

THE POST-SOCIALIST CITY OF BRAŞOV: CHALLENGES AND PERILS

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Abstract: *The change of political regimes in the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the last century has revalued the building plots in cities and reconfigured the stakes of urban space ownership. Braşov is one of the most attractive cities of Romania, residentially speaking. Nonetheless, the convergence of real estate developers' and their direct beneficiaries' interests raises the risk of choking the city and modifying the characteristic features of its central area. The solutions of inadvertently building new real estate in the old and highly valued neighborhoods of the city diminish the quality of urban residence.*

Key words: *urban space, downtown, throng.*

1. Introduction

Braşov is considered one of the most attractive cities of Romania. Its brand renders commercial value to the residential projects within the city and justifies the fight over gaining control of the urban space. The hereby paper emphasizes the common traits of the post-socialist restructuring of the cities in Central and Eastern Europe and, by identifying a set of common features in this respect, the threats raised by chaotic and opportunistic real estate development in cities like Braşov.

2. Urban space as a social product

Social space is not neutral. According to Heidegger (1982), people organize it by inhabiting this space, placing things where they belong and guarding it. What is more, they themselves find their place in the world by identifying and valuing its center, as the place of the original hierophany, as Eliade underlines (2006). Peoples' stylistic matrices contain the categories of their unconsciousness, bear the mark of a geographic space of origin and mark all their cultural manifestations, claims Blaga (1994). As Bernea (1997) highlights, Romanians attribute positive connotations to the East and South, and make negative associations with the other two cardinal points. The aforementioned authors outline facets of people's relationship with the space that existentially and

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phenomenologically are different. By intervening and/or projecting their intentions on space, people value it. In this respect, Romanians have a saying according to which: “Man blesses the place”.

The urban space is human par excellence and is the expression of human rationality (Weber, 2013). In the last decades, an increasing number of scholars have argued for turning to the interpretive-constructivist approach to study how people live the urban space in their daily lives (Rezeanu, 2016). The urban space is “collectively produced and socially constructed by human actions”, and thus, in its turn, influences the way city dwellers behave (Nedovic-Budic, Tsenkova & Marcuse, 2006, p. 9). Gotea (2016) highlights the influence of space and community on the family life from the urban area.

The urban space regains its value by comparison with its borders. Its value is rendered by its closeness to the center, that is to the physical distance to the walls delineating its limits in the case of traditional towns, and by the costs of transforming the hinterland into built up areas in the case of contemporary towns which are the continuation of the mechanized ones, characteristic of the industrialized era (Toynbee, 1979). The urban land as support for real estate development projects is a social product and its value is reflected by the desirability of such projects.

3. The Socialist Urban Space

In the socialist part of Europe, city development has been marked by egalitarianism and centralized planning of states’ economic development for half a century. Planned urbanization has changed the structure and appearance of cities in alignment to the already mentioned principles. The development of workers’ neighborhoods with their large blocks and modest apartments, along with the de building of factories, restaurants and hospitals by the rule “big is beautiful” (Enyedi, 1996) have facilitated the assimilation of urban dwelling conditions. Ignoring the opinions, interest and distinct demands of citizens in the name of some superior knowledge of everybody’s best interest has allowed planning and building large size constructions and subordinating the public space to the interests of those in power. The people in charge of urbanism during socialist regimes worked with no pressure as to the price of the plots for building, since these were state property and they were generously offered for building purposes (Szelenyi, 1996).

At the same time with the equalization tendency, urban segregation in socialist cities has been more than low as compared to capitalist cities (Haroe, 1996). However, the main features of urban segregation in socialism were, on the one hand, the preferential access to good housing (whether in a new building or in a highly coveted for area) as a result of belonging to the new political elite or to a favored group and, on the other hand, the gradual degradation of residential central areas in cities. The restrictions placed on plot transactions along with the nationalization and compartmentalization of the building in central areas (with a view to renting them) led to a decrease in the latter’s prestige since it was only the poor descendents of the old families and very poor tenants that lived there. (Szelenyi, 1996).

Centralized economic planning oriented towards accelerated industrialization led to an increase in the number of vacancies in the city that was much higher compared to the number of urban residents. In this context, Szelenyi (1996) refers to "under-urbanized" socialist societies. The surplus of vacancies was filled with commuters and that was the cause of city ruralization and of adopting and implementing the urban life style in the rural environment (Bădescu și Radu, 1980).

4. The Configuration of Post-socialist Urban Space

The political changes in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 80s have replaced confrontation with friendship, developed partnership activities, as well as opened and demilitarized the societies (Bolborici, 2013, p. 87) The social changes following the political ones have transformed the structure of the cities in this part of the world. "Urban restructuring in the post-socialist world is marked by the following trends: increasing internationalization of metropolitan areas in terms of both capital and labor; deindustrialization and growth of command and control functions in capital cities; increasing social and economic polarization within cities; changing power relations between the public and the private sector mirrored in deregulation of planning and the emerging competition to attract foreign investment; emergence of post-modern urban landscapes, emphasis on place promotion and city marketing in the context of growing competition for investment and jobs.", indicates Tsenkova and Nedovic-Budic (2006, p. 351). Bertaud views the existence of old industrial spaces nearby the center and the densely inhabited peripheral neighborhoods, along with the lack of services and retail commerce in the center of the cities as "malformations that will be challenging to correct" (2006, p. 95). The challenging dimension of transformations is also rendered by the conversion of political capital into economic capital (Stark, 1990) and by the interest of large companies in cities with intense and diverse economic activity, with a generous workforce offer, access to information and technology, as well as to office spaces (Tsenkova, 2006). Moreover, the challenge comes from the association of the transition period with foreign investments, consumerism, orientation towards the private sector by wealthy consumers, and by the presence of corporations and multinational companies, according to Tsenkova and Nedovic-Budic (2006).

Under the pressure of these challenges, in post-socialist cities suburbs and also hypermarkets and malls have rapidly developed as the expression of contemporary consumerism (Tsenkova și Nedovic-Budic, 2006). What is more, the profit of real estate agents and developers has increased along with the organization of the real estate market and the increase in importance of local administration's decisions (Enyedi, 1996). The fierce competition for urban space was also joined by small entrepreneurs and their coffee shops, restaurants, shops, services (IT, financial, cultural) (Andrusz, 2006). The institutional support of privatizations and the diminishing control over the status of urban plots has allowed the access of a considerable number of actors to the real estate market (Nedovic-Budic, Tsenkova & Marcuse, 2006).

The rapid growth of social inequalities after the change of political regimes has given rise to urban segregation at a higher speed compared to that of city transformation. The dwellings in workers' neighborhoods have lost their status and attractiveness. The old bourgeois buildings in the center of cities have become the property of the new bourgeoisie and have been rehabilitated, and gradually the gentrification of central areas has taken place. Then, cities have been surrounded by single family dwellings. New suburbs and old gentrified centers are the main post-socialist transformations in the urban structure (Szelenyi, 1996; Tsenkova, 2006).

The structural transformations of cities accompany the replacement of the communities formed around work relations (in workers' neighborhoods work colleagues would also be neighbors on the block as a result of dwelling distribution based on the workplace criterion) with residential communities (Andrusz, 2006). Some of the latter by the type of "the defence of luxury" (Andrusz, 2006), surrounded by surveillance cameras and guards are pseudo communities, or "voluntary ghettos" (Bauman, 2001). Nonetheless they become part of the new map of post-socialist cities. The latter and their well delineated segregation lines are transparent (Andrusz, 2006).

Bureaucracy, political instability, viewing planning as "an old habit of the communist regime" (Taşan-Kok, 2006, p. 68) and local authorities' inertia in elaborating new urban development strategies have compelled the latter to flexibly address the requirements of private investors. "In many cases, planning was reduced to a matter of negotiation between property owners, developers and urban government actors. Indeed, many large-scale projects that have noticeably changed the urban landscape of post-socialist cities were the initiatives of private developers.", believes Taşan-Kok (2006, p. 62). The absence of a stable legal framework and of a unitary plan urban development has created opportunities for the groups of interest on the real estate market (Harloe, 1996).

5. From under-urbanization, beyond over-urbanization in post-socialist Braşov

Guided by specific opportunities post-socialist cities evolve into incoherent urban mosaics (Tsenkova, Nedovic-Budic, 2006). The interests of dwellers are programmatically ignored in the socialist city and they are yet ignored again in post-socialism for various reasons. "The opportunistic planning gave private investors the chance to realize their potential and pursue their goals, but the process neglected the public interest." (Taşan-Kok, 2006, p. 69), and "In fact the socialist urban management has been replaced by entrepreneurial rather than participatory governance. The flexible and largely neo-liberal approach by the local governments is far from neutral; it creates new winners and losers, and promotes elitists environments." (Tsenkova, Nedovic-Budic, 2006, p. 360). Theoretically speaking, the post-socialist urban development context of the first decade of the third millennium is delineated by the above description. Its aggravating connotations also cover the current reality of Romanian cities. Permissive legislation, generous and inauthentic urban plans, as well as the dread of local authorities of legal repercussions allow the competing interests of private investors to model and remodel urban space.

Common city dwellers' interests that are directly affected (given their proximity) or indirectly (since all parties interact within the urban organism) are only taken into account as civic arguments in the case of potential confrontations among big actors. Otherwise, they do not matter as a result of the little influence they have. According to developers, not everyone can be happy. Except that the opportunistic development of the city puts not only its common dwellers at a disadvantage. It can also turn against those generating and sustaining it. The convergence of their interests within a determined, limited space can transform coveted areas of the city into uncongenial places. Dreams easily become nightmares in such a context. The desire to use the smallest free plots in good areas leads to adopting doubtful urban solutions that compromise both the constructions' profitability and the comfort of both new and old residents. Thus, clean cities with attractive brands can go amiss with their durable development. The convergence of the desire to live in such places with its unfortunate exploitation gradually transforms the city into a distasteful place. The growth in urban density reduces the comfort of living (that is access to sun, fresh air, smooth traffic, parking lots, etc.). In my opinion, that is exactly what is happening in Braşov at the moment.

Braşov is one of the largest cities of Romania. In January 2017 its number of dwellers amounted to 290,348, according to the National Institute of Statistics (www.Braşov.insse.ro). Braşov used to be a well quoted industrial center even before the instauration of the socialist regime. The accelerated development of socialist industry within the city after the nationalization of its factories (and as a result on their endowment at European standards) programmatically created thousands of jobs. Its under-urbanization was gradually reduced by bringing successive waves of youth into town, mainly from the central region of Moldova. Dwellings were progressively raised for the high number of people working in factories. Thus, workers' neighborhoods consisting of blocks of flats emerged nearby the industrial platforms of the city.

After 1990 "the influx of population in the urban environment increased and the goal of the new comers was to find their own place by either joining college or getting employed" (Borcoman, 2016, p.418). However, the gradual closing of factories after 1989 has led the city into an over-urbanization state. According to the synchronic use of the term as set by Kingsley and Hertz Golden (1954), an over-urbanized city is the one in which its urbanization rate is higher than its industrialization rate. According to a wider definition of the term, an over-urbanized city is the one whose urbanization rate is not supported by the income sources of its residents (Bradshaw and Schafer, 2000). However, the situation in Braşov has come to equilibrium as a result of a redefined urban economic profile delineated by local private initiatives and multinational companies that opened their subsidiaries in this city, as well as by the departure of the former workers of now closed factories to their places of origin and, dramatically, also as a result of youth' high departure to the West. The city population decreased by 21.63% between 1991-2012. (http://www.mdrap.ro/userfiles/consultari_interministeriale/12_08_2016/anexa5.pdf).

Nonetheless, a lot of new establishments have been built in the past years. Avangarden III, the most dynamic real estate project has set de goal of building 3,570 apartments in

collective buildings in the North Western part of the city between 2009-2020 (<https://www.imobiliare.ro/ansambluri-rezidentiale/Braşov/avantgarden-3-Braşov-1268>). The project developer has already built Avantgarden I and II in the aforementioned area and it is also building a residential complex on the former industrial platform in the North of the city. Similar to other cities in post-socialist Europe, Braşov is expanding with small single family constructions into the hinterland where the relief allows it. Such development is natural and necessary since they meet the urgent dwelling requirements of the 80s and also the financially supported desire of the youth raised in blocks of flats to have their own plot and yard for their own children. The horizontal expansion of the city is doubled by a less useful and comfortable density of buildings within the city right in its central area.

The brand of Braşov is one of the most attractive in Romania. It was declared the most beautiful city of our country in 2013 (www.ghiduri-turistice.info) and the cleanest in Romania (<http://newsbv.ro/2017/05/25/Braşov-clean-city-romania>). Poiana Braşov, probably one of its most renowned neighborhoods, is a well-known mountain resort. A lot of private medical centers have been opened in the past years (such as CLINICCO, MedLife, Hyperdia, Regina Maria) and they have been efficiently consolidating their prestige on the Romanian market of medical services. These features encompassed by the brand “the city at the foot of the Tâmpa mountain” are the ones that actually press the developers to build in central areas rather than the real need for dwellings. I believe that actually the target group of developers is made of tourists rather than young residents. In such a context the argument of an over-urbanized city is hardly valid.

To own an apartment downtown is a more interesting and affordable solution than having a holiday cottage, at least for the people from Bucharest. Thus, in winter it is easier to get to the ski slopes rather than drive on the already legendarily crowded Valea Prahovei route, while in summer the temperature is comfortable and sometimes the weather is even chilly. The increased number of private investments in the health business suggests a possible transformation of Braşov into a center for medical tourism.

In this context, the proximity of clinics is an advantage. By far, most of the constructions built in 2017 consist of two room apartments (<http://www.Braşov.insse.ro/phpfiles/03>).

New blocks of flats are being built on private plots, on the picturesque hills surrounding the city, at the foot of the mountain or replace the houses regained by their former owners and thus are raised right among the old houses constructed during socialism. Some of the urban solutions adopted (with the resigned agreement of the local administration that is hardly supported by existing legislation in the field) are not too fortunate and they are obviously a source of discomfort for the residents of Braşov. The inconvenience is of either an aesthetic nature, a symbolic one, or it is rendered by the way the new buildings change the street layout or the visual margins of the city. In other cases the discomfort is of a gross nature, as the photos below (from my personal collection), taken in October 2017 on some of the construction sites, show.

The first snapshot (Figure 1) shows a part of the residential assembly on Dealu Morii, Mihai Viteazu Street, at the foot of University Colina. One of the university’s buildings,

which is part of the architectural assembly and gives its symbolically loaded name to this part of the city, is visible in the background. This residential assembly is still under construction.



Fig.1. *Residential assembly at the foot of University Colina*

The next photo shows the Bellvue Residence Assembly already built on the Warthe, behind the County Library. This assembly which is highly visible from the center of the city (Figure 2) has aggressively modified the profile delineated by the city brand. Another project viewed as “ill-suited for the coherent development of the city” by the Romanian Order of Architects (OAR), Braşov- Harghita– Covasna subsidiary, targets the construction of 200 apartments to be used as hotel like accommodation in a massive and visibly dismal residential complex beyond Bellvue Residence (<http://www.bzb.ro/stire/dupa-american-dream-dealul-warthe-a114248>).



Fig. 2. *Bellvue Residence Assembly*

The next photos (Figure 3 and Figure 4) show how neighborhood rules are not respected and thus a residential building is crammed among already existing buildings, one of which is the University Aula (the construction on the right in Figure 3). Figure 4 is from the first floor of the Aula.



Fig. 3. New building near University's Aula



Fig.4. Forced neighborhoods seen from University's Aula

The construction site in the last photo (Figure 5) is in the lower part of Valea Cetăţii neighborhood on Muncii Boulevard. The residential building in the center of the image is raised in the parking space of the commercial complex by the name of Magnolia. One of the Alphaville residential assemblies is visible in the background.

The construction sites in the city are much more numerous. The number of examples is limited given the reduced space for this paper. The fight for owning the urban space is not a new one since it was first signaled by the first preoccupations for urban sociology. Its real stake is that there is a danger of transforming short term victories into losses for everyone, winners included. By struggling to offer new dwellings in the old areas of the city, the developers risk to transform these neighborhoods into unattractive urban areas. The arduous desire of the potential beneficiaries of these real estate spectacular offers to live in such areas also contributes to transforming the city.



Fig.5. *New block of flats, Magnolia parking area, Valea Cetăţii*

Attracted by the lack of throng, future residents manage to create it. Charmed by the smooth traffic, they jam it by flowing from the residential areas into the main routes of the city. The convergence of a high number of individual desires and decisions can lead to effects that are very different from the ones expected by each and every individual. By pushing for the exploitation of the urban space up to the limit of (sanctionable and therefore to be avoided) breaking of permissive urban regulations and as a result of their anachronism developers sabotage their own investments. By signing contracts for future apartments in residential assemblies that obviously have access, parking, neighborhood, urban density problems and hoping that someone has already thought of solutions for these, the beneficiaries complicate their own existence. And thus, with every step, the dream is gradually transforming into a nightmare.

6. Conclusions

Urban development in socialist European countries shares similar traits. These were politically determined and grounded into the principles of equalitarianism and centralized economic planning. The post-socialist evolution of the cities in this part of Europe has also been similar and governed by the consequences of revaluing urban plots (that is of regaining the real market value). The sanctionable traits of the post-socialist process of urban restructuring are not characteristic of the Romanian space, nor are they part of the Romanian way. They are historically anchored, result from the influence of a totalitarian leftist regime and can be identified across the entire former socialist area. From among all the traits, the inertia of local authorities in updating urban regulations and their reluctance to planning (as a result of the bad memories that it raises) are dangerous for the evolution of cities since it favors opportunistic and chaotic solutions for using the urban space. Until the civic attitude of developers and beneficiaries of urban residential projects matures enough so that they adopt a durable development perspective, the ball is in local authorities' court.

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