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## The Emergence of Women Architects in Romania

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*An informal moment in the Institute for Systematization, Housing and Community Management (ISLGC), 1983, Bucharest (Pepchinski & Simon, 2017)*

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## Contents

Introduction.....	3
Chapter 1 – The context before communism .....	7
Chapter 2 - The communist era.....	12
Chapter 3 - Case studies .....	15
Virginia Andreescu Haret .....	15
Henrieta Delavrancea Gibory .....	20
Anca Petrescu .....	26
Conclusion .....	28
Bibliography.....	30

## Introduction

'The Emergence of Women Architects in Romania' aims to uncover a recent past. It investigates the circumstances in which female architects started to pursue their careers. This paper examines the challenges and difficulties that women have faced and focuses on how the political context influenced the availability of work opportunities.

The lack of resources and inaccessible documentation imposed great difficulties in conducting this research. During the communist period most of the information was classified and the public documentation was propagandistic. Nevertheless, this thesis aspires to cover the research gap regarding Romanian female architects using the very few research papers that are discussing the subject. Due to the scarcity of documents, it studies the subject from multiple perspectives and frames a complex overview which includes a thorough analysis of the social and political context, pictorial representation through an archive of photographs, and case studies. Regarding the sources, it uses the archive of the 'Arhitectura' magazine, books and interviews, various magazine articles, journal articles, newspaper articles, websites and an archive of photographs.

From the very beginning, architecture has been a male dominated field. In fact, the Romanian patriarchal society has perceived architecture as predominantly masculine until the last century. In Romania, the first woman to graduate from the 'Ion Mincu' University of Architecture was Virginia Andreescu Haret, who graduated in 1919. However, Romanian architecture education started in 1892 as a private school under the authority of the Romanian Architects Society. It has been founded following the model of Ecole des Beaux-Arts from Paris and has remained the only Romanian institution of superior studies in architecture until 1990. After 1952 it has been renamed the 'Ion Mincu' Architecture Institute. During communism (1947 - 1989), there was a 40% increase in the number of female graduates in architecture. (G. Ionescu, 1973)

Given these statistics, how did women manage to infiltrate in architecture and how come the proportion of female architects is now equal to the proportion of male architects?

Gender equality in architecture is a topic that needs to be addressed from different angles. Firstly, the timeframe regarding the emancipation of women in Romania coincides with defining the profession of the architect. Although it was an elite movement, bourgeois women, whom were in close contact with cultural and artistic developments, started to actively participate in various

realms, including architecture. Among these women we can find Henriette Delavrancea Gibory and Virginia Andreescu Haret, who later proved to become influential women architects. At the same time, architects were in the search of a new professional identity, calling themselves a guild. This guild alluded to a certain unity that manifested gender equality. It must be noted that for 100 years there was only one Architecture University in Bucharest that all architects have followed. Hence, the close connections between architects that have been formed during the studying years have continued, more often than not, during their whole careers.(Zahariade, 2011)

Secondly, the communist regime needed architects for rebuilding the country in Ceausescu's vision, and women foresaw the opportunity to start working in the field of architecture. After 1952, the Romanian government banned private practice and started to fully control the architectural design.(Panaitescu, 2016) As a result, all architects, regardless of their gender, had the same opportunities and professional limitations in the state's design institutions. In that context, the architects have created (silent) collective values of resistance, protecting all members of the guild, men and women alike.

Romania has undergone a period of communism between 1947 and 1989 which entailed new paradigms and social practices. Ana Maria Zahariade reveals in her book, *Architecture in the Communist Project*, the history of architectural practice and the relation with pre-war and post-'89 architecture. This time period overlaps with an increase in women architects that could be linked to the equality that the communist party claimed to promote. Another article by Ana Maria Zahariade, published in *Ideological Equals: Women Architects in Socialist Europe 1945-1989* (Pepchinski & Simon, 2017), takes a closer look at the specific professional circumstances in which female architects evolved and trace their relevance to the history of the profession. "Feminine Architecture" is rather an empathetic narrative, where numbers and percentages are accompanied by memories and subjective assumptions, in search of a more in-depth portrait of female architects in communist Romania.

For a critical perspective on the representation of Romanian women architects under communism, the 'Arhitectura' magazine is a reliable primary source. This is a magazine published by the Union of Architects in Romania and has been founded in 1906, being the longest-running specialty magazine from Europe. (*Revista arhitectura*, 2008) The main objective is to promote ideas and best works of architecture and urbanism, made in Romania, with model value for professionals and students.

This research builds on the foundation of the work of Ana Maria Zahariade and uses the 'Arhitectura' magazine and archival photographs of groups of architects to analyze the visibility of women in architecture in Romania, between 1947 and 1989. Influential women architects, such as Henrieta Delavrancea-Gibory, Virginia Andreescu Haret and Anca Petrescu will be the lens through which the increased participation of women in architecture can be noted.

In this view, communism has been an opportunity for women to practice the profession and become involved in the architectural discourse. This article aims to cover the research gap in how women architects developed in Romania and what were the consequences in the architecture, connecting the social circumstances to personal stories of influential architects.

The research question that this thesis will try to answer is: **What was the representation of women in architecture in communist Romania?** It will focus on their numeric representation, their visibility and their influence on the architectural discourse.

The structure of this thesis will follow a chronologic explanation of the main factors that depicted the representation of women in architecture in Romania before and during communism. As such, the magazine 'Arhitectura' offers a clear perspective on this matter. It was the only platform for acknowledging individual professional merits of architects. The increased participation of women architects in the field is accurately reflected in the mentions in the magazine. Starting with 1972, few women even had monthly rubrics. During the late years of communism, these women have used their voices to reaffirm their professional reputation, demonstrating that their position was not given by the socialist equality.

The social and political context will be thoroughly explained, and the extensive research of Ana Maria Zahariade will form the backbone of this description. The case studies from the book *'Ideological equals: women architects in socialist Europe 1945 - 1989'* will be compared to the Romanian reality.

The first chapter will discuss the context before communism, an essential prerequisite to understand the emergence of women not only in architecture, but also in other fields of work. The second chapter will focus on the socio-political context of the communism period and the increasing need of architects. In the last chapter the personal lives of the first Romanian women architects, Henriette Delavrancea-Gibory and Virginia Andreescu-Haret will be closely followed. Anca Petrescu, a controversial architect whom received the commission of the 'People's House',

will also be investigated. These stories should reaffirm the theories proposed. The names above will be accompanied by other women architects to explain how, almost by chance, women got to work on 'emblematic' projects during communism.

## Chapter 1 – The context before communism

The inaugural period of "Arhitectura" magazine, spanning from 1906 to 1944, represents a pivotal era in the architectural landscape of Romania. Within this timeframe, the publication holds significance as it marks the emergence of women architects and their initial contributions to the field. However, the identification of female architects within this context poses challenges due to the prevailing convention of using only initials for first names, thereby obscuring the gender of the architects involved. (Societatea Arhitecților Români, 1906)



*February 26, 1911 - SAR anniversary 20 years after its foundation. In the center, architect Ion Mincu stands out (Panaitescu, 2021)*

The pictorial representation of architects during this period underscores the predominant male presence within the profession, highlighting architecture as a domain primarily occupied by men.

An examination of the 'Arhitectura' magazine offers a distinct insight into the burgeoning presence of women within the field of architecture. The visual representations unequivocally depict the prevailing male dominance within the discipline; however, since 1916, a notable mention of several women architects has emerged. Noteworthy figures such as Lucia Dumbraveanu, Heriette Delavrancea, Maria Fridman, Maria Andreescu, and Ada Zaganescu are highlighted within the contests sections designated for university students. (Societatea Arhitecilor Romani, 1916) While Henrieta Delavrancea notably became the first woman admitted to the architecture faculty in 1913, these women have since demonstrated exceptional proficiency within their field. Furthermore, it appears that the judging process, conducted by the jury, has been conducted impartially, with an emphasis placed on architectural merit, thereby transcending gender biases.

Establishing a chronological framework is paramount for comprehending the sociohistorical context. In 1892, the inception of Romanian architecture education occurred towards the latter part of the 19th century, initially as a privately-run institution under the auspices of the Romanian Architects Society. Subsequently, in 1897, the Architecture Department at the Bucharest School of Fine Arts was established. In 1913, Henrieta Delavrancea's enrollment as an architecture student at the aforementioned faculty marked a significant milestone. Furthermore, in 1919, Virginia Andreescu Haret became the first woman to graduate from the Superior School of Architecture in Bucharest, followed by Henrieta Delavrancea's graduation from the same institution in 1926.

The period spanning from 1953 to 1989 witnessed the Romanian government's imposition of a ban on private architectural practice, thereby assuming control over architectural design endeavors in the aftermath of the Second World War. Concurrently, during the latter half of the 19th century, an elite movement advocating for gender emancipation coincided with a reevaluation of the architect's societal role.

In Romania, architects were organized within a guild (Calinescu, 1953), fostering internal cohesion among its members. A shared academic background was prevalent, given that the Architecture School in Bucharest remained the sole institution until 1990, modeled after the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. This emulation was attributed to the substantial number of Romanian architects who pursued studies in Paris before returning to practice in Romania. Subsequently, post-1952, the School of Architecture in Romania was renamed the 'Ion Mincu' Architecture Institute.



Notably, the guild's membership experienced a significant surge, rising from a mere 27 architects in 1891 to 400 by 1944, predominantly comprising members of the urban bourgeoisie. Among the initial cohort of women admitted to the Architecture School were Virginia Andreescu Haret and Henrieta Delavrancea Gibory, both of whom hailed from privileged backgrounds with familial ties to cultural and artistic spheres. Henrieta's lineage traced back to Barbu Stefanescu Delavrancea, a prominent Romanian writer and poet pivotal in the National awakening of Romania, while Virginia Haret was the niece of the esteemed painter Ion Andreescu, who had nurtured her upbringing following her mother's untimely demise.

The guild notably safeguarded the rights of women enrolled in the Architecture Faculty, extending them equal membership privileges from inception. In essence, the guild served as a laboratory for fostering gender equality to a certain degree. (Zahariade, 2016)

In February 2021 the Union of Romanian Architects celebrated 130 years from the constitution of the Society of Romanian Architects. (Panaitescu, 2021) For this occasion, Alexandru Panaitescu has written a comprehensive document depicting the history of the Society of Romanian Architects. By analyzing the group pictures of key moments in history, a clear increase in the number of female architects can be observed.



*1916 – Participants at the first Congress of Architects in front of the Architecture University*  
(Panaitescu, 2021)



*20-21<sup>st</sup> of December 1952 – The conference for the constitution of the Union of Architects. One unidentified woman appears in the front row (Panaitescu, 2021)*



*1960 – Visits organized by the Union of Architects to Leningrad (left picture) and Moscow (right picture). For the Moscow visit, 11 women can be identified out of 29 people (Panaitescu, 2021)*



*14-16<sup>th</sup> of May 1982 – A group of architects from the Union of Architects participating in a site visit in Neamt. At least 14 women out of 33 people (Panaitescu, 2021)*

## Chapter 2 - The communist era

A contrasting perspective on gender dynamics emerged in response to the demand for engineers and architects, particularly with the advent of a new generation of female architects. In principle, these women were afforded equal opportunities as their male counterparts. The influence of communism on Romania's architectural landscape extended to the inclusion of women in the profession. Socialist policies aimed at fostering gender parity in the workforce precipitated a notable uptick in the proportion of women involved in architecture. Nevertheless, leadership roles within the architectural sphere remained predominantly held by men. The impact of communism on the architectural profession in Romania extended to the representation of women architects. Socialist policies aimed to promote gender equality in the workforce, leading to a notable increase in the percentage of women engaged in architecture. However, leadership positions within the profession remained predominantly occupied by men. Despite this, the presence of women architects surged during the communist era, contrasting with lower rates of female representation in other countries such as the United States and West Germany. In the United States approximately 4.5 percent of architects were women (Dietrich, 1986) and in West Germany their share was 10 percent. (Zahariade, 2016) In Romania, on the other hand, the presence of women architects has risen to 30-40 percent during communism in all design fields. (Zahariade, 2016)

However, a pertinent inquiry arises regarding whether the numerical success of women in architecture during this period translated into achieving substantive parity within the workplace and exerting meaningful influence on architectural output.

In Romania, the trajectory toward an architectural career frequently commenced with tertiary education, providing both young men and women with a brief yet remarkable period characterized by intense freedom and creativity. During this phase, individuals explored various professional roles, experiencing a degree of gender equality within the academic setting. This educational environment served as a crucible where aspirations were nurtured and talents honed, contributing to the diversification and enrichment of the architectural landscape.

During the communist era, the demand for architects surged, leading to a remarkable 40% increase in the number of female graduates from 1945 to 1990 (G. Ionescu, 1973). Ana Maria Zahariade posits that the attainment of gender equality within Romanian architecture was not a

direct consequence of the communist party's policies; rather, it was achieved despite the regime's hindrances and adversities. In this context, architects and their guild emerged as bastions of collective resistance, safeguarding the interests of all members amid the challenging socio-political landscape. Despite enduring constraints on active participation in decision-making processes due to pervasive political persecution, architects endeavored to maintain their shared identity within the guild.

The formative years spent as students played a pivotal role in shaping this collective identity within the guild. Notably, academic excellence was impartially recognized, with both male and female students receiving equal acclaim. The architectural faculty cultivated an environment of elitism, where gender parity was ingrained as a fundamental value. Regrettably, the final academic projects undertaken during this period likely represented the last opportunity for practicing architects under communism to express their creativity freely. As an incubator of guild values, the student milieu transmitted principles of gender equality, fostering a sense of unity among aspiring architects.

The enactment of the law on November 13, 1952(Zahariade, 2011), effectively abolished private architectural practice, consolidating all architects under state-designated institutes. Employment within these institutes was contingent upon academic performance, with transfers between institutions severely restricted. Consequently, women found themselves employed across various architectural disciplines, with remuneration parity between genders. Notably, the prevalence of standardized floor plans, coupled with political interference, compromised the individuality of architectural works, eroding distinctions based on gender and promoting uniformity.

Despite the pervasive gender-neutral environment, few female architects achieved prominence during this era, with figures like Paraschiva Iubu, Anca Borgovan, and Anca Petrescu standing as notable exceptions. The 'Arhitectura' magazine emerged as the primary platform for acknowledging professional accomplishments within the field, with women comprising between 30% and 40% of practitioners across all design disciplines. However, their representation dwindled significantly in international architecture competitions open to Romanian participants. In the 1960s, women architects were frequently nominated for awards by the Architects Union, underscoring their contributions to the profession. Towards the twilight of the communist era, as a handful of women architects secured regular columns in 'Arhitectura' magazine(Zahariade, 2016), it became apparent that they sought to assert their professional standing on their own merit, rejecting the notion that their positions were merely conferred due to socialist egalitarianism.

Architecturally, a trend towards neutral modernity and brutalism prevailed across design projects, irrespective of the architect's gender. Consequently, while women participated in various design fields, they often grappled with losing their distinct gender identity as they endeavored to conform to the standards dictated by their male counterparts.(Zahariade, 2016)

## Chapter 3 - Case studies

### Virginia Andreescu Haret



*Virginia Andreescu Haret (1894 – 1962) (R. Haret, 2018)*

The period following the First World War marked a significant shift in societal attitudes toward women's roles. (Mihailescu, 2006) Both socially and politically, this era saw a notable increase in the professional opportunities available to women, as well as the granting of certain political rights. Virginia Haret, born Virginia Andreescu on June 6th, 1894, emerged as a pivotal figure within this changing landscape. Her father, Dimitrie Dobrescu, a merchant (*Anuarul General al Agriculturii, Comericiului Şi Industriei României Pe 1905, 1905*) and the brother of the renowned painter Ion Andreescu, provided crucial support for her education.

From a young age Virginia Haret had the opportunity to develop a taste for beauty, living in the midst of the masterpieces created by her uncle, which, for the most part, decorated the walls of the house where she grew up. Although her mother died when she was only nine years old, her moral traits developed harmoniously, grafting an energetic spirit on the romantic temperament that nature had given her, tempering her character and developing her natural artistic abilities, to grow as a prominent personality in Romanian art and technique.

In 1928, in full creative maturity, the architect Virginia Andreescu marries Spiru I. Haret (1892-1970), the scientist's nephew, "distinguished engineer-professor, Virginia's collaborator on the construction sites", with whom she will collaborate from now on, in all fields of activity. They will later have a son, who will take over the family tradition, becoming a construction engineer.

Virginia Haret's journey into the field of architecture was an unconventional and adventurous choice, being the first woman to pursue such a career. At the time when she graduated, there was no other woman in a similar position.(Caramelea, 2021) Unlike many of her male counterparts, not all of whom held formal degrees, Virginia Haret embarked on a rigorous educational path. While male architects often gained professional acceptance through partial academy studies, Virginia's commitment to obtaining a degree set her apart. This commitment would later prove instrumental as the field of architecture professionalized, with the attainment of a degree becoming a prerequisite for architectural practice from 1933 onward.(Caramelea, 2021)

After attending primary school at the Pitar Moş School, in Bucharest, she graduated from the Mihai Viteazul high school at the age of 18 and enrolled in the Higher School of Architecture in Bucharest, founded by Spiru C. Haret, being ranked first in the 1912 admission competition, with an average 9.25. As can be seen from the documents of the time, she was a brilliant student in school, highly appreciated by all the teachers, obtaining 56 mentions for the works and projects executed during the years of study.

In a communication session from 1976 Henrieta Delavrancea-Gibory remembers about Virginia Haret: "I was in ecstasy in front of her works, I remember even now, after 63 years, how many were to be decided, deeply thoughtful, harmonious and constructively composed her conceptions, far surpassing those of other colleagues. It had been the era of the great Mincu, which did not admit a woman architect. Virginia broke the wall, Virginia entered the big door, her nature won and paved the way for women in architecture. Convinced, dignified and very secure, so natural in her place, no



one dared to challenge her... And still she walked through life, with talent, power and perseverance, without letting anyone suspect the difficulties she went through to succeed"(R. Haret, 2018).

Following her graduation, Virginia Haret embarked on her professional career, breaking barriers as one of the few female architects of her time. She began her tenure at the Historical Monuments Committee from 1918 to 1920, working under the guidance of Nicolae Ghica Budești. (*Virginia Haret | Arhiva de Arhitectura*) Despite the scarcity of female architects, historical records show that women's involvement in artistic endeavors was not unprecedented. Collective exhibitions featuring women artists had been occurring since the late 19th century, gradually gaining recognition as a manifestation of feminine sensibility and professionalism. (A. S. Ionescu, 2019)

One of her younger colleagues, Marica Cotescu, records in her memories: "Virginia came with vivid impressions that she shared with us with great vivacity. Because he knew how to see and understand things and people. An artist by nature, she was in love with life and beauty".

While Virginia Haret did not align herself with feminist groups or participate in exhibitions specifically for women artists, her contributions to the architectural landscape were nonetheless significant. Her professional debut coincided with a period of post-war reconstruction, during which the demand for qualified architects, regardless of gender, surged. Employed by the Reconstruction Committee subordinated to the Ministry of Public Works in 1921, Virginia played a vital role in shaping the built environment of the time. ("Monitorul Oficial," 1922)

She began her work as a young architect at the Historical Monuments Commission where, under the guidance of architect N. Ghika-Budești, she carried out a series of surveys, studies, researches and restorations of our national monuments, some of them being published in the Commission's Bulletin.

It should be noted that this is the first time that the name of a female architect appears in Romanian specialized literature. She will continue this activity in parallel with others, collaborating with the master until the end of the third decade, on the large-scale work "Evolution of Architecture in Muntenia and Oltenia", where she publishes under her own signature a series of plates with various themes.

Her subsequent roles at the Modern Construction Company and the Ministry of Education's architecture department further solidified her reputation as a pioneering architect. (Caramelea, 2021) Notably, her involvement in school design reflected broader societal perceptions of education as an extension of maternal responsibilities, perpetuating entrenched gender stereotypes.

Virginia Haret's involvement in the Society of Romanian Architects underscored her commitment to professional advancement. Earning a position on the society's board in 1923-24, she contributed both financially and intellectually to its endeavors. (Societatea Arhitectilor Romani, 1924) In order to become part of the board of the Society of Romanian Architects, one would need the votes of the other members. It seems that Virginia was supported by her male counterparts, and she did not face gender discrimination in order to become part of the board.

Membership in the society entails added duties. In 1924, it was noted that Virginia Haret made a financial contribution to the publication of the society's journal, where she would subsequently showcase several of her projects. (Societatea Arhitectilor Romani, 1936) Additionally, an article she authored in the Architecture journal, focusing on school buildings, highlighted her penchant for a functionalist approach that prioritizes expansive spaces, illumination, and straightforwardness. (V. Haret, 1938)

Despite her professional success, Virginia Haret faced marginalization in the wake of political upheavals. Her connections with the elite and bourgeoisie made her a target for the communist regime, leading to temporary ostracization. Nevertheless, her legacy endured, albeit reshaped by the regime's propaganda machine, which portrayed her as a nationalist icon. The last decade of communism highlighted accomplishments and achievements as a means to replace scarcity, daily poverty and censorship. That is why Virginia Haret has been published in the media as “the first female architect in the world”. (Caramelea, 2021)

Virginia Haret's story is emblematic of the evolving role of women in architecture. Her pioneering efforts paved the way for future generations of female architects, challenging traditional gender norms and reshaping the profession. By the early 1920s, a small but growing cohort of women had joined the ranks of the Society of Romanian Architects, signaling a shift towards greater inclusivity within the field. Out of 166 members in the Society of Romanian Architects, 6 were women: Virginia Andreescu, Maria Cotescu, Irineu Maria Friedman, Maria Hogas, Antonetta Ioanovici and Ada

Zăgănescu Beza. (Niculae, 2012) In 1916, only 8 years earlier, the society did not count any women among its members.

Virginia Haret's entire professional activity spans over 40 years. During this time, she designed and executed - apart from her other professional concerns - more than 130 architectural works of various profiles, being a pioneer in architecture and technique. She was the first woman who, obtaining her architect's diploma, made full use of the acquired knowledge for the advancement of Romanian architecture in multiple fields.

Virginia Haret's journey exemplifies the intersection of gender, politics, and profession in the tumultuous aftermath of World War I. As a trailblazer in the male-dominated field of architecture, she defied expectations and left an indelible mark on Romania's built environment. Her legacy serves as a reminder of the power of perseverance and determination in overcoming societal barriers.

## Henrieta Delavrancea Gibory



*Henrieta Delavrancea Gibory (1894 – 1987) (“Henrieta Delavrancea-Gibory. Ipostaze,” 2021)*

Henrieta Delavrancea Gibory's presence left an indelible mark on the architectural landscape of her era. Born on October 9th, 1894, in Bucharest, she was part of a distinguished family lineage, being one of the four daughters of the renowned writer Barbu Stefanescu Delavrancea. Her sisters, Cella Delavrancea, Margareta Delavrancea, and Niculina Delavrancea, each made their own significant contributions to the arts and academia. Cella became a famous pianist, writer and memorialist, Margareta graduated from the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy and became a French teacher, and Niculina became a plastic artist. (Stan, 2009)

The Delavrancea sisters met the greatest artistic and cultural personalities of the late 19th and 20th centuries in the country and abroad. "In our modest home vibrated the love for art, in all its forms - literature, music, painting. I remember the writers, around the round table, my mother serving the usual tea at these gatherings, and the aniseed breadcrumbs, nibbled during in our house with spacious rooms. My father's strong personality was the center of attraction. Ion Mincu, the architect of a great talent, was engaged in our circle of children. We played 'țintar' with him and we liked his figure, which resembled that of Alphonse Daudet, the delicate writer from which my father read to us. Mr. Mincu spoiled us, bringing us cakes and toys. (...)Gatherings where so much spirit, so much wisdom was spent only for the sake of abstract speculations" (Delavrancea, 1987), wrote Cella Delavrancea in her memoirs.

In her book, "From a Century of Life" (Delavrancea, 1987), Cella Delavrancea remembers an episode when her youngest sister, Henrieta, who was only 6 years old, was taking the second-grade exam. "Mr. Mincu plays his role as examiner with all seriousness and, after the well-deserved congratulations, asks her what she wants to be when she grows up: Architect, answered the little girl." (Delavrancea, 1987) Henrieta Delavrancea Gibory felt like an architect, she looked at everything that happened around her like an architect, she lived from architecture, her intellectual path was that of an architect.

"My mother was a teacher and state inspector, my sister, Cella, was a long-established great pianist, my sister Babilas was a teacher, Niculina studied fine arts with great talent, and I was destined to be a teacher... like any good girl. I was in the seventh grade when my father, the Minister of Public Works, had obtained a large album with artistic photographs taken of our historical monuments. I was admiring them in the evening, and that's how the idea came to mind that I could be destined for such a thing (becoming an architect). I found out, however, that there was one female aspiring architect, a student of Mincu's, Ada Zăgănescu. I was the fourth architect to graduate, after Ada Zăgănescu, Virginia Andreescu and Mimi Friedman", said Delavrancea Gibory in an interview from 1980.(Stan, 2009) They were followed by Maria Cotescu and Henrieta's cousin, Lucia Dumbrăveanu, the future wife of Horia Creangă.

Delavrancea's journey into architecture began with a groundbreaking achievement: she became the first woman admitted to the Superior School of Architecture in Bucharest in 1913. However, her studies were temporarily interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War in 1916. Undeterred by

the conflict, she volunteered as a nurse, demonstrating her commitment to service and compassion.

It was during her time as a nurse that Henrieta Delavrancea crossed paths with Emile Gibory, a French officer, whom she would later marry in 1918. (Stan, 2009) Despite the disruptions of wartime, Henrieta's passion for architecture endured. In 1924, she resumed her studies, determined to pursue her dream of becoming an architect. Three years later, in 1927, she graduated, marking a significant milestone in her career.

But Henrieta Delavrancea's journey didn't end with graduation; it was only the beginning. In 1933, she achieved another milestone by obtaining her license to practice as an architect. This accomplishment not only affirmed her skills and expertise but also opened doors to a career where she would continue to make significant contributions to the built environment.



1933 – The Architect License of Henrieta Delavrancea Gibory (Marinache, 2022)

In 1949, Henrieta Delavrancea Gibory embarked on a new chapter of her illustrious career as she joined the IPC Design Institute. This marked a significant milestone in her professional journey, allowing her to apply her expertise and vision to a diverse array of architectural projects. Over the years, she distinguished herself as a stalwart figure within the institute, contributing to its success and reputation as a hub of innovation and excellence in architectural design.

As her career flourished, Henrieta Delavrancea's dedication and talent garnered recognition from her peers and the architectural community at large. In 1972, her outstanding contributions were honored with an esteemed award from the Union of Architects, a testament to her enduring impact on the field and her unwavering commitment to excellence.

Beyond her individual accolades, Henrieta Delavrancea's passion for architectural preservation and advocacy for the cultural heritage of Bucharest became increasingly evident. In 1977, amidst growing concerns over the demolition of historic buildings in the city, she emerged as a vocal advocate for their protection. Engaging in various actions and initiatives, Henrieta sought to raise awareness about the importance of preserving Bucharest's architectural heritage for future generations.

Her involvement in these efforts underscored her deep-seated belief in the intrinsic value of architectural heritage and the vital role it plays in shaping the identity and character of a city. Through her advocacy, Henrieta not only sought to safeguard tangible symbols of the past but also to preserve the intangible cultural legacy they represented, fostering a sense of continuity and connection with history.

“My houses that you see here in the pictures have a Romanian feel, but they are also modern in appearance and function, meticulously detailed; they made my clients happy.” (Sion, 2011)

Henrieta Delavrancea Gibory was also a promoter of the Romanian culture through architecture. She understood very well the value of the traditional designs and tried to incorporate the Romanian character in more modern designs. While in the West the modern movements were dictating the style of architecture, Romanian architects have constantly aspired to follow the same guidelines. In an interview from 1978 (Mironov, 1978), Henrieta Delavrancea explains how architects tend to follow only the Western architecture and neglect the Romanian character.

Interviewer: 'Why do you think that many of the new and large houses that are built in villages (...) have been set apart from tradition?'

Henrieta: 'They (the architects) were poisoned by Western architecture. They have only one dream, to make houses that resemble everything they have seen in foreign magazines. Naturally, it is good to research foreign magazines, to see what is being done in the West, to take from them all that is good and all the evolution of architecture, but not to lose the Romanian character.'

(...)

'The houses that I have prepared, I have given them a popular character, that is, a Romanian character to be more precise, but they are equipped with everything necessary for a modern life.'  
(Mironov, 1978)

Henrieta Delavrancea did not introduce a feminine touch to architecture, but she was in a search for the authentic and the traditional. In an interview with Șerban Sturdza, (Elia, 2014) a well-known Romanian architect born in 1947, he recalls the attributes that Henrieta Delavrancea used in her designs. He also mentions that Henrieta Delavrancea was not highly esteemed by the other architects of her time, but she was an important personality nevertheless.

**Șerban Sturdza:** 'Delavrancea, Doicescu, the continuity of architecture slightly influenced by the Balkans and vernacular architecture seemed to me, and still do, the natural way.'

**Tudor Elia:** If there were some references – official or not – to foreign architecture, what was the connection to local architecture, to the architectural past? If the connection to foreign architecture was so ambiguous, how was local modernism seen during the inter-war period, for example?

**Șerban Sturdza:** 'There was – unofficially but consensually – great respect for some interwar architects. In Timișoara, for example, Silvestru Rafiroiu had been rediscovered and was acknowledged by younger generations. He was a local personality and the pride of the town was fueled mainly by his name. Other architects like Henrietta Delavrancea weren't highly esteemed, not in the group I worked in anyway.'



**Tudor Elian:** But Henrietta Delavrancea was an important personality for you.

**Șerban Sturdza:** ‘Yes, the Delavrancea sisters were very important in my family; they were examples of authentic lives which influenced society. In 1980 I designed the Hematology Center in Timișoara in Henrietta Delavrancea’s memory. I designed it in honour of her. Arches and bay windows that were unacceptable at the time in our modern architecture appeared there for the first time.’

(...)

‘What I want to say is that architecture ought to be cautious enough so as not to “perturb” too much and that it has a certain dimension of “caring”. That could be felt in Henriette Delavrancea Gibory’s works as well as in those of other interwar architects. (...) Delavrancea offered architecture the attribute of being a nest or shelter, something that’s good for you. That was my feeling...’

(Elia, 2014)

## Anca Petrescu



*Anca Petrescu (1949 – 2013)*

Anca Petrescu, a Romanian architect whose life spanned from 1949 to 2013, emerged as a significant figure within the architectural realm, particularly during the communist era. Her notable association with the creation of the People's House in Bucharest catapulted her to widespread recognition, although the attribution of authorship to her underscores a broader misunderstanding inherent in projecting contemporary Western notions of authorship onto communist architectural endeavors. While Petrescu's involvement in the project is acknowledged, it is imperative to contextualize her role within the broader framework of the communist regime's architectural initiatives. (Pepchinski & Simon, 2017)

Commissioned by the communist leader Ceausescu, the People's House project was characterized by his direct involvement in decision-making, relegating Petrescu to a subordinate position wherein she executed the directives set forth by Ceausescu himself. The scarcity of accessible documents pertaining to Petrescu's contributions underscores her status as a subject of oral history, complicating efforts to discern her precise role within the project.

The genesis of the People's House project coincided with the waning years of Ceausescu's rule, marred by economic turmoil and social unrest. Following the devastating earthquake of March 4, 1977, which ravaged Bucharest, the project served as a pretext for restructuring the city center. However, the endeavor was emblematic of the regime's failures, exacerbating economic woes and exacerbating public discontent. Throughout the 1980s, Romania grappled with the competing imperatives of repaying foreign debts and advancing architectural projects like the People's House, straining the already fragile economy and exacting a toll on the populace. (Burakowski, 2011)

Amidst these challenges, architects such as Petrescu confronted professional hurdles, as their careers were overshadowed by the exigencies of daily life and the constraints imposed by the regime. Despite Ceausescu's aspirations to leverage architectural grandeur as a manifestation of power and national pride, the People's House ultimately served as a stark reminder of governmental excess and mismanagement, further fueling public disillusionment.

Within the architectural sphere, the contestation for control over the People's House project emerged as a locus of power struggles, with political authorities leveraging their influence to shape its trajectory. The purported architectural competition in 1977 lacked genuine oversight, with the absence of a defined brief, jury, or transparent selection process. Established professionals, including Petrescu, participated alongside influential figures such as Cezar Lazarescu, Octav Doicescu, and Constantin Iotzu, albeit under the specter of political intervention. (Balanescu & Budisteanu, 2010)

Ceausescu's personal involvement in the project, coupled with his predilection for grandiosity, precipitated a departure from conventional architectural norms, fostering an environment where professional autonomy was compromised. Petrescu's eventual ascendancy within the project owed as much to her receptiveness to Ceausescu's directives as it did to the reluctance of established architects to acquiesce to his demands. (Pepchinski & Simon, 2017)

Notably, Petrescu's gender remained inconsequential amidst the male-dominated architectural milieu, reflecting a broader societal norm wherein women's participation in leadership roles was an exception rather than the rule. While Petrescu's trajectory exemplifies the complex interplay between gender, politics, and architecture during the communist era, her singular career trajectory offers limited insight into the broader experiences of women architects within this context. (Pepchinski & Simon, 2017)

## Conclusion

The emergence of women in Romanian architecture, particularly during the communist era, reflects a complex interplay of societal dynamics, political imperatives, and individual agency. While architecture historically entrenched itself as a male-dominated field, the advent of communism presented a unique opportunity for women to enter and thrive in the profession. Through the lens of historical analysis and scholarly inquiry, this paper has delineated the multifaceted journey of women architects in Romania, elucidating key factors that shaped their representation and influence within the architectural landscape.

The period spanning from 1947 to 1989 witnessed a notable increase in the proportion of women engaged in architecture, with their presence peaking at 30% to 40% of practitioners across all design disciplines. This surge in female participation can be attributed to various factors, including the demand for architects spurred by the communist regime's ambitious construction projects and the ostensibly egalitarian policies promulgated by the state. However, it is essential to scrutinize whether the numerical success of women architects during this period translated into substantive parity within the profession and meaningful influence on architectural output.

While the communist era ostensibly fostered a gender-neutral environment within architectural institutions, wherein women enjoyed equal opportunities and remuneration, notable gender disparities persisted, particularly in leadership roles and international recognition. Despite their considerable presence within the profession, few women architects achieved prominence or recognition commensurate with their male counterparts. Moreover, the prevailing architectural aesthetic of neutral modernity and brutalism often compelled women architects to compromise their distinct gender identity in favor of conformity to prevailing norms.

The educational milieu emerged as a crucible where aspirations were nurtured and talents honed, contributing to the diversification and enrichment of the architectural landscape. Within this academic setting, principles of gender equality were ingrained, fostering a sense of unity among aspiring architects regardless of gender. However, the enactment of laws consolidating architectural practice under state-controlled institutions curtailed the autonomy and creativity of practitioners, eroding distinctions based on gender and promoting uniformity in architectural output.

In navigating the socio-political landscape of communist Romania, women architects displayed resilience, resourcefulness, and a steadfast commitment to their professional aspirations. Despite enduring constraints and adversities, they leveraged their agency to assert their presence and contribute meaningfully to the architectural discourse. Through their perseverance and determination, women architects left an indelible mark on Romania's built environment, challenging conventional norms and expanding the boundaries of architectural practice.

Answering the research question, what was the representation of women in architecture in communist Romania, it can be concluded that women were numerically represented, but their work was not as visible as the work of their male counterparts. Although the communist ideals claimed equality in the workplace, it did not create it. Rather, it generated the opportunity for women to enter the work field. The guild, the union of architects, supported women and treated them equally, as it is suggested in the case studies. The presence of women in architecture has not been contested, and the focus in most of the publications is about the design rather than the author.

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