Cristina Bucica -Ph.D. student
Department of Political Science / CÉLAT University Laval

Legitimating power in capital cities. Bucharest - continuity through radical change?

Abstract

In communist Rumania, the significant restructuring and transformation of the townscape that affected the capital city falls within a particular vision concerning the capacity of the city to represent a figure of power. Focusing on recent debates on the concept of power and public action, this paper propose a reflection on the capital city as a figure of power through the case-study of Bucharest under the communist regime and today. Beyond the apparent and unquestionable discontinuity of the practices of power in Bucharest, the persistence of some constitutive elements of the city's past identity, even through altered forms, seem to witness of a certain continuity on a more profound level of identity building process and power relations.

A simple glance of Bucharest is enough for one to notice the significant restructuring and transformation of the townscape that affected the Romanian capital in the late decades. Almost 500 ha of the old Bucharest have been razed to enable the construction of a new Civic Center in the very heart of the city, whose central piece were to be the now famous "The House of the People". Using the resources of an entire country to break the backbone of the capital city in order to rebuild it according to a new view falls within a particular vision concerning the capacity of the city to represent a figure of power.

Besides, some of the first reactions after the political collapse in 1989 were for the desertion, the sale or even the demolition of the "House of the People " building. To get rid of it would have seemed the only way to exorcise the evil; since this building represented, for the majority of the Romanian people, the embodiment of the dictatorial power itself and of all the suffering and the privations that this regime had undergone[1].

Hence, the superposition of the two images, that of the dictator and of his architectural creation seemed going without saying. Even later, when an international competition of urbanism, "Bucharest 2000" was opened, looking for solutions to reintegrate this central area within the existing urban fabric, the proposals mostly tried to blur the massive visual presence of the "House of the People", literally hiding it behind other buildings or vegetation.

---

[1] this last assertion is hardly metaphorical, for the huge investments in it's construction were not made within a context of a spectacular economic growth but rather of high penury and to the prejudice of the population's living standard ; not only the investments in infrastructure were deficient, but a severe policy of shortage and rationalization of the most basic commodities harmfully affected the population ; all these combined with the political option for the repaying of the entire external debt before 1990. No wonder that the building was highly invested emotionally and symbolically.

Demolate it, sale it, or simply hide it, why all this rage against a building? Is it only for esthetical reasons or is it more? Speaking about the nazi architecture, Leon Krier (1986 : 31) notes that nowadays the people seem more embarrassed by Speer's architectural drafts than by the images of Aushwitz. The memory is ephemeral, while the stones, the architecture remain.

This type of questioning guided my reflection on Bucharest, which led to a more general problem, that of the use of the built environment for the purpose of the representation of political power. But what sort of representation and by what means?

*

I would like to introduce my reflection here by a paradox uttered by Balfe and Wizomirsky in their collective work, "Art, Ideology and Politics"(1985). I quote : "If the arts, the architecture, vas purely political, they would become pure propaganda, they would be recognize as such, and they would soon be politically ineffective". One could still object that in the communist systems the art was indeed highly politicized, being considered as an explicit mean of the propaganda. What I attend to show in this paper is that even then, the efficiency of this practice is based on the capacity of the art to evoke other issues than the pure political ones. Which is to mean, on the theoretical level, that before asking *what* buildings mean, one would have to ask *how* do they mean.

Following this type of reasoning, this paper is trying to identify, beyond the apparent and unquestionable discontinuity of the practices of power in Bucharest, the persistence of some constitutive elements of the city's past identity, even through an altered form : the "otherness" in opposition with which the new communist power builds its legitimacy. The identity building process of the communist regime will be in the center of my reflection, with a special focus on the reference to the "otherness" and the evolution of this reference, even on a discursive level or on a practical one.

I will insist here mostly on the case study research on Bucharest. Let me just resume firs my theoretical reflection in saying that the notion of representation evokes a double metaphor : that of the theatre and that of the diplomacy. The first insists on the visual effect and can be resumed by the idea of the performance ; the second, with a more specific political and juridical use, contains the idea of delegation, of transfer of attributions, of mandate. Although distinct in the utilization, these two metaphors have in common the idea of the superposition of two types of presence (Pitkin, 1967 : 89) : an effective, substantial one of a person, an object or an action and an indirect, mediated one. The first presence is instrumental and it puts its effectiveness at the service of the second one, which do not belong to the field of direct apprehension.

Now, the power is precisely this sort of presence which is not directly observable, but need to be "represented" to become visible (Foucault, 1980; Ball, 1988), and architecture is one of its most visible means of representation. The city can thus be read as a palimpsest, because it witnesses of successive

representations which coexist, are reinterpreted and recycled. Trying to understand and deconstruct this palimpsest, the present analysis distinguishes two parts, which also correspond to a chronological evolution : the reappropriation of the past and the building for the future.

The reappropriation of the past

Most of the cities faced with the heritage of the past problems in their modern evolution. The Eastern European cities made no exception, having been confronted to a common problem, which received different answers. This common problem was "how to revolutionize the feudal or capitalist society fossilized in the stones while continue to be proud of the national heritage and, at the same time, reserve all the resources for the economic planification and the socialist transformation" (Hamilton, French, 1979, 195-199).

Countries like Poland, or Tchecoslovakia (more affected by the war) and even the Soviet Union, later on, have made of the preservation and the renovation of historical monuments a priority of the regime. In Romania, the interest for the preservation of the monuments is less marked than in other socialist countries, but can still be noticed, at least in a first period of the communist regime (1945-1977). Whether it was about a real recognition of the monument's value (in the name of the tradition or of the modernity) or simply about the appropriation, by the new power, of the old "hauts lieux " of the city, this practice attests for that period a certain fragility of the regime, always needing to refer to the past to legitimize itself.

The Commission for Historic Monuments, founded in 1892, was closed down in 1948. Still, a Scientific Commission for Museums, Historic and Art Monuments was created three years later by a decision of the Grand National Assembly. (15th of March 1951). An important number of monuments have been classified, inventoried and conserved during this period, which determined Dinu Giurescu, a well-known Romanian historian to assert that "if maintained and continued, such trends would have saved significant parts of the country's architectural and artistic heritage " (Giurescu, 1989 : 31).

Although, behind this practices of recognition of the heritage of the past one could still notice a strategy of legitimization of the new political regime. A strategy we could qualify of "negative ", for being constructed as opposed to the former regime's symbolic centers. In other words, the apparent recognition of the architectural heritage's value means hardly an equally recognition of the former regime values on the whole. On the contrary, the new identity of the communist regime was based on the people and the working class, on the ideas of equality and equity, in evident opposition to the bourgeois values. Besides one of the first objectives of the communists little after taking power was the physical elimination of the ancient political and intellectual elite.

More reveling yet was the destruction of the symbols of this very class, judged incompatible with the new established regime. The law of the nationalization from the 11th of June 1948 attacked one of the basic

values of the capitalist society in formation in Romania between the two world wars, which was the private property.

Within this context, the concern for the preservation of the heritage receives a particular signification, which is part of the negative strategy mentioned earlier. The offensive against the symbols of this past period was much more subtle than the one against its representatives. Instead of the physical destruction and elimination, we preferred a more effective practice : the appropriation. Nothing easier than adding a red star on the old Kremlin or on the impressive neo-baroque building of the Parliament in Budapest. Formally occupied by those who were "exploiting" the people (or, to use a specific formula of the communist propaganda, those who "drunk the people's blood"), the buildings belong from now on to the people and it's "democratic" government.

In the city of Bucharest, a series of acts witness of this new spatial occupation, more "democratic", more "fair". On one hand we notice a reinvestiture of the "hauts lieux" of the old regime through the installation of the new institutions even in their old location (the Parliament, the Government), or in valued places of the city (the Central Comity of the Party in front of the Royal Palace, one of Bucharest's historical sites). The Royal Palace itself receives in 1948 a new function, that of the National Gallery of Art, little after the setting up of the Republic in December 1947, while the Communist Party head-office building faces this very palace. Thus, the symbolic charge of this place is recycled and reappropriated; instead of being stigmatized and excluded, this place became a part of this new process of legitimization. The royal residence in Bucharest, the Controceni Palace, was yielded to the National Council of the Pioneers (the youth communist organization) and have been the Palace of the Pioneers until 1976, while the summer residence in Sinaia, the Peles Castle, was also opened to the public, becoming a museum in 1953. Other buildings belonging to the former aristocratic and bourgeois families were assigned to public or administrative institutions or divided among several families. Thus, all these buildings, symbols of a defeated social and political class, were symbolically restored to the people, and the reference to the otherness, which is to mean, in this case, a social class and a whole period of time with which one no longer identify himself, paradoxically contributes to the identity building process of the new political class.

On the other hand, this populist attitude is illustrated not only by the recycling of the "lieux du pouvoir" but by the urban policies on the whole. The social homogenization was one of the key points of the communist ideology, and the urban landscape offers an accurate translation of this social ideal in the material terms of the urban form.

Responding to a real deficiency in dwelling building due to the rapid urbanization of the country, the construction of new residential districts in the out-skirts was also seen as a form of social justice. The city center, a "bourgeois monopoly" is rendered common place, trivialized by multiplication. For the political propaganda, the resemblance of these new built out-skirts with the center was a declared goal and a real

title of fame : "the out-skirts look just like the center : the same architecture, the same comfort, the same urbanism, one could believe he really *is* in the center". In other words, the access to the center had to be open to everybody, and a way of making this possible was to extend the center itself. In fact it was it's convenience, it's look, it's way of life that were exported. This atrophying of the spatial dimension of the very idea of center is significant in itself, for the elimination of the spatial hierarchy in the city was an echo of principles of uniformity and equality.

What I tried to stress is that the transformations that affected the socialist cities, Bucharest in our case, do not always have a unique and coherent signification. And this is due to the fact that the complex phenomenon that marked the East European countries could not be explained by the action of a single factor, the communist system, in spite of it's significant and incontestable influence. Designating a bloc with certain common traits, the very term of Eastern Europe is not always a pertinent designation for all types of analysis. Without discussing here this conceptual problem, I would only mention that, like all generic term, it operates a simplification in the name of a common experience; in this doing, the different countries are plunged in a sort of *historical vacuum*, as if the communist experience could have erased all heritage or neutralized all other influence (Ronnas 1984:4).

Speaking about the urban transformations, it would be thus more appropriate to use the terms proposed by Hamilton, to speak in terms of *influence* ; of *socialized cities* (cities that have undergone a socialist influence) rather than merely calling them *socialist cities* (Hamilton, French, 1979). This nuance make possible, in my opinion, a legitimate analysis of the socialist aspect of the city without automatically crediting it with an heuristically value. Furthermore, this epistemological choice enable us to grasp, besides the effective urban transformations, some less prominent phenomenon, but still utterly significant, like functional changes (which were mentioned earlier) or modifications in the nomenclature. I refer namely at street names (communist heroes names replacing those of the monarchical family or other preceding political personalities), the names of the restaurants, cinemas, factories, subway stations and so forth (impersonal names like "The Peace", "The Pioneer", "The red banner", "The brotherhood between the nations", "The Work", "The Light", "The Motherland" could be found in all the cities), but also the names of different stores (which erase their personality for simply naming them, according to their function, "Coiffeur", "Food store", "Morocco goods" or "Small-ware shop". In other words, the socialist city is not a creation *ex nihilo* (as several cases in Soviet Union) but the result of a new reading and a reappropriation of an already existing city, the past's heritage being undergone to a more or less effective socialization process (in the sense proposed by Hamilton, 1979). The reference to the past, to this otherness at the same time banished and valuable, even coveted in a way (as we saw in the example of the city center), had a central role in the assertion the new values and ideals promoted by the regime in function.

The ambivalence in the reading of the past become even more evident with another example, drawn from an analysis of certain cultural heritage protection policies.

Hamilton and French (1979:4) had already stressed that the difference between the socialist and the capitalist city was mainly due to the larger part taken by the Socialist State in the determination of either form and location of the urban development. The example that will be discussed here illustrates the monopolization process of the urban intervention by the central power. An official statement from February 1975 stresses the need to maintain the architectural and urban fabric, to preserve the specific character of the city and to conserve the ancient buildings and the existent urban texture, which is to mean to avoid as far as possible the demolition - nothing more encouraging for the architects and historians who pleaded for the preservation of the heritage. The same provisions can be retraced in the law of systematization, planning, and road construction in urban and rural centers voted by the National Assembly in November 1975. In addition, this law stipulates that the opening, the enlarging or the closing of streets in the old part of the towns were subject to prior presidential approval. This point is extremely important to our analysis. Beyond the declared interest for the preservation of the monuments and of the particular features of the city, this decision contains, in embryo, two trends that will become characteristic for the communist regime under Ceausescu's ruling : the centralization and personalization of the decision making (to the prejudice of the professional authority) and, close linked to this, a decree government practice, accentuated in the 80's. The personalized monopoly on the political power has thus been constructed, slowly but surely, behind some widely approved acts, like the preservation of the cultural heritage.

The reference to the past ceased to be a lever for the present legitimization of power, it became a screen for new ideas that emerged and developed behind it, ideas of the future this time.

What about **Building for the future** now, the second part of my analysis.

A future really built on ruins, because a serious earthquake had marked the recent history of the Rumanian capital city. The tremor that occurred on the evening of the 4th of march 1977 had obviously caused a lot of damage, several buildings have collapsed and many people have died under their debris ; the whole city was in ruins and still, this was only the tip of the iceberg, the most visible part of the destructive consequences this earthquake could have had on Bucharest. Cause it seems that this tragic phenomenon had produced a sort of "revelation" for the Romanian communist leader, similar to the "ruins theory" of Hitler : it is to mean the revelation of the perishable and ephemeral character of the built architecture, which seemed until then one of the most lasting aspects of the human culture.

The gate was thus opened to demolition and to the remodeling of the city according to the social aspirations of the regime. The city has become like a chess table whose chessmen, far from being immovable, have a certain freedom of movement. And it is hardly a far-fetched comparison ; being aware

of the tendency of the dictator for the rearrangement of the buildings on the scale models presented for approval, the architects were nailing down the most important buildings so they could not be moved by mistake by the ruler, for every presidential indication had to be followed to the letter.

The buildings had loosen their durability in time, but also their fixedness in space, features which could have passed for intrinsic to architecture. They were no longer bound to the ground (linked to their initial location), they could be moved, which translates a will to control space. It would be difficult to explain otherwise the excessive efforts undertaken in order to move several churches that happened to be in the way of some urban projects, while other monuments have been demolished without any particular scruple, even when other solutions were possible to imagine.

Once again a lack of a rational, coherent and consistent attitude towards the built environment can be noticed, which suggests that the preservation of the cultural heritage was not a goal in itself. Nevertheless, 1977 can be seen as a turning point in the urban policies, whose new trend seems less anxious about the past and more concerned by the posterity. Preoccupied by the creation of its own success symbols, the regime seems to abandon the crutches of the past and opt for an autonomous discourse, thinking of it's own heritage for the future.

The discourse become more radical, the key term to designate the rapid urbanization of the country was "systematization". Briefly, this program had three main objectives : erase the difference between the cities, erase the disparity between urban and rural settlements and, last but not least, the construction of the new man. Let me quote a fragment of an official statement which proves at what point these three objectives were linked together and the architecture was meant to serve a precise social goal : "The transformation of the settlement will give rise to a transformation of the conscience, the habits, the customs, the traditions in the peasant's everyday life. (...) Which is to mean, in a precise and concrete sense, a certain degree of conscience which is proper to the new man. Or, this very formation of the new man is our goal, but can we restrict this goal uniquely to the cities ? The systematization of the villages - matrix of civilization - is a privileged way to mold, to stimulate and to turn to account the features of the new man."

Within those ambitious social projects, important urban interventions were no longer limited to the outskirts, they begun to approach the very heart of the city of Bucharest, in order to speak out openly about the succeeding homogenization process and the creation of the new man. On the other hand, becoming aware of the impossibility to rebuilt all the city, the solution of the facade districts (*quartiers facade*) built in the edge of the grand boulevards for adorning them of a "modern" look witness of an important change in the power's strategy which seems no longer concerned to find methods of homogenization, as in the former period, but trying to create the symbols of the success of this very project. For these corridor districts put only a mask on the traditional fabric of the city, they dissimulate it

without really changing it. Therefore, the individual homes surrounded by large gardens remained almost intact behind the new blocs of flats.

Finally the urban intervention affected the center of the city, which brought about serious demolition : 500 ha of the old Bucharest were razed to make room for some far-reaching projects like the reshaping of the Dambovita river course or the construction of a new Civic Center for Bucharest centralizing the state's institutions once scattered through the city (and whose central piece were to be the House of the People). The axis facing this building, implanted in the 80's in the core of the city on a perfect East-West orientation, contradict the natural evolution to the north of the city. The name of this axis is highly significant, proclaiming neither more nor less than "The Victory of the Socialism over the entire nation". These far-reaching projects were part of a performance of the centralized power, affirming its indivisible and incontestable character to the Romanian people and to the world.

Hence, the negative strategy in the identity building process (based on the reference to the past) was replaced by a more assertive one. Even then, the figure of the otherness reappears under the form of a recycled nationalist discourse. The Romanian nation was constructed, Mihailescu noted, not as a subject of the *liberty* (of the citizens) but as a subject of the *independence* (of the people) (Mihailescu, 1999:27-28). The communist power will reproduce the same logic of the construction of the nation : " a (new) nation, as a subject of independence (from other enemies), drowning from the tradition the source of it's own (different) modernity". The attitude of autonomy from Moscow maintained by the communist ruler Ceausescu or, more recently, the external debts repaying strategy confirm a certain continuity in the very depths of the identity construction. Besides, the obsession of "by ourselves " is evident in the urban practice. The construction of the subway or of the House of the People, with an exclusive Romanian conception and realization (recalled more than once by the propaganda) translates the power's will to prove, by all means, the extraordinary features and capacities of the Rumanian people and it's rulers. The scale of the urban interventions is another significant element. It's that bigger is automatically more beautiful and remarkable, for the House of the People is the second bigger construction on the world after the Pentagon, while the boulevard facing it, 1 500 m long, surpass the Champs Élysées by 6 cm. The monumental performance is nothing but a transformed discourse of legitimization now grounded on an external reference : the superiority relation to "others " (the other socialist or capitalist countries).

Conclusions

Trying to resume all said here, what I attended to show in this paper through the Romanian case analysis was that the representation of power in the city is a particularly complex phenomenon, which consists not only in the creation of new "lieux de pouvoir", as a first glance of Bucharest seems to suggest, but mostly in the reappropriation and the reinvestment of the heritage of the past.

A very stimulating conclusion in my opinion not only for the understanding of the Rumanian capital evolution, too long considered as an unaccountable historical accident, but for the understanding of the

socialist societies themselves. If it remains true that this tragically historical experience represented a clear and regrettable discontinuance in the natural evolution of these societies, the understanding and the explanation of it's very nature and of it's long lasting character have to take into account the way in which the communist system was grounded in the deepest resorts of the identity and of the traditions of these nations.

Bibliography

BALFE, Judith H.et Margaret Jane Wyszomirski,1985, *Art, Ideology and Politics*, New York, Preaeger

BALL, Terence, 1988, " The Changing Face of Power ", in Ball,T., 1988,*Transforming Political Discourse*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, pp.80-105

BUCUESTI 2000, Concours International d'urbanisme (1995-1996), 1997, Bucarest, Simetria

CAVALCANTI, Maria de Betania, 1992, "Totalitarian States and their Influence on City-form : the Case of Bucharest ", *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research,* 9:4, Winter, pp.275-286

CAZACU, Matei, 1987, "Mégalomanie destructrice ", *La nouvelle Alternative*, septembre 1987, no.7, pp.17-19

COLAS, Anne, 1985, "Destruction d'une capitale : Le projet du Centre Civique de Bucarest ", *L'Alternative,* no.31, janv-fév, pp.40-47

DITCHEV, Ivaylo, 1996, "Les ruines de la modernité", *Transeuropéenne,* mars 1996

DUNCAN, James et David Ley (Ed.), 1993, *Place / Culture / Representation*, London & New York, Routledge

EDELMAN, Murray, 1985, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, (rev. edition) Urbana, University of Illinois Press

FOUCAULT, MICHEL,1980, *Power / Knowledge*, New York ,Pantheon Books

GEORGESCU, Vlad, 1988, "Romania in the 1980s : The Legacy of Dynastic Socialism ", *East European ern Politics and Societies,* vol.2, no.1, wintr, Univ. of California press, pp. 70-93

GIURESCU, Dinu C., 1989, *The Razing of Romanian's Past*, New York, World Monument Found, Washington, US/ICOMOS

GOTTDIENER, M.and Alexandros Ph. Lagapoulos, 1986, *The City and the Sign. An Introduction to Urban Semiotics*, New York, Columbia University Press

HAMILTON, F.E.Ian, and Richard French and Hamilton, *The Socialist City. Spatial Structures and Urban Policy*, Chichester, New York, Brisbane, Toronto, John Wiley & Sons, pp.195-262

IOAN, Augustin, 1998, "La critique de la relation entre architecture et pouvoir ", *Chora. Thèmes et difficultés de la relation entre philosophie et architecture*, Bucuresti, Paideia

KARNOOUH, Claude, 1991, "Consensus et Dissensions dans la Roumanie de Ceausescu. Un pays en quête de société civile ", *Les cahiers d'Iztok*, Iztok, Acratie

KING, Anthony D. (Ed.), 1996, *RE-presenting the City - Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21st Century Metropolis*, New York, New York University Press

KRIER, Leon, 1986, "An Architecture of Desire", *Architectural Design*, vol. 56, no. 4, p.30-40

LEAHU, Gheorghe, 1996, *Distrugerea Mânastirii Vacaresti (La destruction du monastère Vacaresti),* Bucarest, Arta Grafica

MIHAILESCU, Vintila, 1999, "Le monde enchanté de la culture populaire : Une lecture du discours ethnologique roumain à travers ses enjeux idéologiques ", *Ethnologies,* vol.21,2, pp.27-46

MORISSET K., Lucie, Luc Noppen, Denis Saint-Jacques (Eds.), 1999, *Ville imaginaire / Ville identitaire*, Québec, Éditions Nota Bene

PITKIN, Hanna, 1967, *The Concept of Representation*, Berkeley, University of California Press

RIEF, A., 1981, *L'immortalité du pouvoir* (interviews with Alber Speer), Paris, Ed de la Table ronde

RONNAS, Per (1984), *Urbanisation in Romania. A Geography of Social and Economic Change Since Independence*, Stockholm, EFI, The Economic Research Institute, Stockholm School of Economics

SAFDIE, Mosche, 1987, " Collective Significance ", in Glazer, Nathan, Lilla, Mark, (Eds.), 1987, *The Public Face of Architecture. Civic Culture and Public Spaces* , New York, The Free Press, London, Collier Macmillian Press, pp.142-154

SCHIELDS, Rob, 1996, " A guide to Urban Representation and What to Do about It : Alternative Traditions of Urban Theory ", in King, Anthony D. (Ed.), 1996, *RE-presenting the City - Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21st Century Metropolis*, New York, New York University Press

VALE, Lawrence J., 1992, *Building, Power and National Identity*, New Haven &London, Yale University Press

VERDERY, Katherine, 1991, *National Ideology under Socialism*, Berkeley, University of California Press