Establishing Power through Destruction: The heritage demolitions that took place in Bucharest to realize a dictator's dream of the ideal socialist city

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Abstract

The thesis analyses the extensive demolitions that happened in Bucharest in the 1980s, during Nicolae Ceaușescu's communist regime, when a substantial part of the historic city center was destroyed to make way for the Civic Center and the House of the Republic, which later became the Palace of Parliament. The demolitions led to the loss of valuable heritage architecture, deeply altering the urban and social fabric of the city. By analysing available literature, archival images, and case studies, the research examines how this period of urban restructuring has influenced contemporary urban planning and heritage architecture in post-communist Bucharest. The investigation aims to discover whether the precedent set by Ceaușescu's demolitions facilitated further heritage destruction in the capitalist, modern context, driven by economic and political interests. Additionally, it addresses the present challenges of preserving heritage architecture and integrating new urban developments within the historic context. This research focuses on providing a deeper understanding of the long-term consequences of the communist demolitions in Bucharest and their relevance to current discussions on heritage conservation and urban identity restoration.

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Introduction

Bucharest is an architecturally diverse city due to the dramatic landscape transformations that happened throughout its history, with each period leaving a mark on its urban structure. The thesis follows one of the most significant and traumatic phases of the city's development that forever altered its identity: the demolitions that happened during Nicolae Ceaușescu's communist regime in Romania (1965-1989). In the final years of his rule, Ceaușescu had ambitious plans to reshape Bucharest into an ideal socialist capital, leading to the destruction of a large part of the historic city center to make way for a new Civic Center. The urban project is dominated by the imposing Palace of Parliament, which is considered the heaviest building in the world and the largest administrative building for civil use in the world (*Largest administrative building,* 2025), a record that Ceaușescu was aiming for to showcase his power and encourage a personality cult (Light & Young, 2010).

The demolitions in the historic center were a huge cultural and societal loss for the city. Entire neighborhoods were erased, relocating thousands of residents, which led to tragic events such as suicides and deaths (Danta, 1993). Many valuable heritage buildings dating from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries were lost.

The thesis focuses on investigating and getting a better understanding of these events and their relation to the contemporary approach to urban planning and conservation of heritage architecture in Bucharest. At the moment, I believe that Bucharest's architecture is chaotic and heterogeneous, and, being surrounded by this environment for most of my life, there has always been an interest in understanding how the city evolved in this direction. Considering how easily Ceaușescu managed to erase protected buildings during the communist period, going against UNESCO, ICOMOS and ICCROM guidelines (Cavalcanti, 1992), did the corrupt post-communist political system allow further demolitions in the capital city, driven by private investments and economic interests? The research also explores how historic architecture is treated today in Bucharest: are there stronger policies for protection, or are the same patterns of destruction continuing?

Academic context

The demolitions that reshaped Bucharest have been the subject of extensive research conducted by Romanian as well as foreign authors, such as Darrick Danta and Maria de Betania Cavalcanti. Political motivations, urban transformations, and post-communist perceptions of the intervention are explored in their research.

One of the most covered aspects of Ceaușescu's urban transformation is the demolition of historic neighborhoods such as Uranus, Rahova, and Antim. Once filled with bohemian family houses, churches, and heritage architecture, these areas were completely erased to make way for socialist boulevards and new architecture. Oana Despa's research in her series "București desfigurat" (2024) provides an inventory of the demolished buildings, highlighting the profound loss of Bucharest's pre-communist urban and architectural character. A few examples are the Ipsilanti Palace, the Brâncovenesc Hospital and numerous churches and monasteries. Many researchers, such as Darrick Danta (1993) and Maria de Betania Cavalcanti (1992), argue that these demolitions were not just a way of modernization but an intentional obliteration of the pre-communist past to align with Ceaușescu's ideological vision and change the country's identity. The urban reshaping of the city reflected the urban planning trends seen across Eastern Europe, where extensive demolitions were used to reinforce political power.

Darrick Danta and Matei Lykiardopol provide insights into the ideological motivations behind the Civic Center, the numerous architectural influences, and the dramatic restructuring of the urban landscape. Danta (1993) details how the boulevard leading to the Palace of Parliament, referred to as the "socialist snake", was conceived as a symbol of socialist power and prosperity. However, rather than being perceived as a victorious expression of socialism, Lykiardopol (1991) states that the boulevard ultimately represents "victory over Bucharest", emphasizing how the communists imposed their political principles at the expense of the city's historical urban fabric.

While many scholars have analysed the destruction and construction that occurred, fewer have explored the evolution of the Civic Center in post-communist Bucharest. Danta's work, written in 1993 while the center was still under construction, reflects the uncertainty about the future of the city. At the time, the city was in a transitional phase after the revolution and the abolition of the regime, struggling with the integration of Ceaușescu's urban interventions into a post-communist, capitalist identity.

More recently, Cosmin Ciprian Caraba (as cited in Sima, 2017) and other researchers think that, despite its controversial beginnings, communist architecture must be adopted as part of the city's heritage rather than erased or ignored. However, Claudia Sima (2017) explores how communist heritage is viewed by society and government officials, making its representation a complex issue. A growing trend in communist heritage tourism has sparked debates in

Romania about whether communist buildings, such as the Palace of Parliament, should be promoted as historical landmarks. However, Sima notes that the process of integrating this heritage into Romania's identity is marked by several challenges regarding the different impressions of the communist era between generations. Sima argues that Romanians do not perceive communism as a distant history, but as an ongoing reality, which makes efforts to promote communist heritage as a cultural asset more difficult.

There is a noticeable gap in understanding how this traumatic chapter in Bucharest's history reinvents itself in the city today. A crucial question remains: Did the large-scale demolitions of the communist era impact present-day urbanism and architectural policies? Furthermore, are historical buildings still demolished or preserved instead? Looking at the current attitude towards heritage architecture and the future of monuments in Bucharest is essential to fully grasp the consequences of Ceaușescu's urban interventions and their influence on contemporary architecture.

Methodology

The thesis explores the immense cultural loss caused by Ceaușescu's demolitions and their lasting impact on post-communist Bucharest. To illustrate the scale and gravity of Ceaușescu's actions, some of the heritage buildings that were destroyed will be analysed - such as the Mihai Vodă ensemble and Brâncovenesc Hospital - through literature and archival images. The study also assesses how these events shaped contemporary architecture and how modern architecture interacts with the historic city center today, highlighting current preservation efforts and challenges regarding heritage architecture.

Structure

The thesis begins with a brief historical background on communism in Romania, highlighting the poor living conditions and daily life by looking at the lived experiences of a historian and members of my family. The focus is then shifted to the Ceaușescu era, highlighting his perfidious and self-centred personality, which fuelled the megalomaniac projects near the end of his dictatorship, and discussing the demolitions by emphasizing the most important buildings that were destroyed. The research culminates with the analysis of contemporary architectural and urban practices, focusing on measures for heritage conservation and the integration of modern architecture in the historical urban fabric.

Chapter 1. Communism in Romania

To fully understand the gravity of Ceaușescu's demolitions, it is necessary to consider the broader political context of Romania in the 1980s and the events that led to the transition toward a communist dictatorship, which is considered by the majority to be one of the darkest times in the country's history. By analysing the lived experiences of Romanians under the regime, one can better understand the lack of freedom and daily hardships that the society had to endure while Ceaușescu was preoccupied with plotting the massive restructuring of Bucharest's city center, through the Systematization project. In an attempt to densify Bucharest, new multi-story residential buildings were rapidly built in neighborhoods formerly occupied by single-family houses. Colloquially known as "commie blocks" (Figure 1.1), these concrete buildings were built quickly to house workers and their families, with little consideration for architecture or human scale. Moreover, the destruction of historical residential neighborhoods for building a socialist symbol, the Civic Center, emphasizes why these actions affected Bucharest so profoundly, not only as a built city, but as a social and cultural environment.

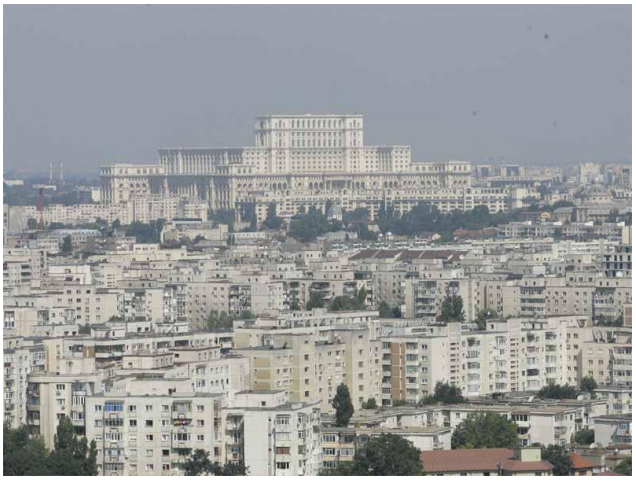

Figure 1.1 *Commie blocks & the Palace of Parliament (Business-Adviser, 2025).*

1.1. Rise to communism

After Romania's alliance with Germany during World War II, the country was under Soviet occupation and influence for 13 years. The communists' rise to power was orchestrated by the Soviet Union with the consent of the Western countries, as the communist party itself, at that time, was lacking popular support (Deletant, 2010), and, therefore, would not have succeeded on its own.

Due to the growing discontent with the war and the realization that Germany was losing, on August 23, 1944, King Michael I led a coup d'état that overthrew the pro-Nazi government of Ion Antonescu, with the hope that by aligning with the Allies, there was a chance to reach a truce with the Soviet Union. However, this decision only accelerated the shift towards communism. Over the next couple of years, the communists successfully infiltrated into all

public institutions and in all domains, from political to social, economic and cultural, while eliminating opposition forces through manipulation and repression (Zamfirache, 2022).

Finally, parliamentary elections were held in 1946. The electoral campaign of the communist parties was based on propaganda and terror. The masses were threatened not to vote unless it was for the communist party, while the leaders of the opposition were illegally arrested or even murdered. The elections were won by the communists as a result of possibly the biggest electoral fraud that ever occurred in Romania, with almost all the votes being counted in their favour, even though the opposing historical parties had most of the votes (Zamfirache, 2022).

To reach supreme control, the only obstacle left was the king. Therefore, on December 30, 1947, King Michael I, under pressure from the communist party, had no choice but to abdicate, marking the transition of Romania officially becoming a communist state.

1.2. Life under the communist regime

The communist period of Romania is characterised by two key moments: before and during the rule of Ceaușescu. In the first phase of communism, from 1947 to 1964, the entire country became a prison (Ofrim, 2022). The country's resources were exploited by the Soviets, to pay the war compensation. Many people were executed, arrested, abused and tortured during this period (Deletant, 2010).

To describe the atmosphere of the living conditions during the communist era, it is best to turn to personal stories. The historian Alexandru Ofrim (2022) talks about the hardships he and his family had to endure under the regime, painting the picture of a restricted and abusive lifestyle, talking about the limited and controlled freedom of speech, the food and resources scarcity, and the abuse from the State Security.

The Department of State Security, also known as Securitate, was founded in 1948, and it was the secret police agency that controlled and monitored the population, punishing everyone who opposed the regime in any way. This led to an overall secrecy and restraint in social interactions, as Securitate agents were infiltrated everywhere. The fear of speaking out against the regime led many to censor themselves, knowing that any negative remark could be reported to the authorities, resulting in arrests and imprisonment. In the same year, all factories, shops, and establishments became state property. The homes of those who were considered "enemies of the state" were confiscated, and their owners were placed in

unsanitary accommodations instead. Owning cars was only possible for institutions, and religion was forbidden in schools.

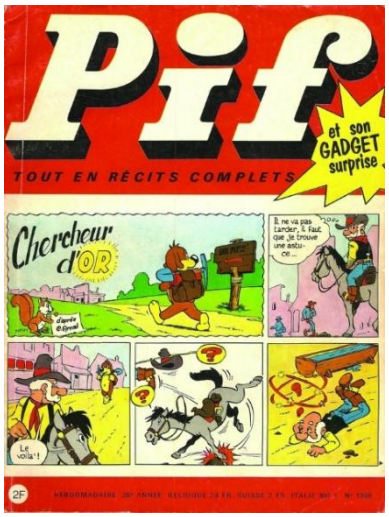

Figure 1.2. *French comic book available during communism (Săcui, 2022)*

In 1964, the regime grew increasingly dissatisfied with Soviet control, leading to plans to gain independence from the USSR. The policy of the regime changed, and what followed was a period of relative liberation and hope that life would get better. Ceaușescu became the leader of the communist party in 1965, and he continued this policy of the regime until 1971. The liberation implied, first of all, a connection with the Western world: many foreign books were translated and published in Romanian, foreign brands of food, drinks and clothes were available in stores and French comic books, such as Pif (Figure 1.2), were being sold for children. There was more freedom of speech, which allowed artists and writers to create somewhat freely, and Romanian cultural values were restored by republishing books from forbidden authors in the 50s. Russian, which was a mandatory subject in schools, was removed from the curriculum.

The overall quality of life improved greatly: there was plenty of food and variety in stores, cars could finally be owned by individuals, the clothes people were wearing were of Western fashion, and foreign music tapes and vinyls were allowed and available for purchase. There is a saying from the French philosopher Régis Debray that in communist countries, jeans and rock music were stronger than the Soviet Army (Ofrim, 2022).

Figure 1.3. *Festivities held by Ceaușescu, following the model of Pyongyang (Muzeul Național de Istorie a României retrieved from ActiveNews, 2014)*

However, the period of relative freedom eventually came to an end. This happened in 1971, after Ceaușescu visited North Korea, which he saw as a model for the ideal communist state. Impressed by the worship of the leaders and the grand celebrations in their honour, Ceaușescu demanded to be treated in the same way (Figure 1.3), returning to Romania with a new sense

of control, considering that the period of liberation had over its limits, and restrictions were applied again.

Science, art, and literature started to be closely monitored by the communist party, to ensure that anti-communist ideas were not propagated. Censorship was applied to the national television and press, forcing them to promote media that would glorify Ceaușescu and his wife. A major newspaper in Romania, "Scinteia", used to be the official organ of the party, spreading communist propaganda and glorifying the regime. Movies were often banned if the Ceaușescu couple did not agree with the content that was being presented, as happened in the case of Mircea Săucan, whose movies were shown in a heavily censored version or not shown at all, and, in the case of "100 lei" (1973), even destroyed (Iancu, 2023).

Even the Securitate got stricter after 1971: the citizens who criticized the regime were labelled as mentally ill and sent directly to the mental hospital instead of prison. Citizens were constantly monitored through a vast network of informants, in which even students were involved. Becoming a Securitate agent was less voluntary than it was forced upon people by blackmail and threats. Opposants were often listened to and spied on through microphones hidden in their homes, as well as through listening to phone calls.

Ceaușescu, who officially became the president of the country in 1974, considered that Romania was a moderately developed country, aiming to create a multilaterally developed socialist society instead. There was a massive industrialization program taking place, which consisted of establishing heavy industries, for automobile fabrication and petrochemistry, which were very energy-consuming and economically inefficient. To sustain these industries, billions of dollars were loaned from Western banks, resulting in a massive debt. Paying the debt was, however, supported by the citizens. Because local production was exported, resources rapidly became scarce, leading to inhumane general living conditions. From that point, food was rationed and distributed in limited portions at designated stores, through owning a food ticket (Figure 1.4). Daily, each person was allocated half a loaf of bread,


I.C.S.M. Alimentara Brașov

Trim. I/1989

UNITATEA Nr. 105

Familia CHELEMEN

cu domiciliul în str. [illegible] nr. 11

compusă din 3 persoane.

Prezenta este netransmisibilă.
Pierderea ei anulează dreptul de a ridica pîinea.

MARTIE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31	

FEBRUARIE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28				

IANUARIE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31	

Valabil numai cu ștampila.

Figure 1.4. *Food ticket (EVZ, 2012)*
Note: "Losing it (the ticket) cancels the right to pick up the bread"

and monthly, they were given one kilogram of sugar, a litre of oil, one kilogram of meat, half a pack of butter and five eggs. To buy certain items such as milk, people had to queue in front of the store as early as 3 A.M., and even then, it was not guaranteed that there would be enough for everyone (Figure 1.5).

Figure 1.5. *Queue in front of the "BREAD" store (Antena 3 CNN, 2022)*

Moreover, there were strict travel restrictions: every other Sunday, only cars with odd-numbered license plates were allowed on the streets, while on the other Sundays, only those with even-numbered plates could circulate. On top of this, international travel was limited only for approved purposes in favour of the state and immigration was strictly forbidden, being viewed as a betrayal of the communist country.

In homes, hot water was allowed only for two hours, two times a week, and during winters, there would be no heating. Electricity was often cut off, especially at night. I remember my mother telling me that she would often do her homework by candlelight. There was cable TV available for only two hours during the evening, broadcasting mostly content that was dedicated to the Ceaușescu couple. There was a possibility to watch foreign TV by catching signals from other countries through makeshift antennas.

This period has left a huge mark on Romania's national as well as personal identity. The people who endured communism are still deeply affected, even if they do not realise it, and the subject keeps being present in contemporary discussions and media. Life under the communist regime is still highly covered by audio-visual material such as movies, TV series, and documentaries, even 35 years after. For example, the National Romanian Television channel (TVR) has a series of mini documentaries that present various aspects from that time, to educate the younger population about the barbarity of communism. Moreover, contemporary movie directors such as Lucian Pintilie, Cristian Mungiu and Cristian Nemescu illustrate different aspects of the communist period in their movies, such as the restrictive abortion laws, power dynamics and censorship, and family relations and behaviours, often in a tragicomedy manner.

Understanding the political and social context of Romania during the second half of the 20th century is crucial for understanding the full scope of Ceaușescu's demolitions and their profound impact on Bucharest. The communist regime, particularly under Ceaușescu's leadership, created an environment of fear, repression, and hardship, with many restrictions and miserable living conditions. While the whole country was in debt and the population was starving, he was pursuing an ambitious and destructive urban project in the heart of the city. By reflecting on the historical background and the lived experiences of Romanians, we gain a clearer understanding of the deep social and cultural consequences that have scarred the society and the urban fabric of the city for a long time.

Chapter 2. Building the Civic Center

The dictatorial and destructive nature of the regime not only introduced a restrictive lifestyle during the 1970s, but it affected the urban system and the city scale as well. Ceaușescu and the communist party already had plans to urbanize and modernize the country, known under the name of the Systematization project, which was carried out from 1974. The main objective of this initiative was to urbanize rural areas and double the number of cities by 1990, but the project also extended towards a further urbanization of urban areas. In the case of Bucharest, the Systematization project would come to fruition after the disaster provoked by an earthquake in 1977. A series of many illegal demolitions began in 1984, to make way for Ceaușescu's most ambitious urban project so far: the building of the Civic Center (Figure 2.1).

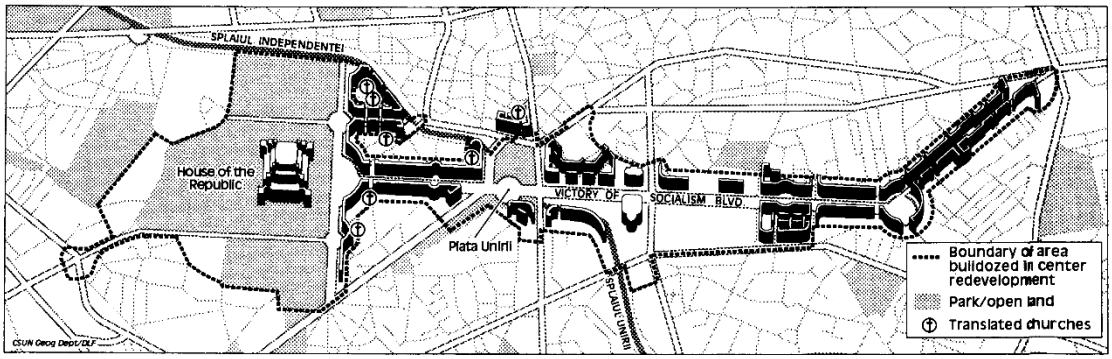

Figure 2.1. *Civic Center map (Danta, 1993)*

In the west part of the Civic Center is the House of the Republic (Figure 2.2), later known as the Palace of Parliament, a building that is out of proportion with the average buildings in the area, having 12 levels above ground and 8 underground, spanning 270 m in length, 240 m in width and 84 m in height.

The Palace can be accessed by a grand boulevard named "the Boulevard of the Victory of Socialism", spanning from west to east, leading to a roundabout which seems to represent nothing substantial, suggesting that the boulevards were only built to emphasize the grandeur of the Parliament building. This boulevard is 3,5 km long and 120 m wide, aiming to be bigger than the Champs-Élysées (Danta, 1993). Ceaușescu had this ambition to

Figure 2.2. *Aerial view of the Palace of Parliament (Wikimapia, n.d.)*

build something bigger, more imposing than what was done before to prove his importance: “I am looking for a symbolic representation of the two decades of enlightenment we have just lived through; I need something grand, something very grand, which reflects what we have already achieved” (qtd. in Light & Young, 2013). Alongside the boulevard, tall apartment buildings were built as housing for the key state functionaries and officials, to have them nearby and under surveillance (Danta, 1993).

The costs for this building were estimated to have reached 3 billion dollars, which makes it the third most expensive building in the world (Hasan, 2017). About 10.000 construction workers were involved in the construction process (Danta, 1993), for which enormous amounts of expensive materials were used. This was happening at a time when Romania was already in debt, and Ceaușescu was trying to keep this debt under control by keeping the population in hunger and cold.

2.1. The earthquake of 1977

The building of the Civic Center was an idea that came to fruition after a tragic earthquake hit Romania on March 4th, 1977. The earthquake reached 7.5 on the Richter scale, destroying significant areas of the country and causing around 1400 victims (Stănilă, 2022). The impact affected mostly the Southern part of the country, leaving the city center of Bucharest in ruin, where more than 33 old buildings and large residential blocks collapsed (Despa, 2024) (Figure 2.3).

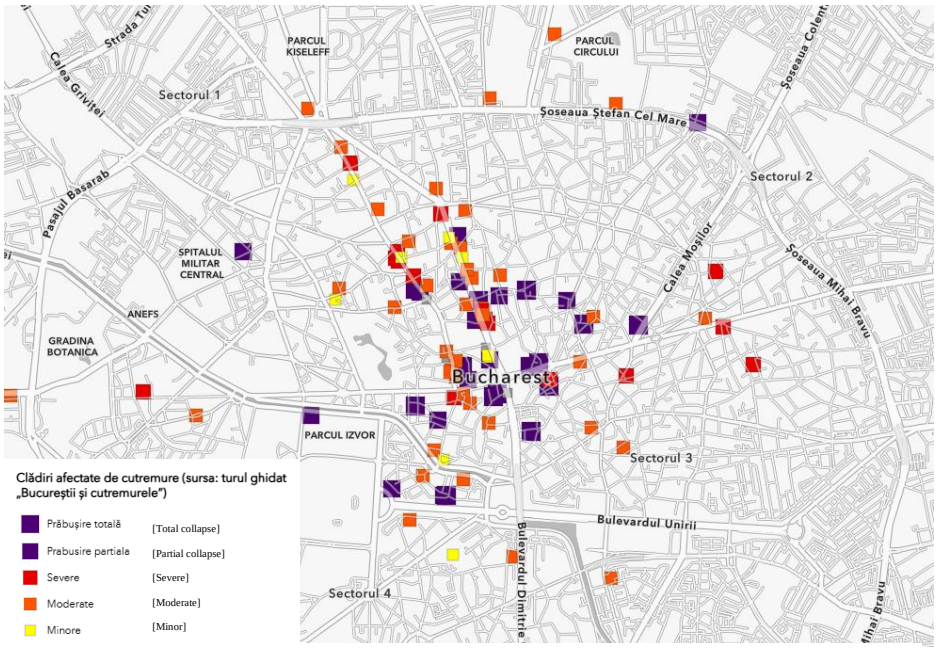

Figure 2.3. *Buildings affected by the earthquake (Toma-Dănilă, 2022)*

Although Ceaușescu used to be in favour of heritage preservation in the past (Moghioroși, 2017), he quickly changed his position, which only highlights his perfidious nature. The disasters caused by the earthquake represented the perfect opportunity for Ceaușescu to modernize and plan the city center of Bucharest as desired (Light & Young, 2010), by promoting a personality cult and his version of Romanian nationalism. Six days after the earthquake happened, he publicly expressed his intention to build a better systematized, more modern political-administrative center, where rallies can be held in the future (*Sistematizarea României*, 2009), following the model of Pyongyang. Instead of focusing on rebuilding and dealing with the losses from the earthquake, his focus was on demolishing residential areas that were not affected by the earthquake, for his benefit.

2.2. Demolitions

Taking over an existing idea of King Carol II, Ceaușescu proposed to build a socialist civic center in the area of the Uranus neighborhood, on top of a hill in the city center. This area was recommended by specialists because, paradoxically, it is the most seismic-safe zone in the city for erecting new buildings, which means that it was minimally affected by the earthquake. Moreover, being the only hill in the center of the city, it was considered a strategic point for a monumental structure (Stănilă, 2022).

Building this Civic Center as a symbol of socialism required the destruction of the previous architectural order (Light & Young, 2010). Since the chosen terrain for the new construction was not just a vacant plot, the entire area had to be erased to make space for Ceaușescu's plans. Therefore, large-scale demolitions began in 1984 in Uranus, extending to other neighboring areas, such as Rahova and Antim. These historic neighborhoods represented the true identity of the city. They were similar to villages, characterised by an organic street layout, with bohemian single-family houses (Figure 2.4), built without any planning, by and for merchants. Many monuments and medieval churches, which were an important part of the

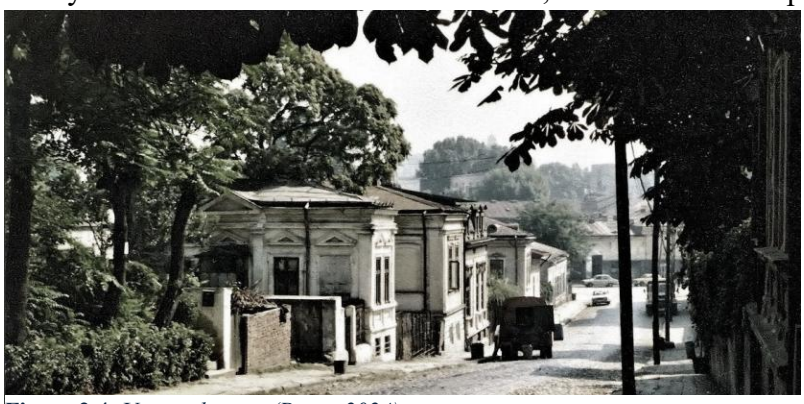

Figure 2.4. *Uranus houses (Perry, 2024)*

history of Bucharest, were also present there. These neighborhoods were specific to that era of the city, although there was a rapid urbanization of these settlements during the interwar period as well. Usually, ethnic minorities were the ones inhabiting these spaces, so they were very culturally diverse, with Turkish, Jewish, Serbian and Armenian influences, among others (Marin, 2022).

Overall, about 9.300 houses were demolished, together with 17 churches, hospitals and scientific institutes. A total area of 5 km^2 was erased, about 2% of the total area of Bucharest and 20-25% of the city center (Danta, 1993) (Figure 2.5). Even the topography was modified, as the hill was levelled, although the hilly characteristic of the site was what made this location attractive.

Figure 2.5. *Demolitions for the Civic Center, showed on current map (Popescu, 2011)*

It was obvious that opposition to Ceaușescu's actions was not allowed, but the media found subtle ways to contest the demolitions. *Arhitectura* magazine, the journal of the Romanian Union of Architects, published cartoons that criticized the massive restructuring of Bucharest (Figure 2.6), the construction of the monumental Palace of Parliament (Figure 2.7), and the way architects were used by the communists (Figure 2.8).

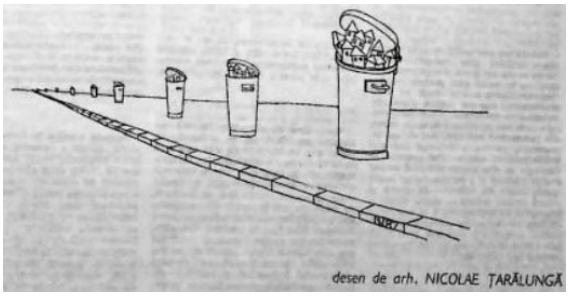

Figure 2.6. *Houses destroyed by demolitions (Arhitectura 6/1987)*

Figure 2.8. *Guided architect (Arhitectura 2/1985)*

Figure 2.7. *Palace of Parliament (Arhitectura 4/1988)*

The demolition process erased most of the monuments from Uranus, such as the Brâncovenesc Hospital, although, one particular church, Mihai Vodă, was spared, and instead of being demolished, it was relocated between other buildings.

2.2.1. Mihai Vodă ensemble

The hill on which the Civic Center was built was called the "Mihai Vodă hill", taking its name from Mihai Viteazul, one of the most important rulers of the country from 1593 to 1600. It was one of the oldest settlements in Bucharest, with elements dating from the Palaeolithic era, considered the most important archeologic and historical complex of the old town (Petrescu, 2010).

One of the most important churches from this medieval complex was the Mihai Vodă church (Figure 2.9), a stone church built in 1589 by the ruler himself. Around the church, the New Royal Court was built, also known as "The Burnt Court" after surviving a fire in 1812. Gradually, important institutions and edifices were being established there, becoming a central point in the city.

Figure 2.9. *Mihai Voda complex (Zaharia, 1986)*

It is known that communists opposed religion, and Ceaușescu was not fond of churches and did not want to see them when driving around the city (Danta, 1993). Therefore, this complex was almost completely demolished, but the Mihai Vodă church was saved because Ceaușescu admired Mihai Viteazul (Uranus Acum, 2021), and he decided to relocate it, hiding it between residential buildings in a nearby area. The church was moved 289 m by rails, downhill, with a speed of 2,2 m/h (Aniculoaie, 2008) with a technology that was observed by UNESCO officials, who were interested in using the method for saving monuments (Danta, 1993).

The church is a rare example of a happy demolition case, where the building was saved. However, it only goes to show the lengths to which Ceaușescu was able to go to for realising his project, as engineers had to develop the technology to translate buildings, which might have costed quite a lot, and, at a time where the country was already in debt, this represented extra costs and capital allocated for the operation.

2.2.2. Brâncovenesc hospital

The hospital (Figure 2.10) was built between 1835 and 1838 by Safta Brâncoveanu, who was part of a noble Romanian family, as a hospital for less fortunate people. After a fire, when the hospital was greatly affected, it was reconstructed between 1880 and 1990 and modernized through the 20th century. Various medical schools developed within the hospital, and three generations of doctors were invested in the process of transforming the hospital in a modern clinic according to European medical standards.

Figure 2.10. *Brâncovenesc Hospital (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, 2023)*

However, the building was demolished during communism, even though it was not affected by the earthquake, and, as Anca Petrescu, the architect of the Palace of Parliament, disclosed, the hospital should not have fallen, as it was not an inconvenience for the new plans of the Civic Center (Ziarul Ring, 2010).

Demolishing this building was a clear sign that there was an underlying motive for the demolition of monumental architecture, which is not related to making space for the building of the Civic Center, but to the erasure of the past, pre-socialist, true identity of the city.

Imposing the values of the communist regime onto the urban fabric could be considered the ultimate form of establishing power and a cult of personality. By replacing traditional heritage architecture with totalitarian structures, a socialist mark is left on the city, which will, unfortunately, forever be a tangible reminder of Ceaușescu and his strict regime, which goes to show the powerful effect that architecture as a product of establishing political power has on a society.

Chapter 3. Post-communist urban & architectural practices

The previous chapter shows how the communists treated heritage architecture and the way city planning occurred through the abusive and illegal destruction of valuable architecture without facing any consequences. Although the Civic Center was considered a negative symbol at the beginning of the post-communist era because of the association with the hardship caused by the regime, it was eventually accepted as heritage. Various plans were aiming to reinvent the building into a shopping mall, a casino, or a theme park (Ioan, 1999, as cited in Light & Young, 2010, p. 10), but none of these plans were realized.

Today, the Palace of Parliament is one of the most visited monuments in Bucharest, being presented as an "iconic image of the city" (Mihalache, 2014). This is emphasized by online media representation, as the picture that is associated with Bucharest is often one of the Palace of Parliament and the boulevard that leads to it (Figure 3.1). The building is often named a "Top Attraction" by travel agencies and websites, being included in most tourists' travel itineraries.

Figure 3.1. *The boulevard leading to the Palace of Parliament (Goway, 2025)*

3.1. Integrating new architecture

The architecture in present-day Bucharest is a blend of traditional 18th & 19th century country houses with art nouveau urban villas, enclosed by communist building blocks, and early modernist grand boulevards, crowded with the recently built private houses and office buildings in diverse architectural styles. For this reason, Bucharest is "possibly Europe's most architecturally eclectic and chaotic capital city" (Walker, 2019).

Figure 3.2. *Example of glass office building (Profit.ro, 2015)*

Therefore, it is safe to say that the country lacks a clear national architectural identity, further disrupted by new construction that aims to be modern and radically different from what was in the past. I believe that the desire for

modernisation might be related to a collective dissatisfaction with the communist architecture, while modern buildings are considered symbols of progress and development.

When Romania turned towards capitalism, the architecture reflected this political shift. Business districts were suddenly the focus of urban planning, as foreign companies were opening offices in Bucharest in the early 2000s. Tall, glass office buildings are built into the already chaotic urban fabric, often in historic areas, altering the city's skyline. These buildings, often poorly built and visually unappealing (Mandache, 2009), are trying to unsuccessfully replicate the Western skyscrapers (Figure 3.2). While there are recent efforts to revive traditional Romanian architecture by incorporating elements from the neo-Romanian interwar style in new constructions (Mandache, 2009), they are often implemented incorrectly, contributing to the city's chaotic and eclectic urban fabric.

Due to post-communist corruption, sectors like real estate often operate fraudulently. Illegal building permits are being issued for the construction of new urban developments, especially in the historic parts of the city, where old buildings are sometimes demolished for these projects. According to the current city mayor, almost 20.000 buildings were built illegally in Bucharest in the last 15 years (Valahia.news, 2021).

A famous example of this type of urban development is the Cathedral Plaza office building (Figures 3.3 & 3.4). It was built next to an important 19th-century Catholic cathedral, a true historical landmark, part of the national and European heritage (*Catedrala Sf. Iosif*, n.d.), located in the heart of the city, next to a major lively boulevard. The office building has 19 stories, reaching 75 m in height, way over the average height of the buildings in that area. The Archdiocese raised concerns about this building endangering the church's structure and altering the area's architectural character. However, the District Hall issued the building permit for this building in 2006, followed by various court proceedings (Adevarul, 2010).

Figures 3.3 & 3.4. *Cathedral Plaza (Chițu, 2012)*

It was built in 2010 after more than 12 years after the project was designed, and it was never used, remaining abandoned. After many tries to demolish the building, in 2022, it was finally decided that it would be taken down, at an estimated cost of 5-8 million euros (Cârlugea, 2024).

These illegal constructions are wasting resources while damaging the historical urban areas. Large sums of money and materials are required for building these structures, which end up being demolished at high costs, highlighting the corrupt system of the country. Moreover, the extensive preoccupation with capitalist architecture and urban development overshadows the precarious state in which heritage architecture finds itself. Many valuable buildings are left to decay, becoming structurally fragile and slowly losing their character.

3.2. Heritage architecture preservation

Bucharest is the only European capital nominated by the World Monuments Fund in 2016 for its disastrous situation of the architectural and cultural heritage (Wring, 2015). It was nominated under the category of "endangered historic city center", due to demolition or abandonment of heritage buildings, uncontrolled development and destructive interventions for rehabilitation (Propatrimonio, n.d.). It is estimated that thousands of heritage buildings throughout Romania are abandoned, and over 600 of them are in an advanced state of degradation (Plan Radar, 2023).

Moreover, Bucharest is a European capital with one of the highest seismic risks, which means that if another earthquake similar in intensity to the one that destroyed the city in 1977 occurs, many 19th and 20th century modernist buildings in the city center will collapse. These buildings have not been structurally reinforced for a long time, and most of them are included in the first category of seismic risk (Propatrimonio, n.d.) (Figure 3.5).

Recently, the authorities have become aware of the urgent need to rehabilitate historical buildings to preserve the spirit, culture, and civilization alive. A lot of financing opportunities and non-reimbursable European funds have been granted for restoration. In 2021, the city hall launched a program dedicated to historical buildings, to offer funding and support for these interventions (Plan Radar, 2023).

Figure 3.5. *Buildings under the first category of seisimic risk (Imagist, n.d.)*

However, the rehabilitation processes carried out by the authorities often compromise the architectural characteristics of the buildings (Figure 3.6). In an attempt to quickly make these structures meet modern comfort and energy efficiency standards, they are rapidly insulated, without considering the architectural and cultural value of the buildings, which leads to the irreversible mutilation of their original characteristics (Ghenciulescu, n.d.).

Figure 3.6. *Modernist building, before (2009) & after rehabilitation (2015-2016) (Tuchilă, n.d.)*

The failure to preserve historic areas also impacts urban planning. Icoanei Garden, a landmark park from 1873 in a protected neighborhood, lost its unique character after a redevelopment in 2022. Despite earlier historical studies conducted in 2007 recommending the use of rammed earth for the rehabilitation of the paths, its original and characteristic sand alleyways were paved with concrete stones (Triboi, 2020).

From a distinctive, one-of-a-kind summer garden (Figure 3.7), the park became a generic modern urban space (Figure 3.8) with paved alleyways, artificial grass, dog parks, and playgrounds (Niculușcă, 2020), erasing its historical identity.

Figure 3.7. *Garden before rehabilitation (Bucureșteni.ro, n.d.)*

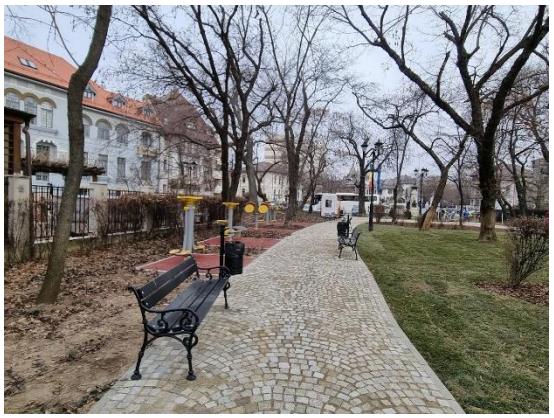

Figure 3.8. *Garden after rehabilitation (Hotnews, 2022)*

This controversial rehabilitation process drew media and public attention, especially from heritage groups like ARCEN (Asociația Română pentru Cultură, Educație și Normalitate; Romanian Association for Culture, Education and Normality), active in preserving Bucharest's historic areas such as the Icoanei District, where the Icoanei garden is located. The organization restored a high school near the garden, which was designed by Ion Mincu, a prolific Romanian architect; documented 98 protected zones on an accessible online platform; raised awareness on seismic risks, and organized walking tours to promote the cultural value of heritage architecture.

Although still undervalued and vulnerable, Bucharest's heritage architecture is being defended by local communities and organizations. Decades of corruption have caused long-lasting damage to the historic fabric, and raising municipal awareness towards this issue remains a slow process. Despite recent preservation efforts, the city's high seismic risk remains a major concern, threatening a large portion of the historic city center and demanding immediate attention.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the impact of the extreme urban restructuring that took place during the communist regime, focusing on the demolition of Bucharest's historic center for the construction of the socialist Civic Center. The relationship between architecture, political ideology, and identity is investigated by looking at the impact heritage architecture has on society and the way it can be altered by political powers. By neglecting the historical architectural context in favour of monumentality, which was used as a tool to showcase the power and control of the regime, the urban fabric of the city was changed drastically, leaving visible scars that are still felt today.

Analysing demolished heritage architecture, such as the Brâncovenesc Hospital and Mihai Vodă Church, has illustrated how landmarks that gave the city its identity were sacrificed for a heterogeneous, socialist vision. The demolitions were a means of rewriting the national narrative through architecture and urbanism, reinforcing the glory of the communist state and eliminating any previous structures and spaces that threatened this newly desired identity for the city.

Thirty-five years after the fall of communism, Bucharest is still facing significant challenges in terms of urban planning and heritage preservation. The transition towards capitalism has introduced new issues for heritage architecture, with real estate interests and weak preservation strategies contributing to the degradation of historical areas. However, society has started to take action, with organizations like ARCEN playing an important role in documenting, protecting, and raising awareness about Bucharest's architectural heritage and the importance of preserving it.

The municipality is beginning to acknowledge the growing concern for heritage architecture, and, while it has presented some initiatives for preservation, these efforts are often limited, conflicting, and misunderstood. Moreover, the seismic risk of Bucharest is an urgent issue that should be addressed, especially since a large number of historic buildings in the historic city center are at risk of being lost at the next earthquake.

In the end, the thesis brings to attention that architectural heritage is not only about preserving old and fragile buildings, but, most importantly, about keeping the memory and identity of the city alive for future generations. For Bucharest to move forward, its past should be cherished and celebrated, not erased and disregarded, as the past is the foundation that keeps the city existing today. Learning from past mistakes and circumstances is a crucial

step for reclaiming identities that were stolen, facilitating the recovery of the city's architectural heritage, so dear to us, yet largely ignored.

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