Shifting local perceptions: Bucharest's Palace of the Parliament

A study of contested readings through scholarly and cultural narratives

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Abstract | Monumental architecture produced under authoritarian regimes often retains symbolic significance after political transition, resulting in contested readings. While existing research focuses on the relationship between monumental architecture and political power in socialist states, less attention has been paid to its relationship with local communities in post-socialist contexts. This thesis examines how contested readings of the Palace of the Parliament in Bucharest shape local perceptions, particularly in the period 1989-1994. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of scholarly and cultural sources, including primary and secondary material, it explores how local communities construct and negotiate these readings. The findings demonstrate a shift from perceptions of oppression and rejection to pragmatic reappropriation, highlighting how the Palace has been institutionally reframed and remains active in today's collective memory. This study contributes to broader debates on place, collective memory, and resilience in post-authoritarian urban contexts.

Keywords | monumental architecture, Bucharest, post-socialist Romania, Palace of the Parliament, place, collective memory, resilience

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Introduction

Authoritarian regimes frequently produce monumental architecture as a means to materialize political authority and assert control over urban space (Cavalcanti, 1997). When such regimes collapse, however, these buildings hardly lose their symbolic charge; instead, their meanings become unstable, contested, and subject to constant negotiation through political and cultural discourse. This dynamic is particularly evident in Bucharest, where – under commission of authoritarian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu – the Palace of the Parliament has undergone many reinterpretations since the fall of socialism (Light, 2001; Moghioroși, 2017). Initially built to impose and overpower, the Palace has gradually acquired different readings, including recognition as an architectural achievement, an urban scar that destroyed and displaced neighbourhoods, and acceptance as a functioning institution within a new democratic Romania. Examining how these contested meanings emerge, evolve, and interact provides insight into how architecture engages in post-authoritarian political transition, mediates collective memory, and shapes cultural narratives.

Despite substantial scholarship on communist monumental architecture and political symbolism in post-socialist Eastern Europe, limited research has been conducted on how local communities have interpreted and negotiated the contested meanings of the Palace in the years following the 1989 revolution in Romania. Existing studies emphasize political history, prominent figures such as Nicolae Ceaușescu himself, and architectural design, while the perceptions of displaced residents and their influence on shaping new cultural narratives are underexamined. Moreover, the post-revolution period (1989-1994), which marks the reappropriation of the Palace into Romania's first democratic government, has received little attention. By focusing on this period of political transition and the affected local communities, this thesis addresses an underexplored relationship between architecture, society, and politics.

In light of this gap, the following research question has been formulated: *How do the multiple contested readings of Bucharest's Palace of the Parliament shape the perception of the Palace within local communities?* This thesis argues that local communities' perceptions of the Palace of the Parliament have undergone a significant shift: from viewing the building primarily as a symbol of oppression and control to rejecting it and, ultimately, pragmatically reappropriating it after the Romanian Revolution. Focusing on the early post-socialist period of 1989-1994, which marks the fall of Ceaușescu and the Palace's reappropriation, allows this study to trace how architecture mediates political transition and shapes cultural narratives.

Due to a lack of digitized archival materials and limited research on local perceptions post-1989, both (digital) scholarly and cultural sources are used. The scholarly material consists mainly of secondary sources, including research papers and dissertations, such as the works of Cavalcanti (1997) and Moghioroși (2017). The cultural sources comprise primary material, including interviews with displaced residents, photography, and documentaries, such as the works of Necșulea (2001), Popescu and Hanna (2024), and the civil initiative Uranus Acum (n.d.). These sources are analysed through a qualitative, interpretive approach in order to identify and compare different perceptions of the Palace across local communities. These communities include displaced residents, activists, dissidents, media figures, and Bucharest inhabitants.

The thesis begins by constructing a theoretical framework, discussing concepts such as place, collective memory, and resilience. In the following chapters this framework is used to interpret the scholarly and cultural sources and distil contested readings and local communities' perceptions. The second chapter examines the years prior to the 1989 revolution to situate the

Palace within the authoritarian power structures of socialist Romania. It highlights two important figures: Nicolae Ceaușescu and architect Anca Petrescu. The third chapter focuses on post-revolution media sources, including interviews, original footage, and documentaries, to analyse the perceptions of local communities. The fourth chapter examines the longer-term aftermath of the Romanian Revolution, focusing on the reappropriation of the Palace of the Parliament as a democratic institution and the evolution of local perceptions over time. The conclusion synthesizes these findings, illustrating how monumental architecture under both authoritarian and democratic governments shapes and shifts public perceptions, offering insights that extend beyond Bucharest to similar post-authoritarian cities.

1. Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework gives an overview of the key concepts that guide this thesis. These concepts are used to enhance and operationalize the analysis of local communities' perceptions in post-communist Romania (1989–1994), in particular the destruction of the Uranus neighbourhood and the reappropriation of the Palace of the Parliament. In doing so, this research situates itself within a broader scholarly debate on place, memory, and resilience. The framework draws first on Edward Relph's (2008) phenomenological study of place, through which he examines how places are formed, sustained, and undermined through lived experience and emotional attachment. Secondly, it draws on the work of Gérôme Truc (2012) who builds on Maurice Halbwachs to examine the relationship between collective memory and place. Finally, this thesis makes use of the concept of resilience in relation to post-traumatic urbanism, drawing on the work of Carola Hein (2019), Lahoud (2010), and Lawrence Vale and Thomas Campanella (2005).

Relph (2008) describes place as a multifaceted phenomenon of experience that has a range of properties. He starts by arguing that location is not a necessary condition of place, but merely a commonality. For example, nomadic communities maintain a consistent sense of place despite their changing location. However, Relph explains that over time people can experience a growing attachment to place, which in turn results in a false sense of place; a misleading belief that *their* place becomes a stable "entity" immune to (violent) change (Relph, 2008, p. 31). It is routine that keeps this "scarcely changing, overwhelming present" alive (Relph, 2008, p. 33). Moreover, this growing attachment can result in the birth of communities. Shared physical place sets the stage for social interaction but becomes secondary when social interaction takes precedence. Place is no longer purely physical; it is now a collective, social construct shaped by the lived experience of people. Nevertheless, Relph (2008) mentions that the relationship between shared place and community is not linear, but rather a continuous reinforcement of each other's identity. The physical environment can also become a reflection of the social construct. Thus, Relph (2008, p. 34) concludes: "People are their place and a place is its people," highlighting how place and community together produce and maintain a collective identity.

After establishing this axiom, Relph (2008) continues to examine the sensibility and fragility of place. He observes that the grandeur and authority of monumental architecture can overshadow citizens' personal environment, making them seem less significant and encouraging awe of "official public spaces" (Relph, 2008, p. 35). At the same time, he notes that people, through their attachment to place, can develop a "sense of deep care and concern for that place", which he argues is an important human need (Relph, 2008, pp. 37-38). This rootedness in place leads in turn to the creation of a home, forming the foundation of individual and communal identity. However, place-attachment can also become restrictive in its "everydayness". One may also find oneself longing for a place that no longer exists, experiencing nostalgia for what has been lost. As Relph (2008, p. 42) puts it: "Our experience of place, and especially of home, is a dialectical one." This dynamic is central to understanding the urban transformation of Bucharest, where large-scale interventions not only physically disrupted place but also place-based identities.

Similar to Relph, Truc (2012) suggests that places can "transfigure" beyond their physical environment into a non-material realm (Truc, 2012, p. 148). Truc extends this line of thinking by explicitly connecting transfiguration of place to (collective) memory, thereby offering a perspective through which the collective identity described by Relph can be understood as rooted in shared memories. He argues that memory is always structured through spatial

reference points, and that without a spatial reference memory is mere fantasy. Moreover, Truc identifies a reinforcing relationship between place and memory: while the materiality of places shapes and alters memory, memory simultaneously reshapes the meaning and perception of those places. He conceptualizes this relationship through two notions: “memory of places” and “places of memory” (Truc, 2012, p. 149). Memory of places refers to memories anchored in a direct physical environment, such as the recollection of a neighbouring street that is subject to the physical alterations of that street. In contrast, places of memory refer to sites that have acquired a symbolic meaning, such as distant monuments that may be less familiar but appear more lively in the collective memory of people. The latter can be seen in the September 11 attacks, where Ground Zero remains a powerful place of collective memory even for those who have never visited it. In this way, collective identity is continuously shaped through shared memories that are attached to place.

Both Relph (2008) and Truc (2012) observe that places that no longer exist can nevertheless evoke emotions, such as melancholy or nostalgia, and persist within collective memory. This then raises the question how such perceptions of vanished places endure and evolve over time, especially in the case of large-scale destruction. Hein (2019) addresses this issue through the concept of resilience. She defines resilience as “the ability of a community or a city to recover quickly, both physically and socially, from natural disasters or man-made destruction” (Hein, 2019, p. 3). Hein further observes that stories from civilians, the media, and politicians can construct broader narratives that guide both physical and psychological recovery and contribute to resilience. This is reflected in the reappropriation of the Palace of the Parliament, where architecture is used to establish a new democratic narrative in post-communist Romania.

Vale and Campanella (2005) further elaborate on this in their book “The Resilient City”. The destruction of place that, over time, has become part of a larger collective identity and memory makes resilience not only a matter of rebuilding, but also of navigating psychological processes of recovery. This can be done through memorialization, building memorial sites to give physical presence to urban trauma. Furthermore, Vale and Campanella underscore the important relationship between post-traumatic (re)building of place and politics, stating that “wherever disasters are not accompanied by significant regime changes, the post-disaster era typically inherits the institutional structure and planning practices of the pre-disaster establishment” (Vale and Campanella, 2005, p. 345). In this sense, moments of urban trauma can become critical points where the system is forced to reimagine itself or perish (Lahoud, 2010, p. 19).

Taken together, these perspectives show how place, collective memory, and resilience are interconnected, especially in the aftermath of urban destruction. Building on the work of the aforementioned authors, this thesis examines and better understands the destruction and displacement of the Uranus neighbourhood, caused by the construction of the Palace of the Parliament, as well as the Palace’s contested role in the aftermath of the Romanian Revolution.

2. Reshaping Bucharest: state power and urban change

During the final decades of Romania's communist regime, Nicolae Ceaușescu ordered the reconstruction of Bucharest (Cavalcanti, 1997). The capital city was to serve as a monumental demonstration of his political power and control over the urban landscape. This ambition was realized through the construction of a Civic Centre, which drastically altered Bucharest's historical centre, leading to the demolition of more than 9,300 buildings and the displacement of approximately 40,000 residents (see figure 1) (Moghioroși, 2017). The construction of the Civic Centre also imposed enormous economic costs, estimated at 1.2 billion dollars, while local residents were faced with strict food rationing.

Despite the Civic Centre never being fully realized, one of its most striking pieces still stands today: the Palace of the Parliament (at the time called House of the Republic). It is situated on the Spirea Hill at the end of the Victory of Socialism Boulevard (see figure 1). Its construction required the demolition of the Uranus neighbourhood (situated on top of Spirea Hill), dozens of churches, and the Republic Stadium (Moghioroși, 2017). The large-scale demolition can be understood as a rupture in place attachment (Relph, 2007), where long-standing relationships between residents, their built environment, and their local community were abruptly shattered. As a result, the Palace of the Parliament emerged not only as a symbol of the communist regime, but also as a site associated with displacement and loss within the local collective memory, forming contested readings of the Palace that continue to shape perceptions today (Popescu & Hanna, 2024).

Within this context, the following subchapters examine the political incentives behind the Civic Centre project, the process through which the Centre – and especially the Palace of the Parliament – were realized, the opposition it generated, and the experiences of local residents whose communities were disrupted by these large-scale urban interventions.

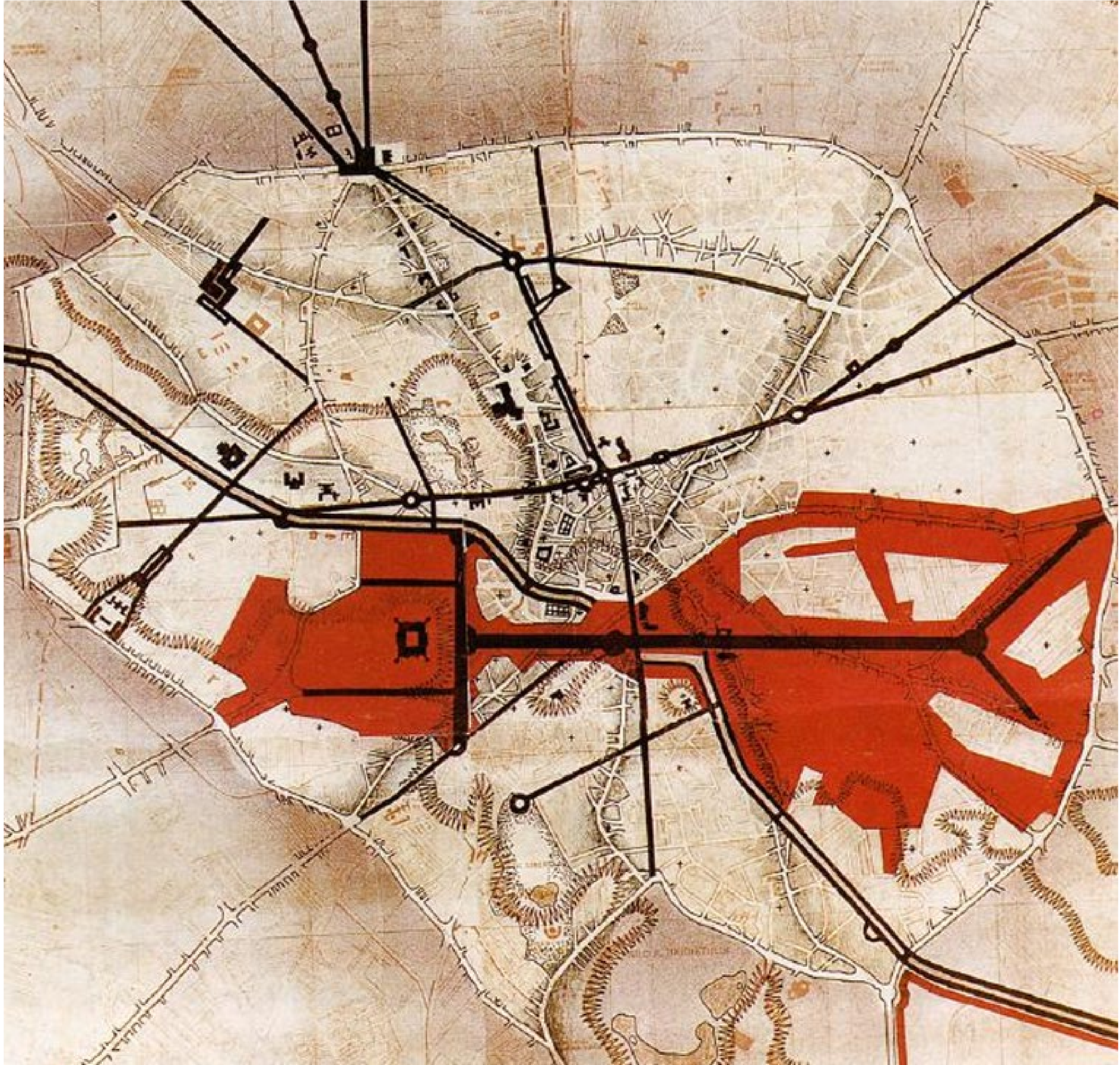

Figure 1. The large-scale demolition in Bucharest is indicated by a red area, within which the Palace of the Parliament and Victory of Socialism Boulevard are highlighted in black (Harhoiu, 1997).

2.1 Incentives

As Vlad Moghioroși (2017) observes, the decision to reshape Bucharest dates back to the late months of 1976 and early 1977. In 1976, Nicolae Ceaușescu began to shift his position regarding the preservation of Romania's architectural heritage. Whereas he had previously expressed support for protecting national architecture and had shown little interest in monumental architecture, he now revised his policy. On the first of December 1977, the state council disbanded the National Cultural Heritage Directorate. At the same time, Ceaușescu became increasingly more lenient towards demolitions, approving the removal of numerous buildings across the country to make way for new residential buildings. This tendency intensified after the 1977 Vrancea earthquake, which measured 7.4 on the Richter scale. The disaster provided Ceaușescu with an opportunity to justify large-scale urban intervention, presenting a narrative where demolition and reconstruction are viewed as necessary steps towards the modernization of Romania (Cavalcanti, 1997).

Although the earthquake helped to justify these interventions, broader political and ideological motives also influenced the reshaping of Bucharest's historical centre. Maria de Betânia Uchôa Cavalcanti (1997) identifies four main motives behind this reconstruction. Firstly, the project aimed to modernize the pre-existing built environment. As Cavalcanti notes, modernization in authoritarian cities – such as Napoleon III's Paris or Hitler's Berlin – physically expresses the changes and achievements of a society under a new government. Moghioroși (2017) further explains that through urban renewal, Nicolae Ceaușescu tried to distance himself from the urban legacy of his predecessors. Secondly, the reconstruction celebrated the new political order. The built environment was designed to reflect the values of a communist society. This was done through homogenization of the urban fabric, but also by removing, altering, or relocating religious buildings. Churches were often put on rails and moved behind apartment buildings to reduce the visibility of religious institutions in communist Romania (Moghioroși, 2017). Thirdly, it embodied the grandiosity and cult of personality that Ceaușescu pursued. Architecture symbolized the regime's authority, with symbolism being of greater importance than the social and urban needs of Bucharest. Lastly, the reconstruction reflected Ceaușescu's personal will. Only he determined what the citizens of Bucharest needed; architects, engineers, and planning organisations played a minor part.

These motives demonstrate that the reconstruction of Bucharest was not merely a functional rebuilding of the city, but rather a symbolic transformation of the capital intended to showcase the authority of the communist regime in everyday life. In doing so, the transformation of Bucharest aimed to incorporate a political narrative of absolute state power into the built environment, shaping how local communities perceived the authority of the government.

2.2 Realization

To ensure that these motives were realized, Ceaușescu maintained strict control over the planning, design, and construction process of the Civic Centre, and especially of the Palace of the Parliament (Cavalcanti, 1997; Necșulea, 2001). In 1977, Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu hosted a "systematization" competition for the Civic Centre (see figures 2 and 3) – part of a larger state planning program aimed at reshaping cities through demolition and large-scale development (Necșulea, 2001). This competition was participated by eighteen teams and consisted of seven stages. However, as Cavalcanti (1997) notes, this competition was democratic in name only. The couple was more concerned with creating a democratic image to repress a narrative of authoritarian control.

The young architect Anca Petrescu, who had only recently graduated, ended up winning the competition, despite the participation of several well-known Romanian architects (Cavalcanti, 1997). In a documentary by Necşulea (2001), distributed by the Romanian national broadcaster TVR, Petrescu explains she was servile to the wishes of Ceaușescu, in contrast to the other participating architects. With every new stage of the competition her decision altered more to the wishes of Ceaușescu, resulting in an eclectic (almost post-modern) design combining a multitude of different architectural styles and rhythms. Romanian architect Gheorghe Leahu later described the Palace as “a kind of cacophony expressed in very expensive materials and at gigantic dimensions” (Necşulea, 2001, 27:08).

Ceaușescu also showed strict control over the construction process itself, which started in 1984 and continued until 1994 (see figure 6) (Cavalcanti, 1997). Ceaușescu reportedly visited the construction site weekly, during which on-site alterations were often demanded, sometimes requiring the redesign of entire sections (see figures 4 and 5) (Necşulea, 2001). With over 400 architects, 20,000 construction workers, and an estimated budget of 800 million dollars, the Palace consumed extraordinary resources (Light, 2001; Moghioroși, 2017). Covering 6.3 hectares and housing 700 offices, meeting rooms, restaurants, and libraries, it ranks as the second largest administrative building in the world (see figure 7) (Cavalcanti, 1997). With each visit, Ceaușescu’s interventions caused the building to grow further, achieving a monumentality that shaped how local communities perceived the power of the regime (Necşulea, 2001). This level of political intervention shows again that the Palace of the Parliament is not merely an architectural project, but rather a direct material expression of Ceaușescu’s personal authority.

Figure 2, 3, 4, 5. From left to right, top to bottom: Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu at the design competition, Elena Ceaușescu and Anca Petrescu discussing at the design competition, Nicolae Ceaușescu and Anca Petrescu at the construction site, and a by Ceaușescu requested one-to-one model (Necşulea, 2001, 14:32, 15:14, 36:13, 37:40).

Figure 6. The Palace of the Parliament under construction (Arnback, 1989).

Figure 7. Aerial view of the Palace of the Parliament (Snellman, 2017).

2.3 Opposition

Despite the regime's efforts to construct a more democratic narrative, the Palace of the Parliament quickly became a contested symbol that generated multiple counter narratives and critical responses, already during its planning and construction phase. Both Cavalcanti (1997) and Moghioroși (2017) take note of activist opposition to these plans and their implementation. In an interview conducted by Cavalcanti, architect Mariana Celac, who was a well-known dissident during communist Romania, addressed in 1977 a public statement to the Communist Party protesting the demolitions of Bucharest's centre. In return, Celac was soon after fired from her positions as an architect in state-organized institutions and was, from 1987 onwards, under strict control by the government; her telephone line was cut, her mail was intercepted, and a police officer was placed in front of her house.

In addition, Moghioroși (2017) highlights multiple protests, mostly initiated by religious communities, during the demolition operations. Several churches and historical monuments were blown up in the historical centre, with many religious communities not being granted a new place for gathering. To prevent protests, most demolitions were undertaken at night guarded by state security forces. One striking event is the demolition of the Spirea Veche church (located on Spirea's hill in the Uranus neighbourhood), which occurred during the night prior to Palm Sunday and was only noticed in the following morning when people gathered to attend the mass. This destruction of monumental and religious buildings, meant a brutal removal of the (religious) Romanian identity. Places were not only ripped from their physical familiarities, but also of their symbolic value – the memories of places as Truc (2012) calls it –, resulting in a disruption of collective memory and a scarred identity.

2.4 Local residents

The Communist Party actively sought to influence local perceptions of the Palace of the Parliament by restricting the emergence of politically conflicting narratives. As Moghioroși (2017) notes, national media largely avoided discussing the planning and construction of the Palace. Consequently, critical interpretations of the project were mostly produced by Western media and Romanian exiles. However, their efforts inside Romania remained limited. Several groups and associations advocated for the protection of Bucharest's historical centre and its citizens, yet their influence was constrained by the regime. Many of them were either not allowed or were only briefly permitted to visit Romania, and from 1985 onwards any unreported correspondence with foreigners was prohibited. As a result, local perceptions were shaped by the official political narratives of the communist regime. While many residents developed personal resentment towards the destruction of their neighbourhoods (Popescu & Hanna, 2024; Uranus Acum, n.d.), the regime's control over information limited the unfolding of a local collective narrative openly opposing the government.

The civic initiative Uranus Acum (n.d.) (Uranus Now in English) has gathered an extensive digital archive documenting the Uranus neighbourhood before, during, and after Ceaușescu's demolitions. Through interviews with former residents, several recurring experiences become visible. Firstly, many residents describe a great uncertainty regarding the demolition operations. One of the interviewers remarks that "residents lived with the hope that the line of demolitions would stop with the last house destroyed". Secondly, when demolitions approached – often announced only 24 hours in advance (Cavalcanti, 1997) – residents were asked to sign a contract stating they agreed to relocate from their homes to apartment blocks on the edges of Bucharest. Those who refused to sign were nevertheless removed from their houses but were

denied relocation (Moghioroși, 2017). Thirdly, many former residents express a lasting sense of nostalgia for their neighbourhood. As Relph (2007) argues, such feelings can emerge when residents have developed strong attachments to a place but are no longer able to inhabit it. Initiatives such as Uranus Acum form important actors that attempt to preserve these memories through oral histories, photographs, visual reconstructions (see figure 8), guided tours, and exhibitions.

These experiences are also observed in the work of Popescu and Hanna (2024), who interview two friends that grew up together in the Uranus neighbourhood before being forcibly separated by the demolitions. Their accounts illustrate how the destruction of place disrupted the social relationships and shared experiences embedded within it. In line with Truc's (2012) research, the disappearance of (parts) of the neighbourhood weakened the spatial framework through which these memories were maintained. As a result, the Palace of the Parliament became not only associated with the authority of the communist regime, but also with memories of displacement and loss of a collective identity.

Figure 8. Uranus Acum collage showing the former Republic Stadium overlaid onto its present-day location in front of the Palace of the Parliament, visualizing the spatial erasure and transformation of the site (Manelici, n.d.).

3. Narrative rupture: the Romanian Revolution and the collapse of state narratives

The construction of the Palace of the Parliament and the destruction of the Uranus neighbourhood were products of a highly centralized and authoritarian Romanian government (Cavalcanti, 1997; Moghioroși, 2017). Through the large-scale reshaping of Bucharest, a political narrative of state authority, socialist modernization, and centralized control was established in the built environment. Due to strict censorship, limited media coverage, restrictions on communication with the outside world, and the suppression of protests, the Communist Party was largely able to control the circulation of conflicting narratives. The Palace of the Parliament stood firmly as a monumental symbol of the new communist era.

However, on the eve of Christmas, 21 December 1989, when Nicolae Ceaușescu organized a rally intended to demonstrate popular support for his regime, this narrative was abruptly shattered when the crowd began to protest (Siani-Davies, 1996). In a moment of chaos, Ceaușescu fled a day later by helicopter to Târgoviște, leaving Bucharest and its Palace behind (see figure 9). With the fall of Ceaușescu, the system that had sustained the Palace's symbolic meaning rapidly dissolved.

This chapter therefore explores how the Romanian Revolution not only ended authoritarian rule, but also ruptured the state narratives that had shaped perceptions of the Palace of the Parliament for years. It then considers the increasingly unstable symbolism of the Palace in the aftermath of Ceaușescu's downfall, before turning to the role of media, public debate, and local perceptions in shaping new narratives concerning the revolution.

Figure 9. The Ceaușescus seen fleeing from the Central Committee building to escape protestors (Andreescu, 2014).

3.1 Romanian Revolution

In December 1989, protests emerged after authorities attempted to evict the Hungarian pastor László Tőkés, who in an interview with Hungarian television criticized Nicolae Ceausescu and advocated for the human rights of Romanian citizens (ITN Archive, n.d.). The interview spread across the border regions of Romania, encouraging both Hungarian minorities and Romanian citizens to protest, and eventually sparking an uprising in Timișoara. The protests in Timișoara were, however, brutally suppressed: the Securitate – Romania's secret state police (Cavalcanti, 1997) – opened fire on demonstrators, causing dozens of casualties. Rather than isolating a local revolt, the violence in Timișoara intensified public anger and transformed a local uprising into a nationwide revolution against Ceaușescu's regime. Within a few days, demonstrations spread across the country and especially to Bucharest, culminating in Ceaușescu's flight and the collapse of his government, and ultimately leading to the execution of both Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu on 25 December 1989.

As Peter Siani-Davies (1996, p. 457) observes: "It is often not so much the downfall of the regime that is unexpected, but the manner and consequences of its fall". The collapse of the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu followed a similar pattern. Although the authoritarian character of the communist regime had long been visible through the suppression of dissent, censorship, and forced demolitions, opposition remained fragmented and was contained by the state. However, the events of December 1989 rapidly showed the fragility of the regime. Archival footage preserved by ITN Archive (n.d.) (Independent Television News Archive) demonstrates how the revolution was televised and broadcast across Romania and Europe, opening up public debate and allowing citizens to witness events that had previously been kept from the public eye. Romanian citizens could now form their own interpretations of the unfolding events and reshape their perceptions of the communist regime.

3.2 Symbolism and the Palace after the fall

At the time of the Romanian Revolution in December 1989, the Palace of the Parliament was still under construction and had not yet become the operational centre of the communist government (Moghioroși, 2017). Instead, the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu continued to operate from the Central Committee building on Revolution Square (known as Palace Square until 1989), which consequently became the primary stage for the revolutionary events. It was from this building that Ceaușescu gave his last speech on 21 December 1989 before fleeing with his wife by helicopter, turning Revolution Square into one of the most iconic locations regarding the Romanian Revolution.

As a result, much of the revolutionary imagery of the revolution became closely associated with Revolution Square and the Central Committee building rather than with the Palace of the Parliament (see figures 10 and 11). Since the Palace remained under construction and was not involved in the revolutionary events, its monumental presence was symbolically absent from the fall of Ceaușescu. From a phenomenological perspective, Relph (2007) highlights that place is not only shaped by its physical characteristics but also through lived experience and social interaction; in the absence of this social dimension, the Palace remained outside the larger collective experience that was defined by the Central Committee building and Revolution Square. Similarly, Truc (2012) explains that "places of memory" acquire symbolic meaning through collective memory. As the Palace was neither in use nor publicly engaged with, it had not yet entered local communities' collective memory as a "place of memory". This absence of

engagement left the Palace's meaning open and contested, allowing new perceptions to shape its role and symbolism in post-communist Romania.

3.3 Media, public debate, and local perceptions

While Carola Hein (2019) discusses narratives of resilience in relation to post-disaster recovery of communities, her concept can also be applied to moments of political upheaval. In this context, resilience may remain largely hidden over long periods of time, but can become visible and activated through (sudden) political disruption. In the case of the Romanian Revolution, television did not merely report events but helped to construct a shared narrative of resilience. In her dissertation "The power of television", Daniela Mustata (2011) describes the revolution as a live event, drawing on interviews with television employees and original media footage. Mustata argues that the Romanian state broadcaster TVR formed an important catalyst in the revolutionary events of December 1989. Not only did it play a significant role in the emergence and broadcast of the revolution, but it also actively took a stance alongside the revolutionaries, effectively joining and shaping the revolution itself.

On 21 December 1989, when Nicolae Ceaușescu took the stage at Revolution Square, it was the medium of television that became subversive (Mustata, 2011). It had captured, only ever so slightly, the hissing from the crowd, the shakiness of the camera, and the abrupt end of Ceaușescu's speech. Due to its real-time presence and inability to rewind, the medium of television spread discontent with Ceaușescu throughout the nation. "Audiences were no longer isolated with their own discontent within private domestic walls, they saw on television there were others like them, others that shared their own discontent and had the same cause," as Mustata (2011, p. 221) observes. The broadcast revealed resilience that had endured several decades of state oppression and helped activate civilians across Romania (see figures 10 and 11). Even though a "polished" version of the speech was broadcasted later that day, the damage had already been done; live television had not lent itself to Ceaușescu's political control and instead sparked the beginning of a new counter-narrative.

Figure 10, 11. From left to right: the crowds in front of the Central Committee building in the beginning of the live broadcast on December 21st and the Central Committee building being occupied by protestors the following day (TVR, 1989; ITN Archive, n.d., 36:14).

The following day, on 22 December, streets and central places of Bucharest were occupied, among which the headquarters of TVR (Mustata, 2011; ITN Archive, n.d.). The state broadcaster had continued its normal programme, avoiding the upheaval of the previous day. However, the broadcast was abruptly interrupted, after which Mircea Dinescu and Ion Caramitru appeared on screen, surrounded by a multitude of civilians. Where broadcasts had centered on Nicolae Ceaușescu for decades, local civilians had now taken the spotlight. The poet and actor announced that revolutionaries had occupied the television building and that tanks, the army, students, and thousands of Romanians had joined the revolutionary movement. The broadcast ended with everybody screaming: “The television is with us! We won! We are here! We won!” (Mustata, 2011, p. 226). The rupture of the official state narrative had thus been replaced by a new, media-aided narrative of resilience.

However, as Lawrence Vale and Thomas Campanella (2005) observe, narratives of resilience are often a political necessity and may be shaped or manipulated by media and political actors. Such narratives can be used to restore political authority and influence public perceptions. Mustata (2011) further notes that television functions as a figurative medium, placing individuals such as army generals, dissidents, and Ion Iliescu – the successor of Ceaușescu – into visible roles within a public narrative. Through television, these figures appeared as central actors in the unfolding of the revolution. At the same time, these broadcasts can also blur the distinction between reality and on-screen presence. This is also described by Vale and Thomas (2005), who state that resilience can cast opportunism as opportunity. Political disruption can be used as a cover for a hidden agenda. In numerous broadcasts and imagery actors like Ion Iliescu, who was a member of the Communist Party and a former secretary of ideology under Ceaușescu, were portrayed as heroes, patriots freeing the country from its tyrannical roots (ITN Archive, n.d.). Yet, one could question the true intentions of a former, high-ranked communist. The televised revolution, therefore, not only documented the revolutionary events but also shaped (or rather confused) the viewer’s perceptions of the actors and their role within the new political system.

4. Reappropriation: long-term narratives and collective memory

Despite the fact that the Palace of the Parliament did not play a significant role in the Romanian Revolution, its meaning became increasingly contested in the years that followed (Light, 2001; Moghioroși, 2017). While the destruction of the Uranus neighbourhood contributed to a growing resentment among Bucharest residents towards the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Palace itself was not a primary focus of the events of December 1989. Instead, its significance emerged more clearly in the aftermath of the revolution, when Romanian society began to renegotiate the legacy of the communist era.

In the years and decades that followed, the building became the subject of public debate, design competitions, and architectural discourse (Moghioroși, 2017). These discussions questioned the Palace's role in both local and national identity and its place within the collective memory of Bucharest citizens. As a result, perceptions of the Palace of the Parliament slowly shifted from viewing it as a monumental symbol of authoritarian power to interpreting it as more complex and contested architectural object of Romania's post-communist urban landscape.

The following sections therefore examine how the Palace was institutionally reframed after 1989, how competing narratives shaped (and still shape) its meaning, and how these interpretations have been used to come to terms with a troubled past.

4.1 Institutional reframing

Although the events of December 1989 resulted in the execution of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the outcome of the Romanian Revolution was perhaps less revolutionary than the term might suggest. As Peter Siani-Davies (1996) argues, the uprisings in both Timișoara and Bucharest did not pursue a clear ideological goal beyond the removal of Ceaușescu from power. As a result, the aftermath of the events did not immediately lead to significant economic or political reform. Siani-Davies, therefore, questions whether the events of December 1989 should be understood as a true revolution. The primary goal of the uprising may have been the removal of a single, authoritarian figure, who, through his extensive personal involvement, had left a significant mark on controversial developments such as the Civic Centre and Palace of the Parliament. This interpretation is further supported by the rapid appointment of Ion Iliescu and his National Salvation Front (NSF) in May 1990, which included several former members of Ceaușescu's government (Mustata, 2011). Thus, in hindsight, the revolution can also be viewed as an event that created a political vacuum in which new political actors were able to assume authority, in part by constructing narratives, gradually reframing the legacies of Ceaușescu's regime within the institutional structures of post-communist Romania.

This "institutional reframing" was physically made apparent through the reappropriation of the Palace of the Parliament as the new parliamentary house of Romania's democracy. At first, in March of 1990, its doors were opened to the public (Light, 2001). Showing only partially completed interiors, Romanian citizens were sharply divided over the building's future. Some claimed the building should be repurposed into a casino or a museum, others were in favour of its demolition, as it still represented the most difficult period of Romania's past. However, after being elected in 1990, Iliescu ordered the continuation of the Palace's construction (Moghioroși, 2017). Duncan Light (2001, p. 1061) offers two possible reasons for this decision. Firstly, it was a logical way to negate a symbol of totalitarianism by "reclaiming" it for a democratic parliament. Secondly, because the new government included many former members of the Communist Party, there was likely less resistance to repurposing the building. Renaming the building from

House of the Republic to Palace of the Parliament also helped to accentuate this institutional reframing. Nonetheless, Anca Petrescu was allowed to carry on with her project and finished, after 13 years, the Palace in 1997, a year after the Chamber of Deputies had started hosting sessions in the building. In 2004, the Senate followed the Chamber of Deputies, which marked the full institutional reappropriation of the Palace within Romania's post-communist political system.

4.2 Contested readings and identity building

The political reappropriation of the Palace of the Parliament is one way to navigate the material legacy of Nicolae Ceaușescu and his regime. However, with the demolition of the Uranus neighbourhood and a sudden political revolution, a new opportunity presented itself for Romanians to rebuild their local and national identities. Duncan Light (2001) examines this in relationship to tourism in post-communist Romania. He argues that through tourism a country or community has to present itself to the "other", the tourist or other external groups that are not familiar with Romania, which results in Romanians having to (re)define their collective identity and differentiate themselves from the "other". "A country can make a statement to those others of "who we are" and "how we want you to see us"," as Light (2001, p. 1055) describes it. In this way, tourism becomes not only an economic activity but also a cultural process of reinterpreting the past and building a new identity.

This concept of presenting identity to the "other" is further explored by Lawrence Vale and Thomas Campanella (2005), who argue that local resilience is often closely related to national renewal. The perceptions and narratives of Bucharest residents regarding the Palace therefore influence broader interpretations of Romanian identity. Many celebrate the building as a pinnacle of Romanian craftsmanship and architectural ambition, emphasizing national pride and the city's monumental achievement. For others, the building represents the hardship of the past, and, in some cases, ongoing reminders of political and social upheaval (Light, 2001). These conflicting narratives show how the Palace functions as a site of contested meaning, where collective memory, local perceptions, and national identity intersect. This tension is further illustrated in the tourism branding of the Palace, which often presents the building as a landmark of the "new Romania", even though local communities continue to struggle with its contested meaning. The building thus mediates between local experiences of hardship and resilience and external representations of Romanian national identity.

These contested readings have led to several proposals and initiatives to repurpose the Palace's surroundings. In 2000, the competition "Bucharest 2000" invited Romanian and international architects to design a project that would reintegrate parts of the urban fabric radically altered under the rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu (Moghioroși, 2017). The competition was won by two German architects, Meinhard von Gerkan and Joachim Zais, who proposed high-rise towers to challenge the visual dominance of the Palace (see figure 12). In doing so, the project attempted to symbolically rebalance the overwhelming presence of communist monumentalism. However, due to the enormous cost and political instability at the time, the project was ultimately abandoned. In the following years other initiatives were presented to turn the Palace into a museum or a shopping mall, to essentially strip the Palace of its political symbolism and open its doors to local civilians. Despite the multiple efforts, the Palace of the Parliament still remains the house of the Romanian government.

Another intervention that reshaped the area around the Palace of the Parliament is the construction of the People's Salvation Cathedral (see figure 13) (Moghioroși, 2017). After decades of discussion, the cathedral was eventually built next to the Palace, exceeding its height by almost thirty meters. By challenging the symbolic dominance of the Palace, the Orthodox Church reclaims its presence that had been marginalized during the construction of the Civic Centre under Nicolae Ceaușescu. On the other hand, its monumental scale and enormous construction costs may also echo the same authoritarian architecture that characterized the communist regime. This raises the question of whether the urban landscape of Bucharest (and its communities) has truly moved beyond the monumental ambitions of the communist era.

Figure 12. The winning project of Meinhard von Gerkan and Joachim Zais for the "Bucharest 2000" competition (Arhitectura, n.d.).

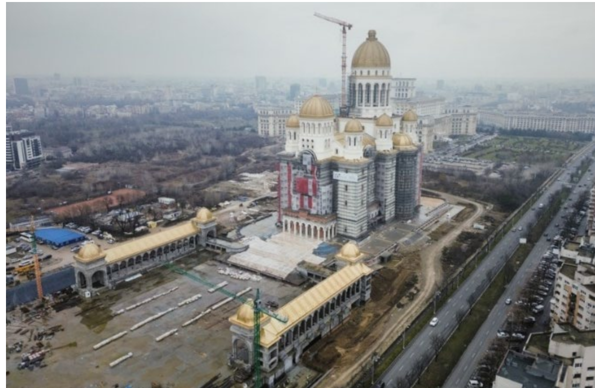

Figure 13. The People's Salvation Cathedral under construction with the Palace of the Parliament in the background (Chapple, 2023).

Together, these debates and contested readings demonstrate how the Palace of the Parliament remains a symbolical site through which Romanians, and especially local residents, continue to negotiate the legacy of Nicolae Ceaușescu and redefine both local and national identity. As the documentary by Necșulea (2001, 44:17) observes, this process is not always easy: "Time forces us to come to terms with the presence of the house, today the Palace of the Parliament, and to accept its absolute solitude and even uniqueness. However, no Bucharester passes by this landmark of the golden era with serenity and warmth. The house forces you to a disturbing exercise in memory."

4.3 Coming to terms with the past

When examining the historical context of the Palace of the Parliament in retrospect, two distinct timelines emerge: the demolition of the Uranus neighbourhood during the 1980's and the events of the Romanian Revolution in December 1989. The destruction of the Uranus neighbourhood was not a direct catalyst for the revolution but later became symbolically incorporated into post-communist narratives about the violent oppression of the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Over time, the temporal and spatial distance between these events has blurred, allowing memories of the demolished neighbourhood to merge with broader narratives that have developed after the fall of the regime.

This blurred relationship between memory, place, and historical events forms the premise of Ioana Marinescu's (2023) installation "Billboard" (see figure 14). Marinescu uses empty white billboards in the streets of Bucharest to "bring memories of the old districts to the current site, to give a presence and a voice to forgotten places" (Marinescu, 2023, p. 124). Initially photographing the blank billboards – white screens that visually echo the erasure of space caused by the demolitions of the 1980's – she later rents the billboards and replaces the white

canvas with large black-and-white images showing the simultaneous destruction of the Uranus neighbourhood and the construction of the Palace of the Parliament. When the rental period expired, the image was removed; a process Marinescu (2023, p. 135) calls “neutralisation”. The temporality of the image reflects the fragility of collective memory. Just as the billboard returned to a blank canvas, the memory of demolished neighbourhoods can quickly disappear from public space, mirroring how abruptly the urban landscape was transformed under the rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu. She then repeated the same installation but with a different picture on a different location. This time Marinescu placed an old map accompanied by the phrase “you are here”. However, the location indicated on the map no longer exists, having been erased during the construction of the Civic Centre. The work therefore confronts local residents with the absence of a place that once formed part of Bucharest’s historical centre.

During the installations, Ioana Marinescu (2023) documented public reactions through conversations and social media platforms such as Facebook groups. The responses to her work varied. Some locals reacted “happy” and had initially viewed the image of the Palace’s construction as resembling a bomb that had destroyed the authoritarian building. Others responded more critically, reflecting on a traumatic past and stating that Romanians live in a post-apocalyptic sphere. These reactions reflect the ambivalent relationship many residents of Bucharest continue to experience with the Palace of the Parliament. As a local taxi driver describes it: “It is ours. It belongs to us. It is like a child – whether it is good or bad, it is yours. It is the same with that building” (Light, 2001, p. 1062). Whether these contested interpretations will persist as the generations who experienced the demolitions gradually disappear remains an open question. However, installations such as Marinescu’s demonstrate how collective memory can be kept alive, revealing how even billboards can “become part of the city, of the public consciousness” (Marinescu, 2023, p. 132).

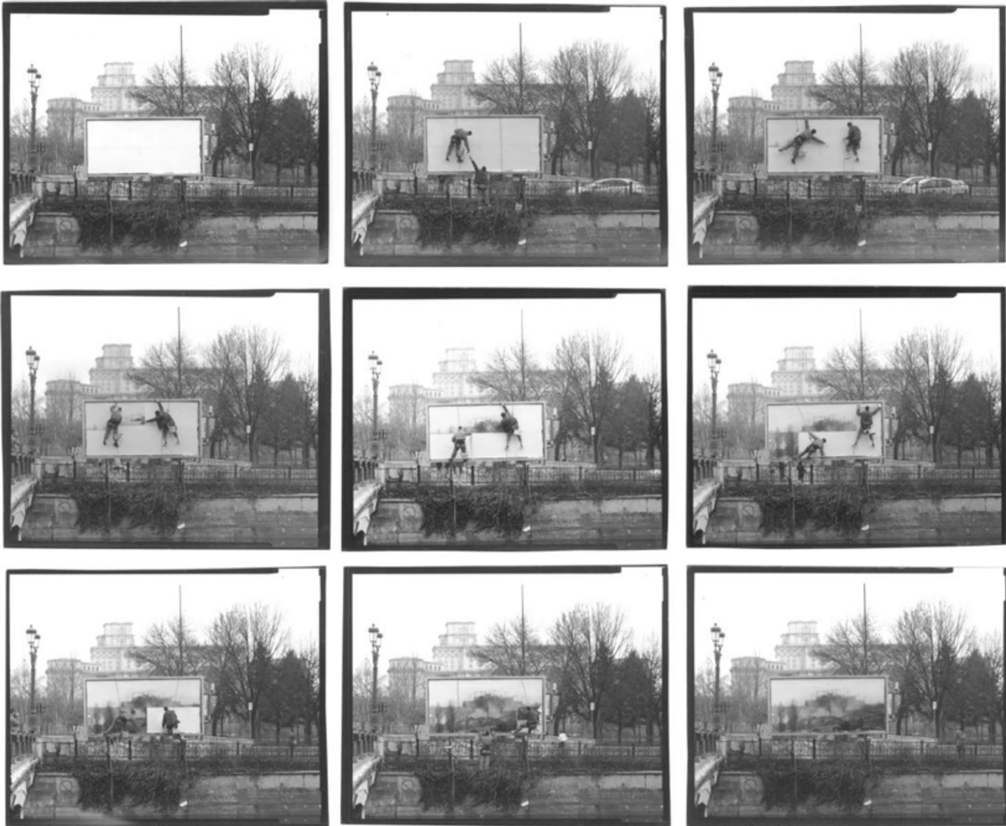

Figure 14. Installing "Billboard" with the Palace of the Parliament in the background (Marinescu, 2023).

Conclusion

This thesis examined how the perceptions of local communities regarding the contested readings of the Palace of the Parliament have shifted over time. Leading up to the revolutionary events of December 1989, which marked the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime, local communities perceived the Palace as a symbol of oppression. The Romanian Revolution marks a clear turning point in these perceptions, as the symbolic significance of the Palace became contested and opened up to new interpretations. In the longer-term aftermath, the Palace was pragmatically reappropriated, marked by its institutional reframing as the parliamentary seat of a new democratic Romania.

This shift reflects broader processes that took place in Romania during and after the late socialist period. It demonstrates how the control and oppression of an authoritarian regime were materialised through monumental architecture, even in the phases leading up to its completion. Continuous pressure from both Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu on architect Anca Petrescu, the displacement of tens of thousands of local residents, and the silencing of dissidents all contributed to the perception of an authoritarian Palace. Additionally, despite its absence in the revolutionary events themselves, the Romanian Revolution played a crucial role in the Palace's reappropriation. Through the medium of live television and protests from Bucharest inhabitants, the Palace became a site of contested readings, offering space for new political and cultural narratives. The symbolic charge was eventually politically reframed through continuing the Palace's construction to house a new democratic parliament. However, as this thesis also demonstrates, the meaning of monumental architecture is not solely dictated by politics, but is continuously challenged through everyday perceptions. These everyday perceptions are made visible though, among other things, civil initiatives, art installations, and tourism branding.

By linking these findings to theories concerning place, collective memory, and resilience, this thesis has shown that the perceptions of the Palace are the result of an interplay between physical reality and lived experience. The persistence of memory, particularly of displacement, loss, and rupture, made sure that the Palace remained embedded in a larger collective identity. In this sense, the Palace's reappropriation can be understood as a form of resilience, where past trauma is reworked into new social and political meanings.

Future research could elaborate on this thesis by more closely examining Romania's political structure and cultural narratives of the twenty-first century, delving into the more Western-oriented course the country has taken in the last two decades. It would be interesting to further examine how influences from the West might have altered local communities' perceptions of their past and contested architectural heritage. Moreover, future research could expand this thesis by comparing the case of Bucharest and its Palace of the Parliament with other post-authoritarian cities where monumental architecture plays a similar contested role. It should also be noted that this research is limited by the availability of sources, particularly the scarcity of digitized or archival material that give a clear, uncensored representation of different communities and their perceptions.

Ultimately, the Palace of the Parliament shows how monumental architecture can both embody and mediate political transition. As a remnant from the communist era, the Palace continues to facilitate political power in a new democratic Romania, shape the perceptions of local communities, and confront a free society with its dark past.

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