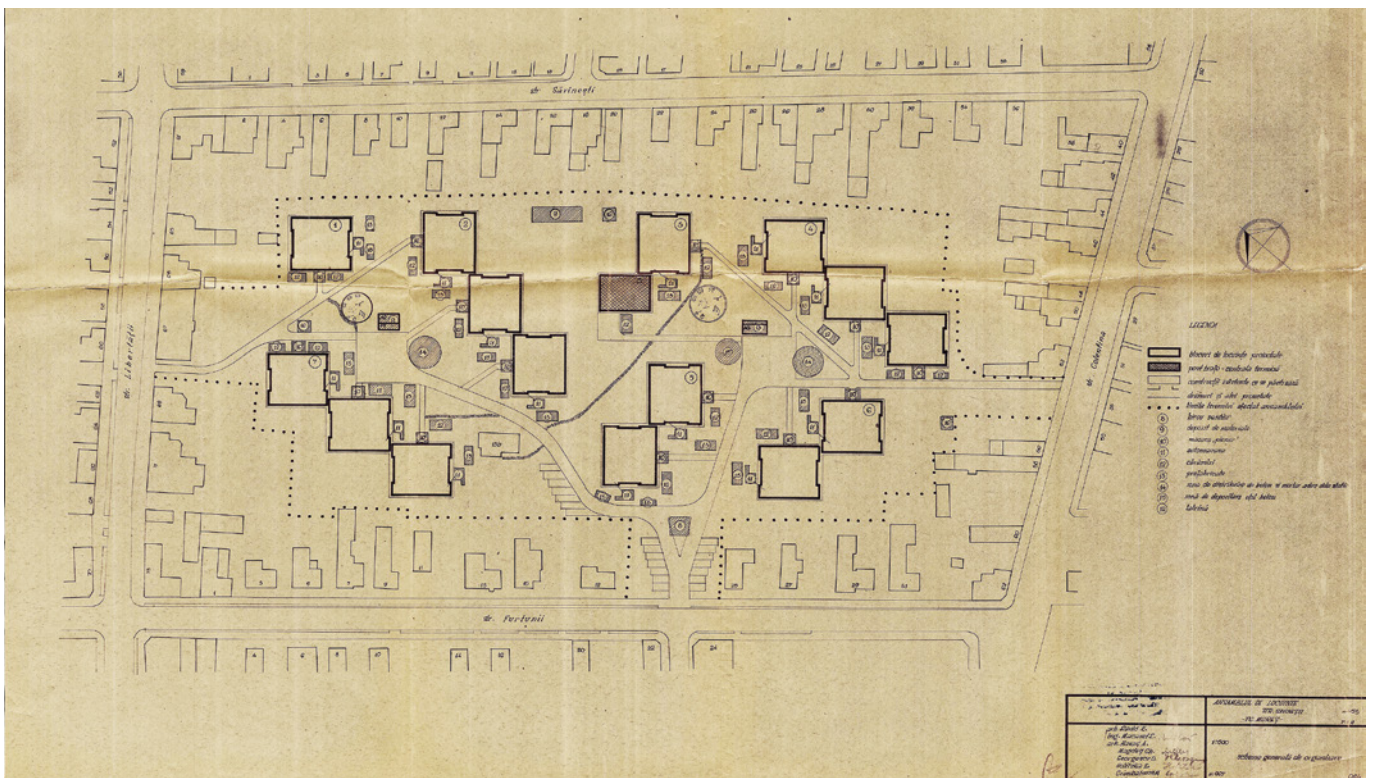
The socialist project to reorganize collective housing had a counterpart in the attempt at social uniformity. Newly built apartments were given to the population as a form of “social salary” (Locar, 1966, p. 19) and less often for purchase. Housing distribution was mainly organized through the state factories, prioritizing workers from large industrial units. The dimensions of the apartments were differentiated according to the size of the family, the birth rates, and the demographic growth (by Law no. 4/1973²). Architect Gusti Gustav (1962) described the socialist view related to the common property of the country: “The monopoly of private property over the urban territory is practically liquidated (...), and social property is established” (p. 5).

For a large part of the population, living in socialist collective housing was equivalent either to displacement from the villages or hometowns following the national distribution of jobs or to displacement from urban housing demolished following expropriation decrees. These new residents of the neighborhoods were being put in the position of having to form new communities and appropriate their new homes.

THE IN-BETWEEN SPACE IN THE PROFESSIONAL ARCHITECTURAL AND URBAN DISCOURSE IN SOCIALISM

The state was the absolute owner of all economic fields, and the free practice of architecture and urban planning was suspended and replaced by the state design institutes as the only places where the projects were carried out and within which political indications and directives were not optional (Vais, 2020). The administrative process required for construction took less than a year and included economic planning, systematization plan, expropriation decree, design, and work authorization. Architectural speech was concentrated in a few publications and was subject to censorship (Stroe, 2015, p. 27). The publication that constantly appeared throughout the socialist period is *Arhitectura R.P.R.* [*Architecture of the People's Republic of Romania*] magazine, which became *Arhitectura* [*Architecture*] magazine in 1965. It was the main way of disseminating information in the professional architectural and urban field of the time.

The design approach and interest in the space around the collective house buildings as presented in the period's publications fade over time. At first (in the time of socialist realism), the quarters formed inner courtyards with greenery in the collective housing complexes. The early 1960s until the first half of the 1970s is the period in which perhaps the most significant importance was given to the planned arrangement of the space around and in between the apartment buildings [FIGURE 04]. At the level of the professional discourse, the importance of outdoor



04 Playgrounds, pedestrian walkways, and planted green spaces proposed in the Alea Săvinești neighborhood in Târgu-Mureș. © Unpublished document from the archive of the former State Design Institute of Mureș County – project no. 4453/1967.

design in satisfying the need of spending free time among the inhabitants was discussed: “the housing process of the urban community, in all its complexity, will have to be contained in a whole system of buildings and exterior design” (Gustav, 1962, p. 3). These aspects are reiterated throughout the period in a multitude of articles published in *Arhitectura (R.P.R.)* magazine, noting the close connection between the design of the exterior free spaces around the housing buildings, the living conditions (quality of life) and the new form of the “socialist city (...) as the built environment of society” (Gustav, 1962, p. 5).

Architect Victor Sebéstyén (1962) pointed to the lack of national experience in designing public space and sought to hierarchize it (from the complex’s central garden to the green spaces related to the apartments). In terms of design, on the one hand, the green spaces received a major role. The importance of the landscape was mentioned since “architecture (...) cannot be conceived without a close connection with the surrounding green spaces” (Sebéstyén, 1962, p. 14) and the projects presented sought the environmental importance in the design of “the necessary micro-climate” (Gusti & Hussar, 1963, p.18). Furthermore, architect Alexandra Florian (1963) wrote an article about the need for playgrounds in housing complexes, exemplifying designed spaces for children from various cities in the country [FIGURE 05], along with a list of elements considered necessary in equipping these types of places (pp. 40-45).

If in the first half of the 1960s, the articles published in *Arhitectura R.P.R.* magazine concerning the design of the spaces between the apartment buildings illustrated an appreciative view, in the second half of the 1960s, the first criticisms appeared concerning the “huge free spaces between the apartment blocks” and the “distribution of the free spaces planted (...) evenly on the systematized territory”, also pointing out the financial challenges related to the maintenance of public spaces: “the large expenses, which are necessary for these free spaces to become and, in particular, to remain what can be called a green space, cause them to be abandoned” (Ghelman, 1966, p. 34).

Since 1971, design directions have focused on cost-effective solutions (regarding financial and land use), leading to the redirection of funds previously dedicated to the design of exterior public spaces. The (then) president of the State Committee for Economy and Local Administration, Petre Blajovici (1971), raised the issue of economic efficiency: “the negative phenomena (...) of wasting investment funds in constructions (area) that do not justify themselves” (p. 2). The same aspect is reinforced by Nicolae Ceaușescu’s speech at the 3rd Conference of the Union of Architects from the Socialist Republic of Romania in 1971: “in the new neighborhoods

that are currently being built, as in the neighborhoods built in recent years, it is necessary to ensure the most rational use of land surfaces, an optimal density of constructions. In the process of continuous development (...) the retouching of design mistakes (...) committed in the past must be pursued” (Ceaușescu, 1971, p. 6).

The rational use of land led to the abandonment of the principles of free urban planning, and the provided green spaces within the ensembles were replaced by new buildings (in the process of densification). Within the new ensembles, the desired density led to housing estates that should have considered the design of the space surrounding the building. Gradually, in seeking densification and increasing the pace of urbanization, in the last part of the socialist period, the interstitial space remained an empty space, a platform, often paved and randomly planted. This was frequently discussed in the architectural discourse of the time, especially as a critique.

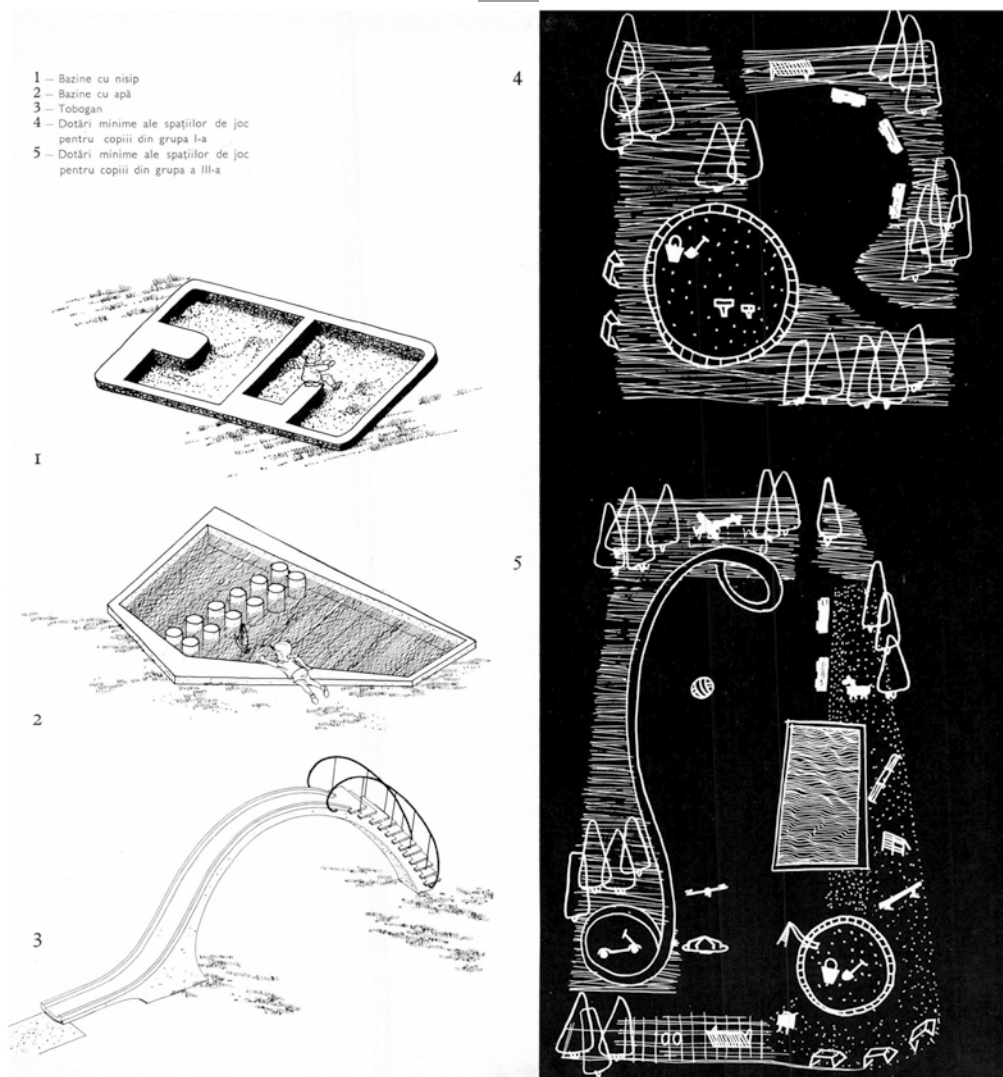
Furthermore, architect Cezar Lăzărescu (1976) identified a problem faced by socialist mass housing public space nowadays, namely addressing the parking lots [FIGURE 06], which he considered “insufficiently solved” and proposed as an alternative to the construction of “neighborhood parking lots (buildings), outside the housing complex” (p. 11). This desired solution was not realized, but the concerns of that time – “we risk, in the very near future, not being able to drive or walk on the streets anymore or destroying the green spaces” (p. 15) – are a real and important issue for the post-socialist Romanian cities.

Architect Cezar Niculiu (1981) wrote about the fact that housing “requires outdoor spaces” (p.17). A year later, architect Petre Derer (1982), during the Plenary Session of the Union of Architects (with the main theme “the quality of housing”), emphasized “the importance of the vicinity, of the environment in defining the quality of housing” (p. 31). However, since economic efficiency was the main issue in “achieving the systematization details of housing complexes” (Horodincă, 1983, p. 34), the public interstitial space of socialist mass housing built in the 1980s in Romania was at a distant level of urban planning priorities.

EVERYONE’S SPACE, NOBODY’S SPACE

As Ana Maria Zahariade (2009) pointed out in *Symptoms of Transition*, “the space that forms the immediate vicinity of the home plays at least as important a role as the home itself” (p. 146). The transition between the private space of the socialist apartment and the public space of the neighborhood is perhaps best defined by the notion of the nearest vicinity.

Despite the homogenization imposed by the socialist dwellings, people responded to the new way of habitation by seeking to domesticate not only the space of the

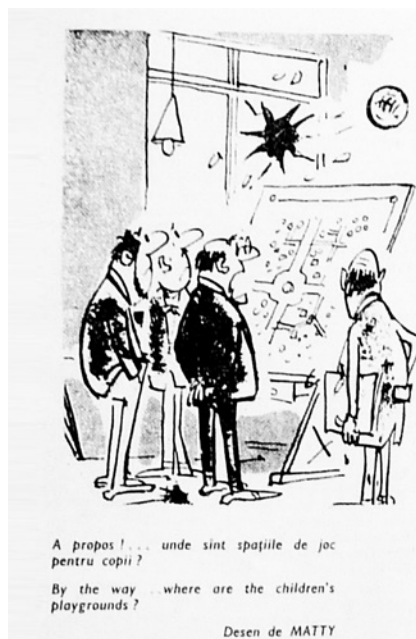


- 1 - Bazine cu nisip
- 2 - Bazine cu apă
- 3 - Tobogan
- 4 - Dotări minime ale spațiilor de joc pentru copiii din grupa I-a
- 5 - Dotări minime ale spațiilor de joc pentru copiii din grupa a III-a

05 Playground project in the 1960s for socialist neighborhoods. © Florian, 1963, p. 41.

apartment but also the space around it, almost always and in all cities. The uniformity of the spaces that were assigned to them was counterbalanced by the gestures of living as symbols of freedom in the appropriation of the homes and their extensions; the entrance hall, the

staircase, and the common halls were given the functions of play, storage and spending free time among objects and flowerpots, the interstitial space left between the blocks without specific programming. The free space between the apartment buildings received numerous



06 Drawings made by cartoonist Matty Aslan for *Arhitectura R.P.R.* magazine as a critical irony on the free space between the buildings in the socialist neighborhoods, highlighting the battle between the playground and the parking lot. © Matty Aslan (Derer, 1972, p. 10).



informal employment [FIGURE 07]. In this outdoor free area, the inhabitants planted trees or continued into this new collective type of courtyard/backyard activities previously associated with traditions and spaces of the courtyards from the villages. Meanwhile, the children built their own imaginary worlds in these spaces left undesigned, using objects and areas as props. The almost theatrical image of the in-between (public) space of the Romanian socialist mass housing was a very animated one - a non-restrictive playground next to the socialist apartment buildings, appropriated by the inhabitants with spontaneity and inventiveness in use as an antithesis of the political constraints that sought social uniformity.³

Anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu (2018) described the phenomenon of appropriating the space between the socialist apartment buildings as a paradoxical one: although a non-participatory phenomenon, the formation of the communities around the blocks was largely influenced by the possibility of further appropriation facilitated precisely by the diffuse search for the design of public spaces. "For urbanism to be imaginative to the extent that it gives up being definitive and forgets to plan everything, leaving the inhabitants the possibility of post-urban developments" (p. 29).

As an antithesis to the idea of imaginative urbanism, in the publication *Experimentul Cățelu*, Florin Biciușcă (2005) emphasized the differences between the intentionality of the design and its reality and the discrepancies between the untruthful, idyllic illustration of the public space exhibited in the projects in the specialized architectural socialist literature and the resulting spaces which, in the absence of character and sociological meaning, risked remaining deserted. However, Biciușcă mentions the iconic image of the space between the socialist blocks, a metaphor for free space and freedom of appropriation that marked the collective memory in Romania for generations. He describes

the use of the space between and next to the socialist blocks as spaces whose generosity is guaranteed by the lack of rules, constraints, and profiling: "When the new neighborhoods smelled of fresh lime walls, children did not have playgrounds designed with swings and slides, but they did transform the ground between the apartment buildings into something good for long games; they would play games too ridiculous to seem important to the city planners (...). These were not sad children because nobody would teach them how to play. The only exterior facilities were some bowers with concrete benches where grandparents were supposed to sit (...). They would find themselves much friendlier spots (...)" (Biciușcă, 2005). This lack of constraint was facilitated by a social system in which children could freely enjoy the spaces between the blocks supervised not only by their parents but also by the whole community, by these "networks of adults (who) played the role of informal supervision cooperatives" (Petrovici, 2018, p. 22).

THE IN-BETWEEN SPACE NOW?

Political pressure and the systematization of cities were the keywords in the process of building the socialist country, and the communist program generated the construction of vast uniform neighborhoods in all Romanian cities. The socialist construction of the country was abruptly stopped with the Revolution of 1989, and the apartments previously rented from the state were sold at insignificant prices to the residents; this phenomenon is also found in the history of other countries belonging to the former Soviet bloc. Meanwhile, buildings' condition has deteriorated, as has the quality of urban life. The socialist neighborhood as an urban structure outlived socialism, but the communities changed permanently. The responsibility for maintaining urban constructions and interstitial spaces was initially transferred to the population. Currently, local authorities, together with residents, are responsible for looking after the public space. This uncertain legislative status and the questioning of territoriality [FIGURE 08] over public space results in its precarious maintenance.

The interventions in the neighborhoods in the post-socialist period did nothing but continue the process of uniformity without morally rehabilitating or revitalizing them: thermal insulation of facades with polystyrene, replacing the original wooden windows with PVC ones, closing balconies, building new floors on the existing buildings and changing their shape, public space almost entirely occupied with cars, etc. These interventions were how the population understood the new freedom after the 1989 Revolution. Furthermore, urban life has other needs. The time of the residents (and implicitly of the children involved in various extracurricular activities) is structured



07 The image of urban life in the newly built socialist neighborhoods. © Găvozdea, 1969, p. 19.



08 The image of the territory of all that is partially fenced off in the post-socialist period.
© Andrei Mărgulescu, 2018 (for Mnemonics).



09 The contemporary urban image of a socialist neighborhood.
© Andrei Mărgulescu, 2018 (for Mnemonics).

differently compared to the period when the neighborhoods were built. Reduced free time, traffic hazards, previously vacant spaces that are now parking lots and access roads, playgrounds with precise function devices made for small children, fenced, and always surrounded by adults [FIGURE 09] have transformed the public space that once was an unscheduled playground which offered the possibility of spontaneity found in the childhood games of the generation of latchkey kids. In 2018, the project *Mnemonics* that represented Romania at the Venice Architecture Biennale appealed to the collective memory related to childhood freedom of expression in the space between the socialist blocks translated as a big playground in a space not programmed for it. The children's key necklace symbolizes independence and a reminder of their only responsibility while their parents were at work and they played outside with other children.

A series of contemporary reactions (both at national and European levels) responded to these changes and sought solutions through good urban practice methods to offer communities opportunities for public space in mass housing neighborhoods. In Romania, examples such as *Urban Spaces in Action*⁴, *Studio Basar*⁵ projects, *Cișmigiu Civic Initiative Group*⁶, *De-a Arhitectura*⁷ program, *Mnemonics*⁸ project, *Bloculmeu*⁹, and others are trying to raise awareness of the impact that public spaces from socialist mass housing (still) have on the quality of urban life.

CONCLUSIONS

The architecture of the socialist period (especially that of the socialist collective housing program) is contradictory and complicated. Even though they form the majority of the country's built environment, socialist mass housing neighborhoods have a bad reputation among the population, buildings face energy inadequacies, and public spaces are given few to no options and chances for redevelopment and reuse.

Seen by generations as a space of constraint, the neighborhoods represent, in fact, a reserve of space and

a resource for development, a place of inter-human relations that needs a plausible and sensitive to the question of public space future scenario.

Beyond appealing to the nostalgia linked to the iconic image of children playing next to the blocks in socialist neighborhoods, this interstitial space should not be neglected in the process of urban regeneration and revitalization in order to understand the intersection between the structure (public space, private space, semi-private space) and habitation (habitants' practices).

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Romeo-Emanuel Cuc is Ph.D. student and Associate Teacher at Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism. He graduated with a master's degree in Architecture (Université libre de Bruxelles), attended courses at the "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urbanism (Bucharest), and received his bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering (Technical University of Constructions of Bucharest). He was curator of the Romanian Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale (2018), where he raised the question of the social functions of Romanian mass housing public space.

ENDNOTES

- 1 As an example, Lazdynai neighborhood in Vilnius is an example of innovative Soviet Modernism and is listed in the Register of heritage objects of Lithuania.
- 2 <http://www.monitoruljuridic.ro/act/lege-nr-4-din-28-martie-1973-privind-dezvoltarea-construcției-de-locuințe-vinzarea-de-locuințe-din-fondul-de-stat-catre-populație-si-construirea-de-case-de-odihna-propritate-personala-308.html>. Accessed Dec. 10, 2022.
- 3 Within the Mnemonics project, a number of professionals from different fields who lived in a Romanian socialist neighbourhood presented their views on the subject. See Voices section on <https://mnemonics.ro/>.
- 4 <http://asociația-komunitas.ro/projects/urban-spaces-action/>. Accessed Dec. 06, 2022.
- 5 <http://www.studiobasar.ro/>. Accessed Dec. 06, 2022.
- 6 <https://gradinacuamenii.ro/>. Accessed Dec. 06, 2022.
- 7 <https://www.de-a-arhitectura.ro/>. Accessed Dec. 06, 2022.
- 8 <https://mnemonics.ro/>. Accessed Dec. 06, 2022.
- 9 <https://www.manopera.com/improving-tudor/> Accessed Dec. 06, 2022.