

Cristina Hanganu-Bresch

The People's House:

The Building and Rebuilding
of Romanian National Consciousness



The Palace of Parliament today
Frontal view from the Union Boulevard

One wants to get free of the past: rightly so, since one cannot live in its shadow, and since there is no end to terror if guilt and violence are only repaid, again and again, with guilt and violence. But wrongly so, since the past one wishes to evade is still so intensely alive.

Theodor W. Adorno—*What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?*

Twelve years after the fall of communism in the East European block, the nations in that part of the world still grapple with a notion that had provoked intense debate and discussion in the aftermath of the second world war: coming to terms with the past—the famous Adornian concept of “processing” (Auferbeitung) the past in the sense of mastering it. Although communism produced, overall, more horrors and victims than Nazism, both in physical terms and in terms of distorting people’s views of reality and social normality (Courtois (1998) gives a tentative figure of 100 million victims of communism as compared to the 25 million victims of Nazi terror), most of the former communist countries have never benefited from a Nuremberg trial that would indict both the system and the criminals within it. While some countries (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, former GDR) have managed to find a way out of the historical morass through economic, political and judicial reform, others seem to have been more affected by a particular form of “national communism” that scarred the collective consciousness to a point where the economic and social healing seem to become if not impossible, than ever elusive. Whereas the official discourse of the authorities seems to touch upon the correct terminology and be directed in the correct direction for the future, certain symbols, facts, movements, and *lieux de mémoire* seem to indicate old mentalities that could not be uprooted overnight and that are symptomatic of the current struggles towards achieving prosperity and normality within a democratic framework.

My goal in this paper is to analyze such a symbolic representation of national consciousness in a former communist country: the Romanian Palace of Parliament and the adjacent Civic Center complex, a behemoth structure forcefully implanted on the heart of the Romanian capital by former communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. A utopian structure much like the projected Nazi Berlin Axis, the Palace of Parliament (more commonly known today as the People’s House after December 1989, when the dictator was ousted and executed) came into existence due to the megalomaniac stubbornness of the dictatorial couple and as a culmination of an utter distortion of the national past—and indeed, present and future of Romania. A discussion of the attitudes and symbolism of the building can be revelatory in understanding the processes that over-inflated feelings of nationalism and European inadequacy are preventing Romania from understanding its past and tackling its future in a constructive way. This is all the more true especially as Romania is one of the few former communist countries in which the rupture with the old regime in 1989 was violent, in which the hasty mock-trial and summary execution of the Ceausescus left a bitter aftertaste depriving Romanians from a well-deserved spirit of justice and moral reparation, and which lagged behind others in terms of economic reform and fundamental democratization.

Rhetoric and Architecture

This paper is based on the assumption that architecture is a cultural discourse imbued with ideology; this is especially in the case of public/state-contracted architecture. Carol Blair (1999) urges us to look beyond the symbolism of the rhetorical text and study the materiality of rhetoric with its consequences and partisanship—the material force of rhetoric “beyond goals,

intentions and motivations.” In distinguishing between what a text means (symbolic level) and what a text does (consequence level), Blair reminds us that a text—whether in sound, script, or stone—has an existence and meaning beyond authorial intentions. Her work on American memorial sites emphasizes memorials as centrally epideictic through their “recalcitrant presentness” and their visible orientation to eulogy. Since memorials and monuments in general have become an accepted, almost obvious target for rhetorical analysis, we may be tempted to describe other architectonic structures in rhetorical terms: after all, buildings are purposeful inscriptions on our environment that often, if not always, go beyond mere instrumentality. Buildings appeal, have a purpose, persuade, create communal spaces—or, in some cases, create tension; to continue using Blair’s language when describing memorials, they “enable,” “appropriate,” “contextualize,” “supplement,” “correct,” “challenge,” “compete,” or “silence” their environment and the people in it. While the epideictic purpose of memorials is easily identifiable, other major rhetorical categories of discourse seem less appropriate—it seems difficult, even tenuous, to apply the deliberative or forensic categories except in the most (ironically!) symbolic of senses. One can—and has—, however, envision a rhetoric of architecture in which we are invited to understand and interpret the maze of meaningful markings that we leave in stone, wood, metal or glass and in which we choose to conduct our lives. A rhetoric of architecture would thus attempt to decipher the meaning behind architectural structures, and how they work as meaningful objects. Buildings organize space and determine the way we live, sleep, work, learn, create, are part of a community; they define the parameters within which we are capable to run our lives as social beings. What, then, is a house? A home? A shelter? How are houses positioned here, in this culture? What are the spatial elements that characterize a domestic arrangement in a Western society now, or a hundred, or a thousand years ago? What about a different culture (say, Germany? Or an Arabic culture?) How is space organized—and how has it been organized, rhetorically, throughout the ages?¹ How do certain architectural structures get invented—for example, the palace? The castle? Governmental/parliamentary buildings? Memorials and monuments? Parks? Museums? Universities? Places of worship? Capitol buildings? Opera houses, theatres, and such? Malls?² What is the connection to the sociopolitical system that created them? What sort of function do they serve? What do they mean to people—and how do they achieve a particular signification?

So far I am aware of efforts toward a semiotic of architecture, attempting to read architecture as a system of signs which can be broken down in manageable units (the cell, the wall) that stand in a particular relationships to each other and that further interact with “ensembles of other sign systems in different media.” Donald Preziosi made remarkable progress in this field, although, I’m afraid, with very few followers. His attempt at building an

¹ An interesting book by the Romanian philosopher and poet Lucian Blaga attempts a comparative description of two cultures—German and Romanian—through the way they organize their living space: Germans tend to have houses that are built very close together, sometimes with no space between living units, while this sort of organization is totally atypical for Romanian folk culture, who organizes space in an undulating continuum of house—garden—house, which creates a different “rhythm” to the landscape; Blaga believes that that deep rhythm corresponds the geography of the space inhabited by Romanians (hill—valley—hill) and is furthermore mirrored in the traditional meter of the Romanian folk song (trochaic, six-syllables), which in turn allows him to make further remarks on the interpretation of cultures.

² Walter Benjamin’s work on the “Arcades Project” starts by looking at “the subject of the Paris arcades—les passages—which he considered the most important architectural form of the nineteenth century, and which he linked with a number of phenomena characteristic of that century’s major and minor preoccupations” (English translators’ note, p. ix). The arcades were, in a way, the precursors of modern-day malls. Benjamin is concerned with cultural history, but a rhetorical study on the materiality of shopping spaces would probably yield interesting results as well.

architectonic vocabulary molded on similar formalist and structuralist efforts to deal with language and literature (Jakobson and Mukařovski, among others, are some of the main sources of inspiration), remains somehow removed, however, from a social-historical analysis that would deal with human purposes, action, articulation, and consequences. Charles Jenks is similarly concerned with rhetoric and architecture, but his discussion seems to revolve more around style. The parallels between an objective, neutral, business-like style in writing and a similar style in architecture are poignant, and that is certainly another road that may yield interesting results in the field.

According to Demetri Porphyrios, “Architecture as a discursive practice owes its coherency and respectability to a system of social mythification” (1985:16). According to his concept of critical history, which involves looking at ideologically laden artifacts in “a profound struggle toward achieving freedom of consciousness” (21), architecture can be interpreted in terms of social function. According to Porphyrios and a host of cultural critics, the structuring of the space by official architecture is “a process of reproduction of the relations of power.” (19) From this point of view, architecture is nothing else but “naturalized rhetoric” (18), a concept that is extremely transparent in Ceausescu’s Palace and surrounding complex—undoubtedly a culmination of totalitarian rhetoric. Analyzing Tafuri’s book *Architecture and Utopia*, Jameson remarks that “[architecture’s] other or exterior is coeval with history and society itself and it is susceptible therefore to the most fundamental materialist or dialectical reversal of all.” (62) Tafuri, Porphyrios and Jameson focus on the criticism of “capitalist” architecture, in an effort to unmask its political agenda, but the terms in which they articulate that criticism are extremely salient to analyzing totalitarian language in architecture—showing, maybe, the extreme extent to which cultural practices can turn into instruments of oppression if they are not subject to healthy, skeptical criticism. Such a critical process, while allowed in Western democracies, was totally denied in countries such Romania; even today, despite the visible steps in the democratization of society, the stigma of the past still prevents a successful, open public debate on the consequences of communism for the national psyche. The process of “criticizing, subverting, delegitimizing, strategically interrupting, the established codes of a repressive social and spatial order” (Jameson, 52) has an almost transparent object in the People’s House and the Civic Center complex—an architectural object in which almost every detail was crafted with an explicit ideological agenda.

The People’s House demonstrates the confusion between (authorial) intention and consequences, the strange mix of epideictic, or memorializing, and instrumental, and the possibilities of expanding Blair’s five questions concerning the materiality of rhetoric (referring, respectively, to the significance of the text’s material existence, the durability, the modes of reproduction, the interaction with other texts and the action upon people) to the genre of governmental buildings. This paper is, therefore, a study in the rhetoric of architecture, focusing on an exemplar of public communist architecture: the Romanian Palace of Parliament, a megalomaniac project initiated by the country’s former communist dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu, and considered to be the second-largest building in the world after the Pentagon. My premise is that architecture is a cultural discourse which creates ideologically-laden texts that perform, signify, and persuade; as such, I will use Pierre Nora’s notion of *lieu de mémoire* as “a significant unit, of material or ideal nature, in which human will or the work of time has built a symbolic element of a certain common relevance” (Nora, 1993) and Blair’s crucial questions related to the material ends of rhetoric (Blair, 1999). I will also place the Romanian Palace of the Parliament and the architectural complex around it in contexts such as historical, cultural, social

(communist and post-communist Romania), and architectural-ideological (other complexes built by dictatorial-propagandistic regimes, such as Versailles and Speer's project for the Great Axis of Nazi Berlin) in order to decipher the power relations and the rhetorical mechanisms that forever changed the face of a European capital. I will also examine the current public perception of the building and the successive layers of meaning that it has taken over the years. Finally, I will describe the building as a fault line between collective memory and history, as a fascinating confluence of ideology, myth, and power, and as a spatial embodiment of totalitarian rhetoric.

The People's House: A History

In 1984 Nicolae Ceausescu, the President of the former Socialist Republic of Romania, and his wife, Elena, laid the foundation stone of the biggest construction site in Europe ever—“The House of the Republic” and the surrounding architectural complex—including two large plazas on both ends of the long “Victory of Socialism” boulevard, and administrative and apartment buildings. The event took place after several years' efforts to raze a significant portion of the historical center of Bucharest—which involved, among other things, historical buildings, a monastery, several churches, a museum, and an entire neighborhood with fin-de-siècle housing and department stores.

To this day, the huge construction and the adjacent complex (now the Union Boulevard) dominate the landscape of the Romanian Capital. The building, too huge to escape any tour of Bucharest, has been the object of controversy and squabble among Romanian intellectuals, generating mixed feelings of awe and nausea, pride and rejection, admiration and bitterness among the general public (including foreign visitors who tend to include a tour of the now Palace of Parliament as an obligatory stop on their agenda). The totalitarian monumentalism of the building has forever changed not only the face of Bucharest, but that of Romania in general through the enormity of the resources used for its construction, which implied deprivation of basic subsistence needs for the ordinary Romanian (food, electricity, heat). After the 1989 anti-communist revolution, Romanians had to learn how to cope with both the huge internal debt that the construction had generated and with the much too obvious symbolism of the building—a megalomaniac monument to one of the fiercest dictators in Eastern Europe, a shrine to the grimmest version of totalitarian communism. Relentless criticism and praise for this building is symptomatic of the current Romanian struggle to come to terms with its communist past.

From the early seventies until the late eighties the “moderate” sort of communism that the West thought it was witnessing in Romania gradually gave way to a more and more aberrant form of the “personality cult,” not shy of the glorification of such dictators as Stalin or Mao-Tze-Dun. I will return to the cultural movement that underlies this particularly aberrant form of megalomania presently. There was no secret that when Ceausescu started the building of the then called “The House of the Republic,” what he actually meant was a glorification of his dictatorship. The site involved the tearing down of 9,300 homes, one cathedral, and more than a dozen churches, most dating from the 19th century or before. The “Civic Center” complex includes, apart from the bland and colossal People's House, the 3.5 km long Avenue of Socialist Victory, ending at the other end in a huge round square—Alba Iulia Square (Alba Iulia is the place where the decision was made for Transylvania to join the Kingdom of Romania in 1918) the choice of the name is significant for the efforts of the regime to continuously reassess two crucial ideas: the unity and continuity of the Romanian people). Behind the main building there

are several other monumental buildings meant to host ministries, hotels, etc. The avenue is lined up with apartment buildings built in the same style, and, on the same axis, you can find several “supermarkets” and the unfinished skeletons of the projected National Library and of a huge concert hall meant to host the huge masquerade of the “Song to Romania” festival/contest—a year-long celebration of Romanian communist achievements. The median of the boulevard is split down the middle by a line of flower-shaped fountains. In the Union Plaza (halfway from People’s House to Alba Iulia Square) are three immense fountains of similar design.

Due to its sheer size, the first thing that one learns about the People’s House is statistics. *The Guinness Book of World Records* lists the building on the second place in the world in terms of area after the Pentagon with an area of 330.000 m², and on the third in the world in point of volume (2,550,000 m³, after the rocket assembly hangar at Cape Canaveral and Quetzalcoatl pyramid in Mexico). The building goes 6 (some say 8) levels below ground and raises 86 meters above ground. The barren hill covered by patches of untrimmed grass itself raises at 18 m, making the People’s House the highest building in Bucharest. The statistics are significant as they betray the intention of the complex: it was supposed to be larger than life, in a supposed “competition” with the rest of the world, an apotheosis of the regime. The avenue itself (now called Union Ave.) was designed to be slightly larger than Champs Elysées in Paris.

“Casa Poporului” is a tall, solid, square, 4-tier, 1000-room structure made of white travertine. Its purpose was to host the main state and party institutions (the separation between the two concepts, state and Communist party, had long been forgotten). Some of the halls are bigger than a football field and were designed for the special glorification of the ruling pair (for example, one can still see the 25 ft. tall empty slots at both ends of a huge hall, which were meant to shelter the oversized portraits of Ceausescu and his wife). Ceausescu boasted that all the materials used to build it were made in Romania—from marble to crystal, from precious wood essences to intricate and hand-made tapestries and carpets. There are 2,800 candelabra, 222,000 m² of carpets, 3,500 tons of crystal, 3,500 m² of leather, and one million m³ of marble. 700 architects and about 20,000 workers (at least these are the official figures) worked day and night (three shifts, 24 hours a day) so that most of the building was erected by 1989. The cost of the building is now estimated at about 6 billion dollars; however, there is no definite figure for that, since apparently no clear accounting on the use of the resources was found, and most workers and manufacturers were conscripted (the phrase used was “patriotic labor”) to produce the huge amounts of raw or finished materials that the building was swallowing. For comparison purposes, the total Romanian GDP for 1993 was 17 billion USD.

At the same time, in order to fund the project, Romanians suffered various deprivations such as food, electricity and heat rationing. This explains the popular reaction after the ousting and execution of the Ceausescus in 1989 vis-à-vis Casa Poporului (then still known as the House of the Republic). Huge lines formed: thousands of people wanted to see why they had been suffering all this time, where did their money go. Some, in fits of anger, vandalized the place, wanting to take a piece of it home as “their right,” “their property”—a remnant of the socialist mentality that replaced individual property with the “property of everybody, of the entire people.” In the end, confronted with unrealistic solutions, such as dynamiting the whole building (as it symbolized communism), turning it into a museum of communism, and even a casino, the authorities decided that the building should be used... for the exact purposes it had been built: centralized hosting of the main state institutions. It took a while before the Parliament and a number of other institutions of the newly born Romanian democracy moved to their new premises (the building is not finished in its entirety to this day). Part of the building is now

managed by the International Conference Center, which rents out space in the building and opened part of it to tourists.

People's House and other totalitarian architectural projects

There can be no mistaking in placing the Civic Center complex in a long series of totalitarian architectural projects. In a comparative analysis of the totalitarian language in architecture, Mariana Celac (1993) places the complex in the vicinity of New Imperial Center in Delhi, one of the last accomplishments of Victorian architecture, the EUR neighborhood in Rome, started by Mussolini to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the fascist march in Rome, the Great Axis of the Nazi Berlin (not completed), the infamous Albert Speer project that was to consecrate Hitler's legacy. Other structures—this time related to communist countries, such as the governmental complex at Phonyngyang in North Korea and the projected, never completed, gigantic Soviet Palace. Celac remarks the striking resemblance between the Civic Center and Speer's project (even the lengths of the main avenues coincide). The building's main architect, Anca Petrescu, reportedly remarked that, like Speer, she made a pact with the devil; however, the distinguished architect and cultural critic Augustin Ioan dismisses this as the only point of resemblance between the most famous architect of the 20th century and its alleged Romanian counterpart, seeing, instead of the classicist project with clear allusions to Versailles and similar spaces meant to consecrate the splendor of a regime, a consecration of the Bucharest slums in a megalithic form. Even in its attempt as a Romanian Versailles, the building fails into the realm of the ludicrous, according to Celac. Talking about the commemorative function of the totalitarian discourse, let Celac shows that what was meant to be a symbol of perpetual celebration is shocking the eye precisely through its "ludicrous, carnivalesque character... a discourse which, ignoring the ridicule it's getting exposed to, indulgences in any possible extravagance" (193). Celac believes that in this case, we're witnessing "a degradation of the totalitarian discourse in architecture" (193), while "elements of style, detail, historical reference, ceremonial and national message are interpreted in the manner of Disneyland and the Rio carnival" (194).³

The strategic placement of the building on top of a historical hill and its careful measurements had, among other things, a very important objective: to make the building visible from every corner of Bucharest. This visibility is very close to Baudrillard's concept of "ob-scenity": the "ob-esity" of the building imposes it to the fore through its bland size, like a huge, passive bully. The flip side of this outer visibility is the position of repressive power assumed: any one inside the building has a comprehensive view of the Capital. This power position transforms Bucharest into a huge Panopticon (according to the Foucauldian interpretation): the building has the opaque, invisible power of "disciplining" through its sheer presence and omniscient eye; the inhabitants of the city become inferior denizens, always conscious of being watched, incapable of escaping the ominous presence of the omnipotent surveillance. The irony of this, of course, is that the omnipotent eye has in the meantime turned into a blind impotent one: the building that was supposed to be the site of power is inhabited by a series of painfully

³ Romanian original: "Ceea ce distinge acest discurs [Centrul civic] in corul optiunilor arhitectural-urbanistice de prestigiu este caracterul lui ludic, carnavalesc, este un discurs care, ignorind ridicolul la care se expune, nu isi refuza nici o extravaganta. Cu siguranta, in cazul "Casei Poporului" suntem in fata unei "degradari a discursului totalitar in arhitectura [...] Elementele de stil, detaliu, referinta istorica, ceremonial si mesaj national sunt interpretate in maniera Disneylandului, a carnavalului din Rio."

inept governments and parliaments, supervising the chaos of a Capital with malignant growths, dominated by an underground economy, struggling to become “European,” but incapable of taking care of its own beggars and teenage glue-sniffers, or of “coming to terms” with its own past.

Protochronism and the People’s House

In order to be properly understood, the complex needs to be placed as a culmination of efforts in the direction set by protochronism, a cultural trend that characterized Romanian intellectual life during the last two decades of Communism, but whose roots are to be found much deeper, with the formation of the Romanian state. The trend started in the newly-emerged Romanian scholarship in the second half of the 19th century, largely influenced by Romantic historiography, and essentially propounds two themes: the role of the Romanians in defending European civilization (by serving as a buffer between the Islamic danger posed by the Ottomans and the rest of Europe) and the antiquity and even priority of Romanian achievements in a variety of fields (e.g., a certain Romanian author wrote an epic poem comparable or superior to Tasso’s long before his time, etc.). Despite the ferocious resistance to such absurd claims by a very influential cultural group in the 1870’s-1880’s (“Junimea”), “nationalism with a European finality gave way to autochthonous nationalism” after the 1900’s (Boia, 2001:59). Nationalism, often with chauvinist nuances, became a programmatic trait of all cultural manifestations in Romania (among other things, a claim to re-invent a neo-Romanian architecture that would replace the largely predominant Parisian style that characterized some of Bucharest’s main buildings).

After the Second World War, with the advent of communism, this breed of nationalism receded for a while only to emerge later, this time with a thousand heads instead of one—a development molded after the Soviet protochronist model (which, similarly, claimed that all major discoveries were somehow due or linked to Russian personalities). According to Lucian Boia (2001), there were three phases in the communist discourse: 1) internationalist (mid 40’s to late 50’s), 2) a recovery of the past (up to the early 70’s), and 3) an exacerbation of nationalism through protochronism (up until 1989). While the first stage boasted the well-known slogan “Proletarians from all countries, unite!”, seeming to carry out the Marxist program of a universal “class struggle,” the second stage came at a time when the shining accomplishments of communism were already losing their luster for the majority of the population; thus, in the context in which “the radiant future no longer worked, [...] the past could still work” (Boia: 74). An Orwellian appropriation of the past took place, reinterpreting Romanian history as an inevitable progress towards a communist future, as an all-going class struggle, in which the quasi-fictitious Romanian Communist Party (which numbered maybe a couple of hundred members before 1944) played an important role. Thus, “Romanian spirit was obliged to fit into the communist legitimation process” (75). The most acute phase of this process came after 1971, the start of Romania’s own Cultural Revolution. Cultural isolationism and Ceausescu’s megalomania transformed Romania into a field for endless commemoration celebrating the “Romanian spirit” of unity and continuity, inventing a proto-Romanian state that started over 2000 years before with the Dacians under a mythical prince (Burebista—remarkable probably through his inconspicuousness in ancient historiography), whose direct descendant, of course, was Ceausescu. Initially originating in literary circles, protochronism, which basically asserted

Romanian precedence and/or supremacy in various cultural avenues, was seized upon by the regime and transformed into a national religion with one High Priest—Ceausescu, and with one purpose—transforming a small country like Romania into a great power through its sheer national genius. (A discussion of the endless celebration of Romanian virtues and their unique embodiment in the dictatorial couple would probably render interesting results, but it is outside the scope of this paper.) Katherine Verdery, a careful analyst of the Romanian developments in the last years of communism, accords protochronism ample space in her book *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*. In her words,

This idea encouraged critics and literary historians to look for developments in Romanian culture that had anticipated events in the better-publicized cultures of Western Europe (thus “proto-chronos”: first in time). From literature, protochronism spread into other fields. [...] Clearly symptomatizing the plight of subaltern cultures dominated by metropolitan centers, protochronism soon attracted the attention of a Romanian party leadership that also wished to raise Romania's image in the esteem of the world. Romanians and outside observers alike have considered protochronism among the strongest manifestations of national ideology under Ceausescu—even, perhaps, that leadership's basic ideology. (1990:168)

Boia explains how this intellectual model moved Romania backward to a Soviet version of communism closer to the Stalinist model than the Soviet Union itself, upon which elements of Oriental mythology were superimposed (China became a traditional friend, and so did Korea). Actually, many place the origins of the People's House with Ceausescu's visit to East-Asian communist countries and the big impression that the similar architectural models he saw there made on him. Thus, Bucharest needed to be transformed into a utopian city that would eradicate its bourgeois past (which had gained it the fame of “the little Paris of the Balkans”) and will be worthy of Romania's present splendor and accomplishments. The project was a direct continuation of Romania's great past and accomplishment, further proof that its great past held the seeds of a great future. The “demiurgic value of architectural planning” is thus associated with “the ideal of the control of the future” (Jameson, 77). For Tafuri (quoted by Jameson), utopia is the dream “of a ‘rational’ domination of the future, the elimination of the *risk* it brings with it” (77). Building the gigantesque palace and complex was a way of securing a future for Romania, and inscribing it forever in its very center of power. The Civic Center and the imposing Palace at its center are at the same time a clear manifestation of the protochronist ideology: a way of glorifying, proving, asserting Romanian precedence in all fields—a monumental achievement that will make an object of awe and admiration, nationally and internationally—actually, *the* object. As always, Ceausescu's project is characterized by an utter lack of proportion and perspective—which is true of all his endeavors. As Boia notes:

With Ceausescu everything seems lacking in proportion—his pretension to found a totally other Romania (going as far as the complete modification of the urban and rural landscape and even of geographical equilibria), concomitant with an obsessive reference to the great exponents of an immutable Romanian destiny, a confusing dialectic in which he *identified* with history at the same time as he tried to *cancel* it out. The discrepancies in his case are impressive—between the idealized past and the real present, or simply between the vulgarity of the presidential couple and the mythical figures invoked. (226)

To establish the connection with the past (and perpetuate it into the future), the Civic Center and the People's House in particular were supposed to be built in a "Romanian" style—derived from the "Brancovenian" style (Brâncoveanu was an enlightened prince of one of the Romanian principalities in the late 1600's). These claims are, of course, hardly tenable (mainly because there is no agreement that such a style really exists). Furthermore, the insistence on using only made-in-Romania materials and the obsession with size and statistics are symptomatic of the indiscriminate glorification of national ingenuity and resourcefulness. Augustin Ioan reports that the whole complex—"a mixture of huge replicas of North-Korean kitsch monuments"—is "adorned with decorations 'saved' (according to the chief architect of the project, Mrs. Anca Petrescu) from the demolished monasteries in the area" (2001, par. 1) This claim, made, obviously, after 1989, by the leader of the project, tries to establish a legitimacy and continuity (the same main themes of protochronism!) for the mega-building, linking it somehow to the past. The same is perpetuated by the tour guides around the building, which continue to claim the presence of a "Brancovenian" style and maintain another invented myth preyed on by the neo-communist Romanian leadership: that, far from being an accident profoundly rupturing the capital city, the People's House represents a just realization of the old princely court of Bucharest (which burnt to the ground sometime in the 18th century) as well as of the 1935 master-plan for Bucharest (Ioan, "Snobiliary Architecture").

Like many other foreign tourists to Bucharest, Michael Vachon was told the same lie: that the Palace was not Ceausescu's idea, but "it was first proposed by King Carol in 1935, and later authorized by an act of the legislature under Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, Romania's post-war communist leader. Ceausescu simply carried out plans that had existed for a long time" (Vachon, 1994: 60). Vachon does not buy the easy explanation and correctly intuits the real reason: by denying the place's primary connection with Ceausescu, the current leaders want to deny all it represents and fall back on the same mentality that had lulled the Romanian people into an ideological slumber during the communist era: "To do otherwise, to face the truth and move on from there, would make a government composed mostly of the former Communist elite⁴ very uncomfortable. It might set the stage for more radical admissions and actions [...]" (61). Vachon's article is illustrative of a certain type of perception of Romania by the West. The difference between what Romanians perceive to be the national values they need to hold dear and how foreigners perceive them has always been striking and symptomatic for the schizophrenia of the Romanian culture, generally torn between East and West, Istanbul and Paris (as representative seats of a certain type of culture).

Post-Revolutionary domestic and international perceptions

It would be perhaps helpful to understand the perpetuation of Romanian myths about their past, present, and future, and the discrepancy between self-perception and perception by others if we look at two texts dealing with Casa Poporului—one written for the web page of the Romanian Parliament (<http://www.cdep.ro/>), and one for the New York Book Review (published in November 2001). I have reproduced some of the most significant excerpts below.

⁴ At the time Vachon was visiting the People's House and writing his article (1993-1994), Iliescu's neo-communist regime was in power. After a 4-year interlude when Romania was led by democratic forces, the 2000 elections brought Iliescu back to power and saw an resurgence of nationalism, as the Greater Romania Party, a right wing ultra-nationalist party, won roughly 30% of the seats in the Parliament.

The web page of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies is meant to facilitate the democratic process, posting news about the activity of the Parliament (there is also a senate), legislation news, current debates, drop-boxes for citizen's concerns/questions for Romanian MP's, etc. The website contains this link explaining the history of the building that hosts the Romanian Parliament, and presented in terms of national pride. There are few concessions made to admitting the megalomaniac, utterly useless and ruinous character of the communist project; instead, the page advertises in both Romanian and pained English a sort of 8th wonder of the world, a building that stands in the admiration of Romanians as well as foreigners (as the quotes very well punctuate). This view of the building is the stereotypical one presented by the authorities after 1989, and it does not substantially differ from the presentation of the building

Web page—Romanian Parliament, Chamber of Deputies

After December 1989, the construction that may easily be spotted wherever you are in Bucharest, was considered to be a hideous building and become subject to the most original ideas.

Realizing its enormous value, in fact a Romanian inheritance in danger to be destroyed and robbed, people began to look the building with less hostility and named it the "People's House".

As the people himself had experienced hunger and cold, it was now more than fair that he should act upon the destiny of the building.

Consequently, the builders resumed their work and, as the works were carried on, it was decided that the construction should be meant to lodge the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of Romania, and that it should change its name to the "Palace of Parliament" - a symbol of democracy. [...]

Visiting the Palace of Parliament, designed and built with great efforts and many sacrifices by the Romanian specialists and the whole Romanian industry, anyone may realize that it is not o palace from Aladdin's stories, but a real one, showing the true wealth of Romania: stone, marble and wood from the Romanian mountains and forests.

Consequently, talking today about the architectural ensemble of the Palace of

Parliament means to bring moral justice to the Romanian people and there are not a few foreigners who already have agreed upon it. We could only mention for instance:

Jean Paul Carteron - The President of the Crans Montana Forum: *"The Romanian art and the Romanian's creativity have been gathered in this magnificent building, after years and years, at the price of great sacrifices and against any logic. Let us forget today the "one" who ordered it and let us praise the "one" who created it."*

Catherine Lalumiere - General Secretary of the Council of Europe: *"It has been a long way Romania covered during the last 4 years, since my first visit here in February 1990. You have even succeeded in taming this huge palace, the construction of a megalomaniac, but, at the some time, a masterpiece of the Romanian people."*

Today, the monumental building stands for the most precious symbol of democracy in Romania, that is the Parliament, serving the high and noble aim we have all aspired for: equal and complete representation of the Romanian people."

Tony Judt: “Romania: Bottom of the heap”

The New York Review of Books

Nicolae Ceausescu's economic policies had a certain vicious logic—Romania, after all, did pay off its international creditors—and were not without mild local precedent from pre-Communist times. But his urbanization projects were simply criminal. The proposed "systematization" of half of Romania's 13,000 villages (disproportionately selected from minority communities) into 558 agrotowns would have destroyed what remained of the country's social fabric. His actual destruction of a section of Bucharest the size of Venice ruined the face of the city. Forty thousand buildings were razed to make space for the "House of the People" and the five-kilometer-long, 150-meter-wide Victory of Socialism Boulevard. The former, designed as Ceausescu's personal palace by a twenty-five-year-old architect, Anca Petrescu, is beyond kitsch. Fronted by a formless, hemicycle space that can hold half a million people, the building is so big (its reception

area is the size of a soccer field), so ugly, so heavy and cruel and tasteless, that its only possible value is metaphorical.

Here at least it is of some interest, a grotesque Romanian contribution to totalitarian urbanism—a genre in which Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Trujillo, Kim Il Sung, and now Ceausescu have all excelled. The style is neither native nor foreign—in any case, it is all façade. Behind the gleaming white frontages of the Victory of Socialism Boulevard there is the usual dirty gray, pre-cast concrete, just as a few hundred yards away there are the pitiful apartment blocks and potholed streets. But the façade is aggressively, humiliatingly, unrelentingly uniform, a reminder that totalitarianism is always about sameness; which is perhaps why it had a special appeal to a monomaniacal dictator in a land where sameness and "harmony"—and the contrast with "foreign" difference—were a longstanding political preoccupation.

before 1989! Again, Romanians are portrayed as a talented, hard-working nation capable of great deeds, and recognized as such. This is strikingly in line with Ceausescu's own project. Apart from the note of personality cult, which is, to say so, conspicuously absent (for everything in the building reminds one of the infamous dictatorial couple, in "taste" as well as in spirit), every other element of an inflated national ego is present in this text—the carefully chosen quotes, the immediate mythologizing of the building into a site/symbol of democracy, the glorification of the nation, the memory "slip" related to its conditions of emergence. This fragment, so typical of post-revolutionary discourse in Romania, also illustrates the tendency so prevalent in Romanian society of *forgetting communism*. Boia even talks about a "methodology of forgetting" and an official policy geared towards a "concealment of communism" (232), visible in textbooks, official representation of communist symbols, refusal to release the former Securitate files (the communist secret police), etc. All seems to point in one direction: "Communism did not exist! Or at least we have to behave as if it never existed" (234).

The genuine interest in understanding the past and hopefully "exorcizing" it, has been replaced by the "Still, something was achieved" mentality, fueled partially by the debilitating tendencies of protochronism, and partially by the Romanian confusion about the country's place in the concert of nations. That "something" that was achieved, in this case, is a pointless, pharaonic complex that drained the country of resources and forever scarred the face of

Bucharest, nevertheless proving a remarkable capacity of coordinating efforts on a national level for a common goal. To admit the latter without recognizing the emptiness of the goal—or, in other words, without some sort of critical consciousness, is a misleading and dangerous endeavor.

The description of the glorious post-communist Romanian democracy and making the building a symbol of that is the ultimate irony. It also relates to Romania's hidden fears and ambivalent attitudes toward the West: a love-hate relationship, at once wanting to be integrated and resenting the cold, sober reception of an Occident that looked with suspicion to the excruciatingly slow processes of change taking place in a country found, from their point of view, on the border of civilization. Again, this kind of attitude has its roots with the formation of the Romanian state in the 19th century. Today Romanian's attitudes towards "foreigners" still oscillate between integrationism (recent opinion polls indicate that a large majority of the Romanian population is pro-European Union and pro-NATO, without really having a critical attitudes as to the cost and responsibilities that such membership would entail) and isolationism (illustrated by the ascent of left-wing and ultra-nationalist parties such as the Greater Romania party, many of whose leaders, incidentally, used to be in the forefront of the protochronist movement). Symbols of national worth such as the People's House has become are fiercely held on to in order to show a semi-fictitious West what a small but brave and talented nation is capable of.

Obviously, this is not usually the Western reception of such values. Judt's article (which caused a sensation in Romania) dwells on the many unsolved issues that mar the Romanian political climate (among others, issues of restitution of the past, acknowledging the persecution of the Jews during the legionary regime in WWII, etc.). Quite perceptively, Judts lingers over the monstrous Palace in order to diagnose some of the long-enduring effects of communism for Romania, and which still hold back its development. His unflattering view is in total contrast with the self-indulging official Romanian version of the building's symbolism. It is also symptomatic of the general Western attitudes towards Romania, which all have in common, according to Boia, a vision of "a country only partially integrated in European civilization, a country of the margins, characterized by a still pronounced store of primitivism, a strange amalgam of modern urban life and rustic survivals" (185). Throughout this century, Romanians have been perceived as little but "*something else*" (185)—except the "difference" that Romanian nationalist are bragging with is far from being that flattering. Boia explains that the solution to this kind of reception has been either "contemptuous autochtonism" or an "exaltation of all notes of modernity and Europeanism" (187). The lucid Romanian historian calls for a middle way—a self-critical democracy that could finally set Romania on the much-desired right track. However, as long as uncritical, self-indulgent attitudes towards the past or "sensitive" symbols such as the People's House prevail, this does not seem likely. As recently as 1997, when asked to send artifacts illustrative of the cult of personality in Romania to a museum in France, there was a debate in the Parliament on the opportunity of "besmirching" the Romanian repute by putting "the worst foot" forward. Obviously, the refusal to send but a few "politically correct" artifacts had quite the opposite effect!

People's House as a *lieu de memoire*

The building has gone through several stages of symbolism: a totalitarian, pre-Revolutionary one, in which it was celebrated as a triumph of communism and cult of personality while it was being build; an initial phase of post-revolutionary rejection, in which the meaning was basically

the same but now with an emphatic negative sign in front, and finally a post-revolutionary integration into Romanian consciousness as a positive representation of the creative potential of the Romanians. Because of its sheer scope and the deep wounds that the building left both on Bucharest and on Romanians' way of life, it had already become a *lieu de mémoire*, in Pierre Nora's terminology: "a significant unit of material or ideal nature which human will or the work of time has turned into a symbolic element shared by a community." Initially, it was regarded as something that had hurt the Romanian people and the Romanian capital forever. The title of the building ("House of the Republic") was quickly forgotten: nobody wanted to remember the former Socialist Republic of Romania. In its stead, the building was dubbed "The Madman's House" and/or Ceausescu's Palace. Perhaps a measure of the Romanian's obsession with the building is one movie produced immediately after the revolution and that won the "Golden Lion" at the Venice Film Festival in 1992. The movie was entitled "Hotel de Lux" ("Luxury Hotel") and was shot entirely inside the unfinished building. It was meant to be a parable of the condition of the Romanian people, laboring in the underground, somewhere in the huge entrails of the building, while an absurd puppet was directing the construction of a luxury suite. The metaphor was only too obvious: the building, empty, vain, with a dirty, hidden underbelly, and a mad, mechanical ruler, and a few lost characters trying to either cope with their condition or to escape, roaming in the huge hallways of the "hotel," represented Romania itself.

However, this sort of criticism was not meant to last. The surge of frenzy over the building dwindled as people realized that this was actually a project that was there to stay, despite its stained history, and with which they had to come to terms. In the early nineties, the official point of view of the leading party (dominated by ex-communists) prevailed: the palace was cast in a positive light, in an attempt to disassociate it from Ceausescu and to dwell on its architectural merits, which were, after all, the result of the people's efforts, and another proof of Romanian ingenuity and artistry. Many Romanian intellectuals have asked themselves why this happened, and whether this was a genuine, widespread Romanian feeling. Celac speaks about the "visitors' notebooks" full of enthusiastic, proud comments immediately after the opening of the Palace to the public in 1990. A survey indicated at the time that 90% of Romanians approve of the building—a figure that remained more or less constant during subsequent studies. Celac quotes a Ph.D. dissertation by Maria Cavalcanti (Oxford Polytechnic, 1993), which includes the results of a survey on the public perception of totalitarian architecture, using "Centrul Civic" as an example. According to that survey, "Casa Poporului" is considered by 16.3% of the population to be an important building, by 44.9% as a very important building, by 22.4% as contributing to the "beautification" of the city; 22.7% of the surveyed considered the building as an "essential contribution to the transformation of Bucharest into a modern capital, symbolizing the creative potential and abilities of the Romanian people" (Celac, 1996). Celac argues that the defenders of the building are the dominating class of the Romanian society both before and after 1989, "the product of the industrialization and urbanization that changed the Romanian social network for the past thirty years" (196). According to this author, this class is relatively numerous, vital, willing to assert itself, and at the same time without roots and without history.

While Celac's thesis may be arguable, it cannot be denied that the building does satisfy on some primeval level the need for identity and legitimacy of a generation who was born and lived most of their lives under communism. Marxist utopia juggled with the structure-drawn and the event-drawn character of history; however, where Marxism wanted initially to impose a structure upon any event, national communism reversed the process by imposing (fictional) events over an established structure (Boia, 1995:14). The confused character of the history taught

in schools left that generation with confused ideas not only about the study of history in general but also about the particular events presented. The 1989 revolution had almost a suction effect that left people in a historical vacuum, and with an overwhelming need to *assert* something, to build upon some sort of past, where everything they had known seemed to be denied to them.

Thus, the denial of all the building represented was eagerly seized by a nation with innumerable social and economic problems: the building was, indeed, the second largest... etc. (all the statistics were produced and used just about that time, which somehow perpetuates the Ceausescu's obsession with numbers and "firsts"), and turned soon into a huge ego-booster. Romanians could look at it and be proud. Finally, something good came out of communism, and it was because of the efforts of the ordinary man. This change in the attitudes of the masses quickly (and significantly) reflected in the name people started to refer to the building: The People's House. Even now, when the official title is "The Palace of the Parliament," people still fondly refer to it as the People's House. It is theirs. They built it. They've redeemed it from a cruel, unjust tyranny. They've got every right to call it theirs. Thus, coming to terms with the past seems to have come through a strange process of denial and sublimation (in an almost psychoanalytical sense). Alas, the pill is nothing more than a placebo—it does nothing to actually heal the ruptured Romanian society of a tormented past that still haunts it.

The transformation of the values attached to the building is quite apparent. From a symbol of Romanian "greatness" to a symbol of oppression, back to a reintegration and reinforcement of a Romanian ethos as one capable of "great deeds" (a favorite communist cliché), the symbolism of the People's House has come full circle.

Conclusion

This sort of obfuscation of the past is not, by all means, a symptom unique to the Romanian society. Post-World War II Germany faced similar problems. When Adorno was talking about the "coming to terms with the past" he deplored the meaning of the phrase in contemporary Germany (1977) as being "rather wishing to turn the page and, if possible, wiping it from memory" (115). The similarity with a Romanian society that feels a more or less willing accomplice of communism is striking. Adorno perceives that this weariness in facing the past is only a too acute awareness of it. The analysis that he performs of the German collective consciousness in the wake of Nazism could indeed apply to post-communism Romanian psyche: the same type of personality that "does not correlate easily with politico-economic criteria," "thinking within the paradigm of power-powerlessness, rigidity and the inability to react; conventionality; conformist behavior; lack of self-reflection; and finally an altogether deficient capacity for experience." (120) Similarly, Ceausescu's destructive policy and exacerbation of nationalism appealed to the "collective power fantasies of those who were powerless as individuals and, indeed, felt themselves only by virtue of such collective might" (121). The Romanian collective narcissism still needs to be titillated by a recognition of its worth—and if that is the People's House, so be it. In a way the Romanian society seems to display a strange variety of the Stockholm syndrome: a captive of national communist mentality, it ended by being enraptured by its most fundamental tenets. Hitler's nationalism as a "paranoid delusional system" (124) has a lot in common with its Romanian version, and resulted in the same "cold forgetting" of the past, without an attempt at a critical assimilation.

This building has taken on successive layers of meaning (from positive—a symbol of the triumph of communism—to entirely negative—a symbol of communist oppression and failure, the work of a megalomaniac and “madman,” the cause of Romania’s economic collapse—to more neutral—a stone “colossus” and a statistics—the world’s second largest administrative building—and finally back to positive connotations, as it was integrated back into the Romanian ethos as a proud display of Romanian ingenuity, artistic craft and resourcefulness, a cornerstone of Romanian nationalism, in many ways similar with what Romania’s former communist dictator was trying to build). The whole architectural ensemble has played an important role in the attempts of redefining Romanian national consciousness in the post-communist era, and has become a *lieu de mémoire* grafted on the recent Romanian collective memory and turned into history as it was being built. The deep roots of protochronism are, in my opinion, at the core of Romania’s failed attempts to cope with its communist past, and this process can be analyzed by slicing this particular piece of national history and identifying the transformation of its meaning in the Romanian consciousness. Getting out of that impasse is only possible through the Adornian critical “Aufarbeitung”—which is, essentially, “a matter of the *way* in which the past is called up and made present: whether one stops at sheer reproach, or whether one endures the horror through a certain strength that comprehends even the incomprehensible” (126). For this, the civil society—not only in Romania, really everywhere—needs to be “educated” as to the available means and tools of introspection and as to its mission of overcoming any attempts to fall back on easy nationalist recipes as a way of harnessing the energy of a people. Only that way we can have a solid guarantee that the past will not repeat itself.

References

- Adorno, Theodore W. "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?" In Hartmann, Geoffrey H. (ed.). *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Beldiman, Alexandru. "Victoria Socialismului—Casa Poporului: O ruptura in istoria Capitalei." In Lucian Boia (ed.). *Miturile Comunismului Romanesc..* Editura Universitatii Bucuresti, 1995: pp. 206-212.
- Boia, Lucian. "Cele doua fete ale mitologiei comuniste." In Lucian Boia (ed.). *Miturile Comunismului Romanesc..* Editura Universitatii Bucuresti, 1995: pp. 7-15.
- Boia, Lucian. *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*. Central European University Press, Budapest, 2001.
- Celac, Mariana. "O analiza comparata a limbajului totalitar in arhitectura." In Lucian Boia (ed.). *Miturile Comunismului Romanesc..* Editura Universitatii Bucuresti, 1995: pp. 181-205.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*.
- Ioan, Augustin. "Healing the Ruptured Memory." In *Art Margins*, www.artmargins.com, retrieved 11/28/01.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology." In *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985: pp. 49-100.
- Judt, Tony. "Romania: Bottom of the Heap." In *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 1 2001. www.nybooks.com.
- Nora, Pierre (ed.). *Realms of Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Porphyrios, Demetri. "On Critical History." In *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985: pp. 13-21.
- Vachon, Michel. "Bucharest: The House of the People." In *World Policy Journal*, Vol. X, no. 4, Winter 1993-1994: pp. 59-63.
- Verdery, Katherine. *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1991.