

LIVING WITH DISABILITY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIALIST-ERA HOUSING IN ROMANIA

1958-1989

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Abstract: *Nicolae Ceausescu's regime in Romania, beginning in 1965, aimed at industrializing the country by increasing the labor force, leading to the development of large-scale housing blocks across Romania following the Soviet model. Urban planning and design were instrumental in serving political objectives such as industrial development, urban homogenization, and social control. However, amidst these grand architectural visions, the experiences of individuals with disabilities have been largely overlooked. The government's policies toward individuals with disabilities reflected a belief that they were incapable of contributing to a socialist society, resulting in their marginalization and neglect. This thesis explores the experiences of individuals with motor disabilities in Romania during the 20th century, shedding light on their marginalized narratives within the context of socialist-era architectural decisions. Through historical analysis, case studies of housing developments and interviews with residents, the research will be led by the question "How did the political policies and architectural design strategies employed during the construction of socialist era building blocks in Romania shape the living conditions, accessibility, and well-being of the disabled community?" The paper argues that architecture acted as a barrier to the integration of the disabled community, directly leading to increased institutionalization rates among individuals with physical and motor disabilities, as it substantially hindered their ability to lead typical lives within their homes. The thesis contributes to contemporary discussions on inclusive urban planning and societal perceptions, highlighting the importance of considering diverse perspectives and understanding the history of the context in architectural design and policymaking.*

Target Journals: Journal of Family History, Housing Studies, Slavic Review

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Introduction

In 1965, Nicolae Ceausescu, Romania's dictator at the time, initiated a 24-year regime with the objective of industrializing the country by augmenting the labor force. (Dinu, 2014) The economy and the built environment were developed following the Soviet model therefore, with the modernist movement came the development of large-scale housing blocks all throughout Romania. (Vais, 2020) Existing literature argues that urban planning and design was used as an instrument of ideology as a response to the unsuitable living conditions during the late nineteenth century. (Engel, 2022) Dana Vais adds that a more accurate reasoning would be for "political goals: to support industrial development, homogenize urban expansion throughout the national territory, exert social control, effect demographic change and even control the balance of power among various state institutions." (Vais, 2020)

The architects employed a system of serial housing known as type projects ("proiecte tip"). These were standardized designs created by state architects, assembled in catalogues, and distributed nationwide. (Vais, 2020) A staggering number of 1.12 million new dwellings were constructed in the period between 1960 and 1975. Analysis of the 1950s and 1960s in Romania, as well as across much of the Soviet Bloc, frequently evaluated the architecture of that era based on considerations of cost and the efficiency of production and assembly. (Maxim, 2009)

This research delves into a critical yet underexplored aspect of Romanian history: the experiences of individuals with disabilities during Nicolae Ceausescu's regime and its massive architectural projects of the 20th century. Despite the grand scale of housing initiatives during Ceausescu's rule, the challenges faced by people with disabilities were often ignored and overlooked. Documentation from this period is scarce, partly due to purposeful attempts to conceal the harsh realities endured by the disabled community within institutions. This study focuses on the period between 1958 and 1989, encompassing the beginnings of mass housing projects and the fall of communism in 1989. Central to the investigation is the question: "How did the political policies and architectural design strategies employed during the construction of socialist-era building blocks in Romania shape the living conditions, accessibility, and well-being of the disabled community?" Specifically, the research concentrates on individuals with motor disabilities, acknowledging their unique challenges and experiences. By examining housing and residential architecture through archival research, site visits and interviews, the aim is to unveil how past design choices continue to shape the daily lives of residents to this day. Through this exploration, the study strives to offer insights crucial for contemporary efforts to foster inclusivity and address the diverse needs of inhabitants.

Policies and mentalities related to the disabled community.

The experiences of individuals living with disabilities in Romania during the 20th century have remained concealed by the shadows of political ideologies and architectural decisions. According to Razyan Amariei, the communist government in Romania made extensive efforts to intensify the suffering of individuals with mental illness and intellectual disabilities.

The official government approach toward individuals with disabilities aimed at concealing their presence. Communist authorities were unwilling to acknowledge that their nations shared a similar proportion of people with psychiatric conditions or mental disabilities as Western countries. The regime proposed two "solutions": the less severe option involved the individuals staying with their families, who would keep them hidden from the scrutiny of neighbors. This option was very rare due to the magnitude and impact of the rural-to-urban shift and the very low quality of life. Family caretakers, including grandparents, were frequently enlisted into the labor system, leaving nobody to care for the disabled family member. Women were also forced into labor, leaving Romania with one of the highest rates of female participation in the labor force in Europe. (Morrison, 2004)

Alternatively, the disabled individuals might be institutionalized — often left neglected — in state facilities, where the quality of life could at times be comparable to that of a prison camp. (Razyan, 2003)

As part of a comprehensive strategy to boost the decreasing Romanian population and expand the labor force, Ceausescu enacted various pronatalist policies. (Johnson et al., 1996) These policies, employing a combination of incentives and penalties, aimed to stimulate the birth rate while protecting against any slowdown in economic growth due to a shortage of labor. The two main measures taken were a ban on abortions in November of 1966 as well as the prohibition of the import of various forms of contraception. (Moskoff, 1980) In addition to this, divorce was banned with the omission of exceptional cases, financial benefits increased with each successive birth and a 20 percent income tax was imposed on individuals who remained childless, irrespective of their marital status. (Morrison, 2004)

Ceausescu's measures to promote population growth directly contributed to a rise in the number of children with developmental and congenital disabilities. Due to the illegality of abortions and contraceptive use for women, many sought alternative methods to terminate their pregnancies, methods that often failed, causing developmental issues for the fetuses. (Dinu, 2014) These dangers were enhanced by food shortages stemming from strict economic policies, depriving mothers of proper nutrition. This led to malnourished mothers giving birth to low-weight babies with an elevated risk of mortality. Surviving infants faced increased susceptibility to childhood illnesses and disabling conditions, including mental retardation, behavioral disorders, cerebral palsy, and other nervous system disorders such as impaired vision and deafness. (Morrison, 2004)

Communism in Romania: Historic Aims & Visions

In the spring of 1945, the Communist Party rose to power in Romania under Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej, facilitated by forceful Soviet intervention. Between 1948 and approximately 1960, communist leaders undertook the establishment of a totalitarian regime, solidifying their authority through the adoption of a Soviet-style constitution. This constitution assigned ultimate authority in the party, reducing governmental institutions to instruments for executing party decisions. The party further instituted the Securitate (en."Security"), a central element in an extensive security network, dismantling private organizations and significantly restricting the roles of churches in spiritual and educational matters. In a reconfiguration of the Romanian economy, the party embraced Stalinist principles, emphasizing strict central planning, prioritizing heavy industry over consumer goods.

Following Gheorghiu-Dej's death in 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu, his successor, intensified efforts to decrease the country's reliance on the Soviet Union. Ceaușescu aimed to expand economic ties with the West, exploiting the prevalent anti-Soviet sentiments among the population to gain support for the Romanian party. The subsequent nearly two decades of "neo-Stalinism" witnessed an increased grip of the Communist Party over mass organizations and unprecedented invasion into citizens' daily lives. Ceaușescu fostered a cult of personality unparalleled in Romanian history, forming the basis of an immeasurable dictatorship. In a bid to settle a substantial foreign debt accumulated through mismanagement of funds in the 1970s, Ceaușescu, in 1982, mandated the export of a significant portion of the country's agricultural and industrial production. According to Lynn Morrison, "farms and houses were razed, and people were moved into small and inadequate apartment blocks". It resulted in extreme shortages of essential resources dramatically diminished living standards and exacerbated social unrest.

With the modernist movement came the development of large-scale housing blocks all throughout Romania. (Vais, 2020) Existing literature argues that urban planning and design

was used as an instrument of ideology as a response to the unsuitable living conditions during the late nineteenth century. (Engel, 2022) Dana Vais adds that a more accurate reasoning would be for “political goals: to support industrial development, homogenize urban expansion throughout the national territory, exert social control, effect demographic change and even control the balance of power among various state institutions.”(Vais, 2020) The scale of this building project was staggering, adding up to around 1,2 million new dwellings between the years 1960 and 1975. Effective architecture was defined by its ability to address the urgent housing demands of a rapidly growing urban population. Consequently, it tended to prioritize elements such as prefabricated panels over intricate craftsmanship and showed significant concern for the quantity of square meters per inhabitant, while displaying minimal interest in facade treatments.(Maxim, 2009)

The progression of housing development in communist Romania consistently adapted to the changing political landscape of the regime. Certain categories of housing can be clearly associated with specific periods of the regime, although determining the exact start and end points of these periods can be challenging. (Vais, 2020) This paper will focus on the analysis of buildings from the period of 1958 until the fall of the regime in 1989.



Figure 1: N. Kulin, 1964. Gheorgheni microrraions. Model. DSAPC Cluj. (Vais, 2020)

None of the available literature addresses the presence of a specific target group during the design phase. The references only focus on heteronormative families with one or more children. The architects overlooked other demographics, including the elderly or disabled individuals. The upcoming section of the paper will delve into the implementation of these design decisions and mindsets, evaluating the appropriateness of the residences for physically disabled residents who were previously disregarded.

The mass construction initiatives during Romania's communist era, particularly under Nicolae Ceausescu's regime, will be categorized into three distinct phases that, according to

Adam Burakowski, could be defined as the growth, the stagnation, and the decline stages. (Burakowski, 2016) These periods, each influenced by different socio-political events, significantly impacted both the development of residential complexes and the experiences of individuals with disabilities.

The initial period, spanning approximately from 1958 to around 1966, encompasses the regimes of both communist leaders in Romania, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and the early years of Nicolae Ceausescu's rule, before he consolidated full authority. This phase marked the inception of large-scale construction projects known as "mega-neighborhoods."

The second period, ranging from 1966 to 1977, saw significant changes in residential neighborhood designs due to Nicolae Ceausescu's implementation of strict anti-abortion laws in 1966. These laws not only altered the landscape of residential areas but also contributed to an increase in the number of individuals with mental and physical disabilities, alongside fostering negative attitudes towards them. This period concluded with a devastating earthquake in Bucharest, prompting extensive redevelopment efforts.

The final stage, the decline, extends from 1977 until the end of Ceausescu's dictatorship in 1989. Characterized by a decline in the quality of life due to Ceausescu's absolute control over the country, this period saw significant challenges for residents.

The three above mentioned periods will be analyzed through the lens of four typical housing projects of the time, specifically focusing on accessibility for individuals with motor disabilities. The examination will encompass aspects such as entrances, circulation, and dwelling spaces, utilizing archival and reconstructed floor plans, on-site visits, personal photographs, and interviews with residents. Furthermore, any changes made over the years will be dissected by comparing these features to their current state.

1958 – 1966: Mega-cartiere [mega neighbourhoods]

According to Dana Vais, during the end of Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej and the beginning of Nicolae Ceausescu's dictatorship in the 1960's, the emphasis of policy shifted towards the establishment of an appealing urban landscape rather than prioritizing the familial aspect of the dwelling. Improvement efforts were primarily directed at ensuring the provision of decent and hygienic sanitation facilities, representing significant progress compared to the previous living standards experienced by many residents. The inaugural large-scale collective housing developments projected an image of clean, simple structures placed amidst generous green spaces, reminiscent of a Radiant City. This depiction encapsulated the narrative propagated by the political elite, promoting discourse surrounding development, urbanization, and societal advancement. Additionally, it fulfilled another political agenda: that of cultural standardization. By utilizing housing estates modeled after standardized types found in catalogs, the government furthered the nationalist goal of fostering unity through the uniformity of the emerging socialist urban culture they promoted. (Vais, 2020)

The architectural design considered the residents' well-being to some extent, representing a notable improvement compared to the traditional rural dwellings, known as "mahalale," in which the majority of Romanians used to live (Figure 2). The residential blocks were deliberately lacking commercial spaces at the ground level, prioritizing the privacy of the inhabitants. Instead, each neighborhood featured shops and amenities located within separate commercial complexes. A significant emphasis was placed on generous spacing between constructions, with a minimum distance of 30 meters between buildings and 10 meters between the street and the blocks, aiming to minimize construction adjacent to major roads. Within the prevailing social and historical context, these measures marked a significant advancement for residents, although they also signaled the initial oversight of the needs of the disabled community. While the abundance of greenery was deemed beneficial, the considerable distances posed significant challenges for individuals with physical disabilities, highlighting an aspect of inconvenience and exclusion.



Figure 2: Studiourile Buftea, “mahalale”, Retrieved from www.hartablocuri.ro.

Khrushchev's focus on single-family occupancy validated housing projects with limited standardized designs, resulting in compact apartment units. Romania closely mirrored this policy starting with 1958, accompanied by similar rationales. (Stroe, 2015) Like in the USSR, the housing shortages induced by rapid industrialization often led to families sharing apartments. Caffé, one of the most prominent Romanian architect of the time, advocated for small apartment units as a remedy to the widespread practice of communal living in Romanian cities, stressing the urgency of providing each family with its own living space. (Caffe, 1963) Consequently, small apartment types predominated in the initial modernist housing complexes in Romania during the early 1960s.

Therefore, the apartments were designed to be programmatically small and functionally basic, as a response to the political discourse of “one apartment per family” as well as for economic reasons (Figure 3). The main design requirement was a large number of units therefore the dwellings had only one or two rooms with a minimal square footage. (Vais, 2020) Every apartment had the same comfort level, with living rooms between 16-17m² and bedrooms of 10-12m². (Teoalida, 2022) This area limitation meant that some of the dwelling functions had to be moved to the collective facilities representing the new social reality of “smaller families”. (Caffe, 1963) This, again, highlights the added difficulty of a disabled person to carry out their day-to-day tasks. Besides having to commute long distances to carry out basic tasks, the apartment size and features are clearly unsuitable for people with a motor disability, especially in a wheelchair. Most corridors are around 1m wide with doors of 0.8m opening, measurements unsuitable for comfortably maneuvering a wheelchair or even a walking frame. Although small and inflexible, the design considered the daylight orientation, making sure every apartment has at least one room oriented towards the sun.

Carrying out day-to-day tasks became notably more challenging, particularly given the layout of the building and its accessibility. Upon analyzing the entrances of the buildings from this era, an obvious obstacle for individuals with motor disabilities becomes evident: stairs. Through analysis of archival floor plans, site visits, and personal interviews, it becomes apparent that every constructed building featured at least one steep flight of stairs separating the entrance from the apartments. Tower blocks exceeding four floors were required to include elevators, presumably facilitating easier accessibility for the disabled community. However, there consistently remained a flight of stairs preceding the elevator, and the placement of these stairs directly in front of the main entrance complicates the installation of a suitable ramp, even in contemporary times (Figure 4).

The rationale behind this design choice remains unclear, as archival documentation from the period is often nonexistent, destroyed, or inaccessible to the public. Nevertheless, elevating the ground floor does offer certain advantages. It affords privacy for residents on the ground floor, allows natural light into the basement, and provides an additional layer of protection against flooding, among other benefits (Understanding Floor Levels, n.d.). However, the absence of ramps and handrails (Figure 4,5,6) to aid vulnerable populations in accessing

their own buildings underscores the complete disregard for these groups during the design process.

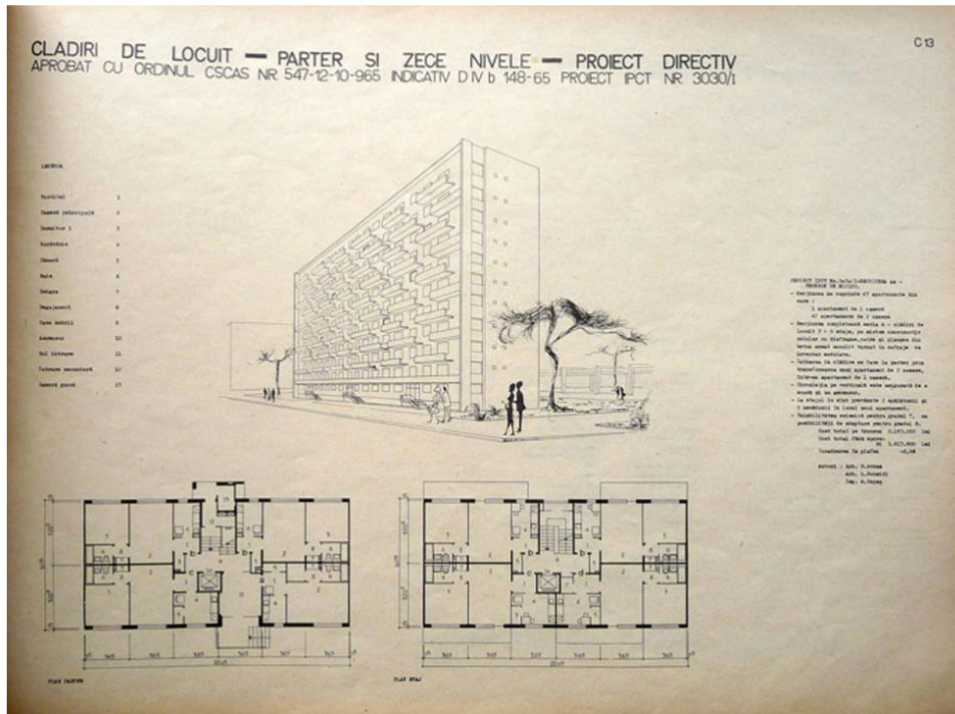


Figure 3: Directive project for a 10 story block designed by IPCT around 1965, (Vais, 2020)



Figure 4: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. Entrance of block, handrail and ramp only recently added. Photograph taken by the author.



Figure 5: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. Entrance of building block from 1965. Photograph taken by the author.



Figure 6: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. Flight of stairs leading to the elevator, no handrail. Photograph taken by the author.

Susana's personal story (retrieved from interviews conducted by the author)

Pop Susana, an 80-year-old woman residing on the fourth floor of the dwelling depicted in Figure 7, was interviewed. She revealed that, due to her and her husband's diminished mobility owing to old age, they found themselves confined within their apartment for over 4 months straight. Descending the stairs safely and comfortably proved impossible for them. Moreover, Susana encountered difficulties moving around and performing her daily activities

within the apartment without assistance. Her walking frame could not navigate the narrow corridors, and she frequently stumbled over the uneven surfaces between rooms, emphasized by the presence of door frames. After more than five decades of residence, they were had no choice but to relocate to a ground-floor apartment in a refurbished building block, as their family deemed it unsafe and unhealthy for them to continue living in their unsuitable accommodation.



Figure 7: Tealida, "Evolutia blocurilor comuniste si plan apartamente [en. The evolution of the comunist blocks and plans of apartments]". Retrieved from www.hartablocuri.ro.

1966-1977: Densifying the built environment.

The subsequent pivotal moment in Romania's housing production was directly shaped by political decisions, such as Nicolae Ceausescu's implementation of the anti-abortion policy in 1966. This policy sparked the development of a greater variety of housing units, particularly those with more rooms tailored to families of varying incomes. This diversification was also started by the privatization of homes, which was a response to the socioeconomic crisis and housing shortages resulting from the mass migration of rural populations to urban areas due to industrialization. Furthermore, it served as a means to render unproductive investments productive. The government sought to sell apartments to residents, thereby expanding the range of available housing types to boost sales. (Vais, 2020)

In the socio-political landscape of socialist Romania, the forced induction of women into the labor force led to one of the highest rates of female participation in Europe. This policy, combined with the elimination of extended family care due to rural-to-urban migration, left the country unprepared for the demographic consequences. With grandparents also absorbed into the labor system, the burden of caring for children fell heavily on women. Unfortunately, Romania also dealt with one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the region, leaving many children without mothers and at risk of institutionalization. The relentless demands of work left families, including those with disabled members, with little time or resources for caregiving.

In such a challenging environment, families struggled to keep disabled members at home, as expressed by the respondents interviewed in Lynn Morrison's paper. With both parents occupied in demanding collective farm work, the absence of caregivers at home and financial constraints posed insurmountable challenges. The scarcity of resources and the pressure exerted by the state on vulnerable families compounded the difficulties faced by those responsible for disabled relatives.

This historical context sheds light on the challenges faced by families in socialist Romania, particularly those caring for disabled members. It underscores the socio-economic hardships

that made it difficult for families to afford more spacious comfort-apartments, further exacerbated by the state's standardization of housing projects, which perpetuated social differences and marginalized vulnerable groups.

Therefore, in 1968, when the notion of 'diversification' emerged in political discussions, housing types with restricted square footagewere brought back and “comfort categories” were introduced, tailored to accommodate families with different incomes. This resulted in the direct negative impact on families caring for disabled individuals. Given the context mentioned by Morrison Lyn as well as regarding the attitudes and policies surrounding disabled individuals, families responsible for a disabled member were likely to face financial hardship, making it challenging for them to afford the purchase of more spacious comfort-apartments. Type projects, which were standardized designs created by state architects, became instruments through which social differences were politically sanctioned in socialist Romania.

Another very important aspect related to the quality of the building blocks are the working conditions of the architects in charge. In 1957, sixteen new regional design institutes were established with the primary goal of fulfilling nationwide plans for large housing estates. (Vais, 2020) However, the institutes faced a chronic shortage of qualified professionals, particularly architects, which worsened with the administrative reform of 1968, increasing the number of institutes to 39 county-level ones. With only 2000 architects in Romania's population of 19 million, architects were overwhelmed and struggled to keep pace with the rapid design demands. In the second national conference of the architects' union (A doua conferinta pe tara a Uniunii Arhitecților), several architects complained about the workload and the limited time they had per project (5 days per project, 4 hours per dwelling) which led to rushed designs and poor qualitative products. (“A Doua Conferință Pe Țară a Uniunii Arhitecților Din RPR. Discuții”, 1965) This scarcity of skilled professionals led to extensive standardization in housing design throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Most attempts to diversify and maximize efficiency and dwelling quality during the design were shut down, leaving the variety of apartment types very limited for residents, especially the disabled ones.

At the urban level, the densification of the existing 60's neighbourhoods came at the expense of the generous green spaces between the buildings which was reduced to 25 meters in 1966, and then reduced again in 1970 to 20 meters (Figure 8). The neighborhoods built after 1970 are also almost completely lacking socio-cultural functions. Most buildings were oriented north-south to maximize sunlight exposure, although some apartments were built facing north. (Teoalida, 2022) This transition impacted the well-being of all the residents, not only the disabled community. Tough, this decline in urban space and functionality allowed for a slight increase in quality of life at the scale of the dwelling. The entrances and circulations of the blocks poses the same issues for the disabled as the previously mentioned period: no handrails, lack of ramps, presence of one or two flights of stairs leading to the elevator, heavy doors (Figure X).



Figure 8: Google Earth. (2024). Drumul Taberei and Rahova neighbourhoods, Bucharest [Map]. Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/earth>

Architecturally, there was a shift from pure modernism to a more intricate Brutalist aesthetic at the residential level during this era. With improving quality of life, a new housing goal emerged: 'one person per room'. Less comfortable accommodations were phased out gradually, particularly in major cities, as housing projects diversified and apartment layouts improved overall. Interior finishes were kept minimal, with linoleum replacing parquet flooring, and tiling restricted to specific areas in kitchens and bathrooms. (Teolida, 2022) While room sizes increased by approximately 2 square meters each, door openings, door frames, bathroom dimensions, and corridor widths remained insufficient for wheelchair accessibility. Moreover, built-in fixtures like bathtubs posed challenges for many disabled individuals.

Monica's personal story (retrieved from interviews conducted by the author)

Monica Runcan, aged 46, resides in a 10-story apartment building located in the Manastur neighborhood of Cluj-Napoca, where she has lived since birth. Born with reversed legs, Monica underwent numerous surgeries, ultimately resulting in the amputation of one leg, while the other ceased growing at the age of six. She candidly shared her challenges navigating a society that often marginalizes the disabled community, recounting instances where she had to adopt alternative methods to accomplish tasks due to the lack of accommodations for her disability.

An illustrative example is the access route to her apartment building, which consists of two steep flights of stairs (Figure 9). Alongside two other wheelchair users, Monica advocated tirelessly for the installation of a ramp. After years of advocacy, a ramp was finally installed, although without the addition of a handrail. Furthermore, the existing handrail, which Monica relied on for assistance, was removed, exacerbating the difficulty of accessing her own residence. Additionally, over the years, each replacement of the building's elevator resulted in a smaller and smaller one being installed, to the extent that it can no longer accommodate a standard wheelchair. Due to her condition, the small rooms and corridors present in the dwelling benefit her, but she mentions that if she was to use a wheelchair, her apartment would definitely not accommodate it (Figures 10,11). Monica's experience serves as a reminder of the enduring presence of negative attitudes stemming from the communist era, even decades after the demise of Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989.



Figure 9: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. "The entrance of Monica's block." Photograph taken by the author.



Figure 10: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. "Monica in her small kitchen." Photograph taken by the author.

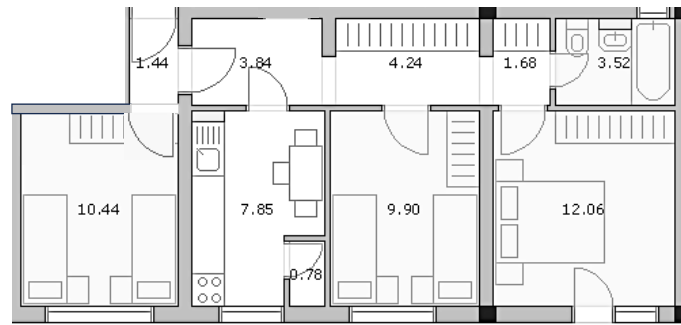


Figure 11: Tealida, "Evolutia blocurilor comuniste si plan apartamente [en. The evolution of the communist blocks and plans of apartments]". Retrieved from www.hartablocuri.ro.

1977-1989: The decline

Since the outset of 1977, Romania's communist regime grappled with a succession of crises, stemming from diverse causes. These crises revealed the system's inefficiency and the central and local authorities' inability to manage effectively, resulting in a prolonged state of crisis and eventual resort to force as a solution.

In 1977, Romania descended into a period of economic and social turmoil, precipitating the complete collapse of the economy and diminished support and trust in the leadership, especially Ceaușescu. Without viable solutions to repair the economic fall, authorities intensified control over citizens' lives. (Burakowski, 2016)

The primary challenge facing the country was the economic incapacity, a reality acknowledged by leaders, party officials at all levels, and the people, who were compelled to drastically cut consumption, even of basic goods like food. During the winter of 1978 to 1979, authorities consistently urged citizens to limit home heating. At the same time, industrialization persisted, and Bucharest's center underwent reconstruction, marked by the demolition of historic neighborhoods in favor of communist blocks.

The period from 1977 to 1989 marked a significant shift in architectural production in Romania, particularly with Nicolae Ceaușescu's initiation of the Civic Centre project in Bucharest, which was planned to become the new political-administrative center of Communist Romania. This period, characterized by a general decline, saw the diversion of almost all national resources towards the Civic Centre, except for one notable exception: housing. Despite the economic situation being described as "at the limit of despair" and the regime entering a phase of "total immovability," according to Dana Vais, type housing persisted as the only other permitted form of architecture. This persistence was driven by political decisions and the survival of a production system reliant on minimal resources, typification, privatization, and cheap construction. (Vais, 2020) Additionally, the destruction caused by the 1977 earthquake offered a fresh justification for imposing complete authority over architecture, leading to an unavoidable decline exacerbated by the shutdown of communication channels. (Zahariade, n.d.)

The massive urban systematization of major cities began in the 1970s, involving demolitions and the construction of high-rise block-fronted boulevards with ground-floor shops (Figure 12). There was little consideration for solar orientation during this period. While there are rumors that Ceaușescu drew inspiration from visits to China and North Korea or that the 1977 earthquake prompted the demolition of city centers and the construction of blocks on all boulevards, the reality was that plans for extensive urban systematization were already in place by the mid-1970s. The earthquake may have served as a pretext or intensified existing plans. Other cities in Romania underwent systematization after 1975.

The minimum distance between blocks remained at 20 meters in Bucharest but was reduced to 12 meters in the provinces, although in many cases, street layouts allowed for larger

distances. (Teoalida, 2022) The block pattern changed after 1977, with blocks being built in rows along streets, some constructed directly on the sidewalk. Green spaces were significantly reduced due to the street network, leading to denser neighborhoods despite a decrease in apartment density per hectare. Quality of life declined, with little to no consideration for solar orientation, residents facing pollution from cars on block fronts and others having views of neighboring blocks and garbage bins from their homes.

At an architectural level, according to Ana-Maria Zahariade, “the decline was gradual, language became increasingly dry and lost any cultural reference, Brutalist elements were executed in plaster on the facades of sophisticated buildings, a shabby decorativism replaced genuine research” (Figure 13). The quick designing and low attention to details propagated an even lower standard of living for the disabled community. Handrails were never present, steep stairs were visible everywhere and there was an even higher mistrust in the leaders, making it impossible for disabled residents to ask for help from the government.

Certain changes were made to apartment layouts, including equipping all 4-room apartments and Comfort 1 3-room apartments with 2 bathrooms. The proportion of 2-room apartments decreased in favor of studios and 3-4 room apartments. Doorways and corridor sizes were still limited for wheelchair users. Although physically disabled residents did not have to cross large distances in order to access basic amenities, they know had a lot less maneuvering space on the street as the distances between building blocks became smaller, and they were built on the street front.



Figure 12: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. "Marasti boulevard." Photograph taken by the author.



Figure 13: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. "Facade built around 1985" Photograph taken by the author.

Mihai's personal story (retrieved from interviews conducted by the author)

Mihai Tataru, a 43-year-old radio producer, resided in Marasti, a neighborhood in Cluj-Napoca, until the age of 31, at which point he relocated to a ground-floor apartment for better accessibility. Since birth, he has grappled with spastic tetraparesis, a condition resulting from premature birth, necessitating the use of a wheelchair. Growing up in a 10-story building (Figure 14), Mihai inhabited the second floor. Despite the presence of an elevator in the building, access was hindered by two flights of stairs and lack of hand railings, making him reliant on assistance from family, neighbors, and friends to navigate his wheelchair. According to him, government regulations at the time prohibited the installation of ramps, thereby neglecting the needs of individuals with disabilities. Mihai emphasizes the lack of consultation or consideration for disabled individuals during the design and construction of dwellings. Despite facing numerous challenges and societal attitudes, he remained resilient and refused to allow his disability or societal perceptions to belittle him. His story stands to prove that the policies and the mentalities pushed by the leaders only

added obstacles in the lives of people with disabilities and completely ignored them, stripping them of opportunities.



Figure 14: Google Earth. (2024). Mihai's block, built on the sidewalk (left), Cluj-Napoca [Map]. Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/earth>

Discussions and Conclusions

During Romania's communist era, spanning from the late 1950s to the late 1980s, architectural production and urban development underwent significant transformations across three distinct periods.

In the initial period, from 1958 to 1966, the focus was on the construction of large-scale housing projects known as "mega-neighborhoods." These projects aimed to project an image of progress and societal advancement, characterized by clean, simple structures surrounded by green spaces. However, despite these efforts, accessibility for individuals with disabilities remained limited, with architectural designs prioritizing uniformity over inclusivity.

The subsequent period, from 1966 to 1977, witnessed changes in residential designs driven by socio-political factors such as anti-abortion laws and privatization initiatives, putting families caring for a disabled individual in financial disadvantage. While there were attempts to diversify housing types and improve living conditions, accessibility challenges persisted. Denser housing layouts and limited provisions for ramps or elevators continued to marginalize individuals with disabilities, highlighting ongoing neglect in architectural design. In the final period, from 1977 to 1989, architectural production faced further challenges amidst economic decline and political instability. Resources were diverted towards large-scale projects like the Civic Centre in Bucharest, resulting in the neglect of urban development and the proliferation of high-rise blocks. Accessibility issues persisted, enhanced by declining living conditions and a lack of consideration for the diverse needs of residents.

Against usual unfolding of events, the quality of life overall decreased throughout the years from multiple points of view. While the apartments benefited from the most improvements over the years, especially compared to the housing situation before the communist regime, most other aspects of life decreased significantly, affecting the well-being of all Romanian population.

Urban Scale: First period emphasized the creation of green spaces amidst housing complexes, reflecting a narrative of urban development and societal advancement. However, the distances between buildings posed challenges for residents with disabilities. The second period witnessed a reduction in green spaces due to denser housing layouts and the prioritization of quantity over quality. Urban spaces became more congested, with limited provisions for amenities and communal areas. The last period saw further reductions in green spaces and the proliferation of high-rise blocks, leading to denser and more congested urban environments. Lack of consideration for solar orientation and amenities contributed to declining living conditions.

Social Considerations: At the beginning of the communist regime, social considerations were minimal, with architectural designs primarily focused on meeting housing demands and promoting a standardized socialist urban culture. Despite this, the quality evolved exponentially from the previous housing situation making the first discussed period an overall big improvement in the quality of life. The next period witnessed some efforts towards privatization and diversification in housing types but still lacked adequate consideration for the diverse needs of residents, particularly those with disabilities.

The last period saw continued neglect of social considerations, with resources diverted towards grandiose projects and minimal improvements in accessibility features, reflecting broader societal attitudes and political priorities. Additionally, at the political policy level, individuals suffering from disabilities were severely underprivileged through law implementations such as the ban on abortion, institutionalization, lack of financial help and overall mentality that only intensified throughout the years.

Dwelling production: The beginning of the large-scale housing projects known as "mega-neighborhoods," featuring clean, simple structures amidst green spaces prioritized uniformity and standardization, with limited consideration for accessibility features. Due to anti-abortion laws, denser housing layouts started to emerge. Privatization initiatives introduced diversification in housing types but still prioritized quantity over quality. Architectural designs evolved towards a more complex Brutalist appearance, with some improvements in floorplan quality but limited progress in accessibility. Period 3 was marked by a decline in architectural quality, with resources diverted towards large-scale projects like the Civic Centre. Systematization efforts resulted in the construction of high-rise blocks with reduced quality of life. Architectural designs continued to overlook accessibility needs, contributing to ongoing challenges for individuals with disabilities.

Architecture served as an instrument that impeded the inclusion of the disabled community, directly contributing to higher rates of institutionalization among people with physical and motor disabilities by making it significantly more challenging for them to lead normal lives at home. Even in cases where institutionalization was not required, these physical architectural obstacles continue to isolate the community within their homes, depriving disabled individuals of basic rights and opportunities.

It is challenging to grasp the specific architectural features that hindered the lives of disabled individuals, given the prolonged silence surrounding their experiences. This silence is evidenced by oppressive policies, lack of documentation, restrictions on communication and information exchange with other countries, architectural barriers, and prevailing mindsets. Historical research reveals a collective struggle and deterioration in the quality of life for all Romanians during Nicolae Ceausescu's dictatorship, particularly affecting the physically and mentally impaired and their families and caretakers. These hardships persist to this day. While Romania has made improvements in policy-making and shifting attitudes towards the disabled community, the brutalist housing blocks erected during a period of severe oppression remain standing as reminders of the past, largely unchanged. Although all the communist blocks are still being inhabited, almost no attention is being given to properly adapt these buildings to the current regulations. Type projects, therefore, functioned as

political tools manipulated by leaders to pursue personal and political agendas, rather than advocating for the best interests of the country's populace.

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Figure 15: N. Kulin, 1964. Gheorgheni microraiions. Model. DSAPC Cluj. (Vais, 2020)

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Figure 17: Directive project for a 10 story block designed by IPCT around 1965, (Vais, 2020)

Figure 18: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. Entrance of block, handrail and ramp only recently added.

Photograph taken by the author.

Figure 19: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. Entrance of building block from 1965. Photograph taken by the author.

Figure 20: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. Flight of stairs leading to the elevator, no handrail. Photograph taken by the author.

Figure 21: Teoalida, "Evolutia blocurilor comuniste si plan apartamente [en. The evolution of the communist blocks and plans of apartments]". Retrieved from www.hartablocuri.ro.

Figure 22: Google Earth. (2024). Drumul Taberei and Rahova neighbourhoods, Bucharest [Map].

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Figure 23: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. "The entrance of Monica's block." Photograph taken by the author.

Figure 24: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. "Monica in her small kitchen." Photograph taken by the author.

Figure 25: Teoalida, "Evolutia blocurilor comuniste si plan apartamente [en. The evolution of the communist blocks and plans of apartments]". Retrieved from www.hartablocuri.ro.

Figure 26: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. "Marasti boulevard." Photograph taken by the author.

Figure 27: Nistor, Cristina. 2024. "Facade built around 1985" Photograph taken by the author.

Figure 28: Google Earth. (2024). Mihai's block, built on the sidewalk (left), Cluj-Napoca [Map].

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