

## **"IDENTITY" IN THE APPROACH OF ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM DURING THE SOCIALIST- COMMUNIST PERIOD IN ROMANIA**

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### **Abstract**

This article approaches the topic of "identity" with regards to the production of architecture and urbanism in Romania during what is often labelled as the "communist" or "socialist" era (circa 1944-1989). As the theme and concept of "identity" (using this specific word) seems to be gaining considerable exposure and attention in recent years as it's being approached by various researchers and professionals of different backgrounds, this article tries to conjugate the issue of identity in the field of architecture and urbanism, focusing on the time interval mentioned above (namely a period that can be labelled as the "socialist-communist" period). In this respect, the article tries to outline some of the most important identity coordinates of the architecture and urbanism that was practiced in the socialist-communist period in Romania.

In doing so, the article will visit some aspects of architectural identity, urban identity and cultural identity in regards to buildings and cities in the study period. The focus will especially be on buildings, groups of buildings and urban areas (such as city centres and central urban ensembles) that have a somewhat powerful representative function and/or underlying valence of representativeness – being representative for a city, for a community, for an ideology, for an aesthetic orientation, etc.. Here, the issue of "identity" will especially be investigated and presented through its role as premise or justification for an urban project or for the design of a representative building. And in trying to understand the identity aspects and implications of various projects and realisations, the issue of "identity" will primarily be presented as it was approached by some of the most relevant stakeholders in the issue, such as the architects and the politicians. The role and influence of politics, politicians and ideology are particularly specific for the study period, being considerably relevant for the topic of "identity".

**Keywords:** identity concerns, representativeness, specificity in

architecture, Nicolae Porumbescu, traditional architecture, historical centre, preservation, value, systematisation, demolition, politics.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Although the political, ideological and economical aspects profoundly dominated the programmatic set of priorities that influenced the urban projects that were carried out in the cities of Romania during the socialist-communist era (circa 1944-1989), the element of "identity" was also present and influential (both in reasoning, discourse, intention and practice). In spite of the fact that the actual word "identity" was rarely used as such in the aforementioned period, some identity concerns were undeniably present in different ways, more or less implicitly, although the word itself ("identity") was not yet acknowledged and current. In this respect, several concerns coming from the part of some stakeholders (such as architects and politicians) can probably be brought in together, nowadays, under the expression of "identity concerns" or "identity concerns". For example: during the remodelling activities of the central areas of some cities, one can consider the attempts to preserve some arguably valuable elements of architectural heritage (and some fragments of the old urban fabric) as "identity concerns". Another relevant example for what can be conceptualised and interpreted as "identity concern" is the emergence of traditional Romanian architecture as a reliable source of inspiration for new buildings, in the second part of the 1960s. In this context, the phrase "identity concern" is advanced by the author of this article and assumed accordingly.

In the discussed period (circa 1944-1989), such "identity concerns" had moments when they seem to have been more influential or less influential, so their contribution to the actual achievements in architecture and urbanism can be argued as not having been necessarily constant throughout the socialist-communist period. There are certain periods when the "identity factor" (if it can be labelled as such) seems to be blooming: as, for example, with the restoration projects and studies on architectural heritage and traditional architecture that were carried out quite frequently and robustly throughout the 1960s, in conjunction with the emergence of the theme of "national specificity". On the other hand, there are other moments when the identity concerns seem to be discouraged: such as with the dissolution of the Heritage Commission following the earthquake of 1977. This was a moment when the identity link to the past seemed to lose relevance.

Likewise, there are architects who work with architectural elements and design features that seem to be more varied, somewhat special, less standard and (in some cases and to a certain degree) even "historicist". Some of these elements of design transmit the intention of a more "friendly" (or less radical) insertion of a new building within the existing urban fabric and built environment, or the intention of coagulating a somewhat special/unique/personal identity of the new interventions. This approach can be interpreted as having an underlying identity reason, as it seems to be trying to counterbalance the monotony for which many of the period buildings and urban ensembles end up being criticised after the proliferation of standardisation and functionalism. In the context of widespread standardisation, this attitude is usually aiming for a certain degree of uniqueness to the design of buildings and urban ensembles (such as civic centres), and this can be considered as an identity concern.

Such identity-driven coordinates of architectural design can be noticed, for example, in the case of some arguably peculiar architectural forms, or in the case

of some stylistic and volumetric references to historical, regional and traditional architecture (such as with the use of columns and capitals, sloping roofs, or bow windows). Especially remarkable are the stylisations of some architectural elements and motifs that are being selected from the vocabulary of traditional architecture and praised for their specificity to Romanian architecture: such as the image of traditional wooden joints and the typical "dovetail" notching that are being transposed into concrete in many of the works of arch. Nicolae Porumbescu.

Otherwise, although such approaches are arguably easier to identify and interpret as "identity concerns", identity reasons for architectural designs and urban projects can actually be spotted in many other situations. For example, the 1980s generalised drive for demolition in the central areas of many cities (including Bucharest, Iași or Craiova) bears an arguably strong identity valence, although this period is probably easier to be interpreted, at least at a first glance, as arguably lacking in terms of "identity concerns" (as it neglects the identity relevance and value of some extensive urban fragments). In this situation, the identity dimension can actually be found (at least partially) within the political desire to boast impressive new buildings and large urban ensembles for reasons of propaganda, as expressions of the so-called "triumph" of socialism. It's therefore (at least partially) a question of political rhetoric that's being expressed in built form, but it's also a question of expressing a new identity that often goes in contradiction (or contrast) with the embedded identity of the pre-existing urban image.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

In approaching the topic of this article, most of the support was in the form of bibliographic sources such as books and articles that are concerned with architecture and urban planning during the socialist-communist era. A key source was the collection of professional magazines *Arhitectura* from the study period (circa 1944-1989), where the topic could be traced and followed via article titles, architect names or other relevant criteria. Another key source was a post-communist extended study on the relationship between architecture and politics during the aforementioned period. Written by architect Alex Răuță and entitled *Negotiating the Civic Center. Architects and Politicians in 20th Century Romania*, the book has proved to be quite abundant in providing some precious pieces of information that are relevant to the identity issue [1]. Otherwise, a source that proved to be crucial for the article and its research theme was Mrs. Ana Maria Zahariade's 2011 book entitled *Architecture in the communist project. Romania 1944-1989* [2]. From her position as one of Romania's leading architecture historians and theorists, prof. Zahariade offers a valuable insight into the history of the profession during the study period of the present article, thus providing the study with information and ideas that proved to be useful for the topic of "identity".

On the other hand, an important aspect of the approach of the research that produced the present article was field study, observation and individual insight coming from the part of the author. The aim was to critically select examples of buildings and urban ensembles that would fit inside a potential "group" in which "identity" arguably played a decisive role in the design, thus expressing the searches for an architecture with "identity" during the socialist-communist times.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Following the research effort, one of the most important results was the identification of a quite constant pursuit of "identity" in architecture and urban planning in the socialist-communist period. Although the results and implications of various identity concerns and rhetorics are not always so visible, so clear and eloquent, "identity" was actually taken into account quite often, by politicians and professionals alike, when thinking and approaching architecture and urban planning in the aforementioned period. The diversity and interpretability of the approaches towards "identity" are probably the key issues that make it quite puzzling for the public to identify and properly interpret/understand the identity-driven designs of the era. For instance, one of the first aesthetic identities that flourished in architecture during the socialist-communist times was the so-called "Socialist Realism" (a term often associated, at least in the case of Romania, with the term "Stalinism").

Within this aesthetic approach (namely Socialist Realism) that came to dominate the scene through the 1950s and even became a sort of "official style" around the middle of the decade, the buildings exhibited quite historically-friendly designs: using columns, capitals, applied decoration of mostly classical origin, and other features that made the buildings integrate within the urban environments quite often. Identity-wise, it was partly about expressing the "emergence" of the working class out of poverty. Suddenly, in the 1950s, due to the emergence of the new communist power and through the application of its policies, the working class (proletariat) could reach out to live in new, robust and arguably prestigious apartment blocks. Often fitted with "columns" and other types of decoration, these so-called "palaces of the working people" aimed for a standard of living somehow typical of the middle class. The complex of inferiority of the proletariat in relation with the middle class or aristocracy – something that had been building up during the liberal and capitalist times – now had to be surpassed (during communism); and this was somewhat of a programmatic goal of the communist party. And this could also be done through architecture. It was about well-being, in the end. It can therefore be argued that propaganda and politics therefore triggered, in some way, an approach to architectural identity.

But the aesthetics of the so-called "Socialist Realism" did not last for the entire socialist-communist period. At the end of the 1950s, this approach (with its embedded and implicit valence of identity) ended up being replaced by a new set of values. And it was the modernist and functionalist aesthetics that took over. Now, with the emergence of what can be labelled as "socialist modernism", the "identity" began to reside in the expression of modernity, of simplicity, of economy, of standardisation, and of the industrial. With this new aesthetic, stylistic and implicitly identity paradigm that consecrated itself at the beginning of the 1960s, the columns of the defunct Socialist Realism ended up being ejected from the palette of so-called "agreed" means. The identity had therefore changed.

Then, during the first years of the Ceaușescu regime – namely in the second part of the 1960's – the urban fragments (and especially the central ensembles) that had been built especially during the late Gheorghiu-Dej period ended up being frequently criticised for an alleged "monotony". Even Nicolae Ceaușescu himself, in some of his speeches and transcripts, declared to be in favour of the constructive traditions and of the local specificities – as instruments against monotony [3]. However, at the same time, some principles and recommendations that were being formulated ended up being somehow contradictory to one another. For example, the goal of intensifying the industrialisation of the building process ultimately

triggers the same "monotony" that's otherwise being criticised [4]. Consequently, this aspect regarding monotony – and the blaming of different buildings and urban ensembles as lacking in "character" or "personality" – can be interpreted as an "identitary concern".

Onwards, these coordinates of the political rhetoric feeds the professional discourse and therefore influences the research themes of many architects and urban planners. Sometimes, the official political agenda coincides with the professional agenda and preferences of some architects and urban planners. The influence can be appreciated as not being one-way though, but actually two-way: from politicians to architects and vice versa. And one of the results of this confluence of political and professional concerns is that the architectural language and the stylistic vocabulary become topics for sustained debate, as key elements of the design process. Sometimes, the idea of a reconciliation of modern construction techniques with a sense of rootedness (inspired by buildings typical to various local communities) is also approached [5]. For example, architects Nicolae Porumbescu and Maria Vaida-Porumbescu plead for the idea that, by reinterpreting some elements of traditional architecture in reinforced concrete, this technically capable but otherwise hard material (with its appearance of "cold" and "industrial") could reach up to its own "lyric" potential [6]. This idea is expressed in an influential article that's signed by the two architects, husband and wife, within the pages of the professional magazine *Arhitectura*, in 1967. The title of the article is eloquent and remarkably relevant for the theme of identity: "Specificity in architecture".

Besides the Porumbescu couple, other architects who – through their writings and their design portfolios – could potentially be included, at least partially, in a kind of group of identity-seekers in concrete would be Constantin Joja, Adrian Gheorghiu, Mircea Alifanti or Viorel Voia.

Constantin Joja, for example, signs a remarkable identity-themed article in the *Arhitectura* magazine in the year 1969 [7]. The article is entitled "The update of Romanian urban tradition" and tackles the issue of tradition not only in regards to the idea of a "building", but also relative to the idea of "urban tissue". In the process of formulating and layering his ideas inside the article, arch. Joja makes a few statements which are relevant to the identitary theme in regards to urban projects. For example (translated by the author of the present article): "Before making new urban ensembles, the notes of specificity of the traditional urbanism should be defined. (...) It hasn't yet been outlined whether the new ensembles are organising or destroying the personality of the city" [8]. As he is leading the restoration works for two old inns in Bucharest around the year 1970 (namely Manuc's Inn and the Linden Tree Inn), arch. Joja develops a rather special concern for the urban and commercial architecture of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Collaterally, he is also conducting research on the theme of glass facades (the so-called "geamlăcuri") that are distinctive or "specific" for this type of architectural heritage [9].

Moreover, Joja writes two books in which he approaches the theme of transferring and translating some elements of specificity from traditional architecture to the new architecture [10]. Architect Adrian Gheorghiu develops a quite similar theme within an article that is published in the year 1967 in the same *Arhitectura* professional magazine [11]. The article's name is evocative in this sense: "Processing Romanian folk architecture".

With a few exceptions such as Porumbescu, the architects that seem to be having an arguably strong interest in the theme of identity and specificity in architecture

rarely manage to actually participate, as lead architects, in the quite extensive remodelling operations that affect the urban cores of many Romanian cities especially in the 1970s and 1980s (the so-called "systematisation projects of central areas"). Such architects are especially active in the professional sub-field of restoration and in academia (where they are producing research, works of architecture history and theory, different types of studies, articles etc.). Architects Grigore Ionescu and Gheorghe Curinschi-Vorona are probably the most renowned names in the field of architecture history who develop identity-related ideas but, on the other hand, rarely get to design buildings themselves and rarely manage to have important roles in the systematisation projects of the cities and their representative ensembles (such as the so-called "civic centres"). Grigore Ionescu is, for example, among the first professionals to openly advocate, in 1965, for the preservation of the historical centres of cities (instead of their demolition) [12]; while Gheorghe Curinschi-Vorona publishes, in 1967, a book that's dedicated to the topic of the "historical centre" of towns/cities [13].

On the other hand, architects such as Cezar Lăzărescu adopt a somewhat neutral, detached, disinterested or even dismissive attitude towards the identity concerns via the traditional. From his position as one of the most acclaimed architects of the period, Cezar Lăzărescu does not seem to be enthusiastically adherent to the new aesthetic identity that is coagulating around the ideas of "specificity in architecture" and "national specificity". For example, he is frequently associated with (and remembered for) the demolition of a considerable part of the historical centre of Pitești, in order to make space for a new urban ensemble that he designs as lead architect. Following Lăzărescu's plans of systematisation, a large portion of the historical centre ends up being replaced by what is frequently described as the "civic centre" of Pitești. Consequently, the urban area in question ultimately loses a considerable amount of its historical identity in favour of a new one that can probably be labelled as "modern", "socialist-modernist", or "functionalistic".

Lăzărescu is having this approach while being an influential architect who, throughout his career, frequently has the support of many of the important decision makers, such as some top communist politicians (including presidents Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceaușescu). Unlike Nicolae Porumbescu, Cezar Lăzărescu doesn't seem to be searching for identity in traditional forms and design elements of the past. His aesthetic and identity preferences seem to be consistently rooted in modernism and functionalism, without much concern towards what can be labelled as "regional modernism" or "critical regionalism".

Another key element inside this debate on identity in architecture and urbanism during the socialist-modernist period in Romania would be an article from 1966 entitled "The systematisation and reconstruction of the central area of towns/cities" [14]. Signed by architect Virgil Bilciurescu and published in *Arhitectura* magazine, this article advances a proposal for a value-based classification of the historical centres of Romanian towns/cities. The author of the article, Virgil Bilciurescu, proposes two such value groups: A and B. In the first value group (A), Bilciurescu considers the historical centres of some former medieval Saxon towns from Transylvania: Cluj, Brașov, Sibiu, Sighișoara, Mediaș and Bistrița. Such urban territories are praised for exhibiting old and prestigious built environments, within well-preserved urban tissues. It is argued that these clusters of architectural and urbanistic value should be mostly preserved and used as such, without any change or with little change.

For the second value group (B), Bilciurescu gives the examples of the historical

centres of Iași, Suceava, Târgoviște and Baia Mare, where the urban tissues are considered to be less compact in their concentration of architectural value. In these cases, the values that deserve to be preserved (according to Bilciurescu) can be found sporadically within the urban tissue: as valuable buildings or urban fragments that are otherwise intertwined with other less-valuable buildings and urban fragments. Thus, Bilciurescu argues that this second value group (namely the „less“ valuable historical centres) could use some upgrading – in the sense of urban interventions that can be done inside the less-valuable urban fragments. The interventions could be minimal (punctual, as mere insertions) or more radical (in which the goal would be to integrate the old valuable fragments within some new developments) [15].

In regards to this vision of approaching the activity of systematisation within the historical centres of Romanian towns and cities, it is interesting to notice that the historical centres of many of the old former Saxon towns of Transylvania have rarely been affected by radical urban interventions during the socialist-communist period. It is debatable whether Bilciurescu’s article from 1966 was influential on this matter – or whether it was just a proof, a witness, a testimony or an expression of an idea that was actually emerging and gaining support, during that time, at a more general level. It is nevertheless clear that, in the years that followed the year 1966 (namely when Bilciurescu’s article was published), most of the large-scale (and arguably destructive) systematisation projects that were carried out within central areas of Romanian towns usually avoided those old former Saxon towns of Transylvania. Instead, the central areas of towns outside of Transylvania were the ones that were usually targeted for these types of interventions.

Moreover, in the years that followed its release, the vision that is exposed in Bilciurescu’s article of 1966 somewhat ended up being reduced to the idea that the old former Saxon towns of Transylvania (with their prestigious and robust medieval heritage) were arguably more valuable than the Romanian towns outside of Transylvania, where the confluence of many different cultural influences (such as Byzantine, Ottoman or French) had arguably created urban tissues of lesser value. As they were arguably less compact and less coherent than their Transylvanian Saxon counterparts, the urban tissues of many central areas of towns from the so-called “old kingdom” (of Romania) ended up as top candidates for the more radical projects of systematisation that targeted the historical cores of towns. This idea has since been regarded by some scholars – such as historian Dinu Giurescu [16] or architect Ana Maria Zahariade [17] – as having been more or less decisive for the concentration of subsequent urban reconstruction policies in the central areas of non-Transylvanian towns and cities, as the Transylvanian ones were not considered as priorities because they were already possessing some reliable and robust qualities regarding urban structure and urban order. In a collateral and somewhat indirect way, this is probably the sign of the actual emergence, in communist times, of the idea that the urban heritage of Transylvania is somewhat superior to that of the other regions of Romania.

#### **4. SELECTION OF A FEW EXAMPLES THAT ARE RELEVANT TO**

## THE TOPIC



Fig. 1. Searching for "identity" in architecture in post-war Romania, during the socialist-communist period: arch. Nicolae Porumbescu and the so-called "Political-Administrative Headquarters" in Satu Mare. For this building and others in his portfolio, architect Porumbescu draws inspiration from the traditional wooden folk architecture than can be found in the ethnographic regions of Northern Romania such as Maramureş and Bucovina. After selecting his sources of inspiration in a critical way while following, among other reasons, the criteria of "specificity in architecture", Porumbescu elaborates on his critically-selected sources of inspiration using modern materials (such as concrete), ending up translating/transposing/transfiguring wooden forms and motifs into concrete. This critical and creative process has an arguably powerful identitary drive, as it tries to make connections with the "specificity", "personality" and "character" of the architectural heritage typical of the territory/region in which the building is placed. For this reason at least, Porumbescu's approach has sometimes been labelled as "critical regionalism".

Source: <https://destepti.ro/palatul-administrativ-satu-mare-satu-mare>.



Fig. 2. Searching for "identity" in architecture in post-war Romania, during the socialist-communist period: arch. Nicolae Porumbescu and the so-called "House of Culture" in Satu Mare. One can notice the formal references to wooden folk architecture, such as the suggestion (in brickwork and concrete) of typical wooden "dovetail" notches and joints. The references to the traditional Romanian architecture are more complex and varied, but the "dovetail" is one of the most noticeable "quotes" from this type of architectural language.

Source: <https://destepti.ro/casa-de-cultura-a-sindicatelor-satu-mare-satu-mare>.



Fig. 3. Searching for "identity" in architecture in post-war Romania, during the socialist-communist period: arch. Mircea Alifanti and the so-called "Political-Administrative Headquarters" in Baia Mare, Maramureş County. Somewhat similar to arch. Porumbescu's approach, arch. Alifanti is probably looking to emulate the architectural identity of the region in which he is designing, but he also pursues an originality of the architectural image.

Source: <https://arhitectura-1906.ro/2015/03/mircea-alifanti-1914-1999/>.



Fig. 4. Plan of systematisation of the central area of Craiova (a major city of the so-called "old kingdom"). The plan is from the year 1982. One can notice how the intention was to erase most of the old historical city and its embedded identity...and implicitly replace it with a new identity. Only a few monuments were considered for conservation. Most of the central area (roughly 80%) was otherwise condemned to disappear. However, the plan was largely not put into practice, but it's evocative for the intentions of that time.

Source: *Arhitectura*, no. 3/1982, p. 27.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

There are certainly many more aspects and ideas that can be addressed and put forward within the theme of "identity in the approach of architecture and urbanism during the socialist-communist period in Romania". Considering the length of the present article in comparison with the complexity of the theme, the main purpose of the article was to highlight some of the most important coordinates of the aforementioned theme. As "identity" hadn't been a common and popular concept throughout the study period but has otherwise started to be addressed quite extensively in recent years, the topic of this article is mostly a critical and theoretical effort that aims at offering an identity-focused understanding of the history of architecture and urbanism in Romania in the socialist-communist period. And in this, the article highlighted some approaches that were considered to have encompassed an arguably consistent dimension/valence of "identity": such as the concerns for developing an architecture with "specificity", or the intentions towards selecting valuable pieces of built heritage in the wake of large-scale systematisations of historical centres. However, there are many other aspects

concerning architecture and urbanism during the study period that can be read in an identity key, and this can be developed in the future.

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**Received: December 15, 2019**

**Accepted: October 26, 2020, revision November 17, 2020**