

Architecture and Conservation in Post-totalitarian Romania

Peter Derer

Peter Derer was the Director of the National Commission for Historic Monuments, Buildings and Landscapes from 1990 to 1993 and is a member of the Romanian National Committee of ICOMOS.

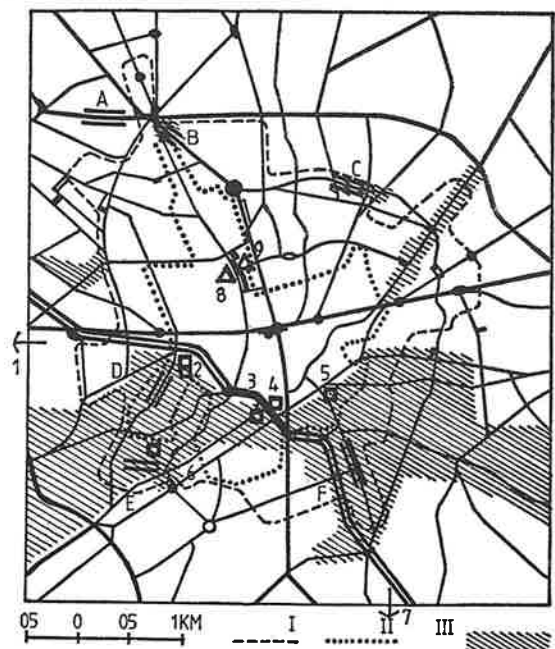
Peter Derer points out the need for achieving a complex balance between economic development and conservation of the cultural heritage. Till such time as architects reconcile the relationship between urban development and the cultural heritage, he stresses the need for, and correct application of, a conservation law. Such a law, he says, will help to overcome the radical urbanist ideology of totalitarianism.

The introduction of the systematisation law of 1974 initiated a period of radical restructuring of towns and villages in Romania. The large-scale building policy of party and government — reconstruction of town centres throughout the country, and especially in Bucharest, expansion of the so-called 'viable' villages, building-up and modernisation of the old residential quarters, extension of the transport network, which was aimed at the creation of a 'new living environment for new people' — found a large following among builders, architects and engineers. During this boom in building, which actively involved the majority of state institutions — banks, research centres, design institutes, the building and construction industry — the specialists involved could count on social, material and, in some cases, professional advantages.

Economic, cultural and social motivations which have moulded the long-term thinking of many town planners and architects help to explain the reserved reaction of intellectuals in the face of the large-scale demolition of historically valuable buildings. After the Historic Building Office was abolished in 1977 and with the small interested sector of public opinion having problems of a more fundamental nature to deal with, there was no effective resistance within the country to this destructive policy, to which many old town centres, important architectural features and buildings fell victim. In statistical terms, only a few protected buildings were demolished prior to 1990, because the list of protected buildings, which was already completed in 1995 — and which in any case covered only a minimal part of the stock of valuable buildings — was not allowed to be extended. As a result of the so-called policy of systematisation, more than half the towns lost their historical centres. Even in Bucharest, an area of around 5.5 square kilometres (containing around 40,000 residential units) in the central areas of the city was cleared and completely rebuilt. The political justification for this was that Bucharest was to become the continent's first socialist

capital. That meant not only the construction of a new centre with a parade boulevard and a large square for rallies in front of the imposing House of the People, but also the homogenisation of living conditions through the replacement of the villa district with high-rise estates, displacement and concentration of industrial units on the outskirts, separation of official transport zones from the other public transport routes, separation of retail use of the ground floors of the boulevards from residential use of the upper floors, etc. In contrast to art historians, most civic leaders, architects and builders justified such measures as follows: The old buildings has no heritage value and were in poor condition

Fig. 1. Town plan of Bucharest



(no mention of the inadequate maintenance and the lack of any funding for the upkeep of buildings, especially after the most recent earthquakes of 1997, 1986 and 1990). Other arguments included the allegedly insufficient building density and the excessive cost of renovation work.

There are currently around 4000 qualified architects in Romania, that means approximately one architect for every 6000 inhabitants. Almost all are graduates of the School of Architecture in Bucharest, where for many years the teaching was influenced by the example of the former Ecole des

Beaux-Arts in Paris. There are now also architecture departments at the universities of Iasi/Jassy, Cluj/Klausenburg and Timisoara/Temeschburg). The main subject here was the teaching of practical design; town planning and conservation, in particular, were subsidiary subjects. Among the graduates, there is a sense of pride and a certain elite mentality, whereby the most commonly-cited principle emphasises the right of each generation to its own architecture. The leading role of the architect in building and town planning was also supposed to be derived from

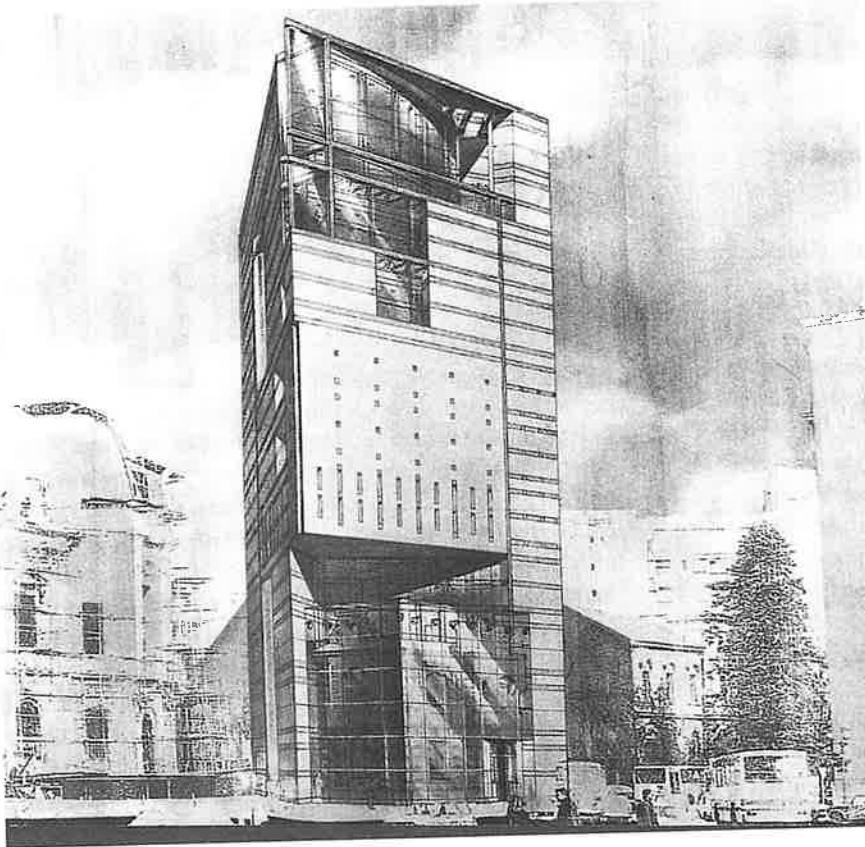
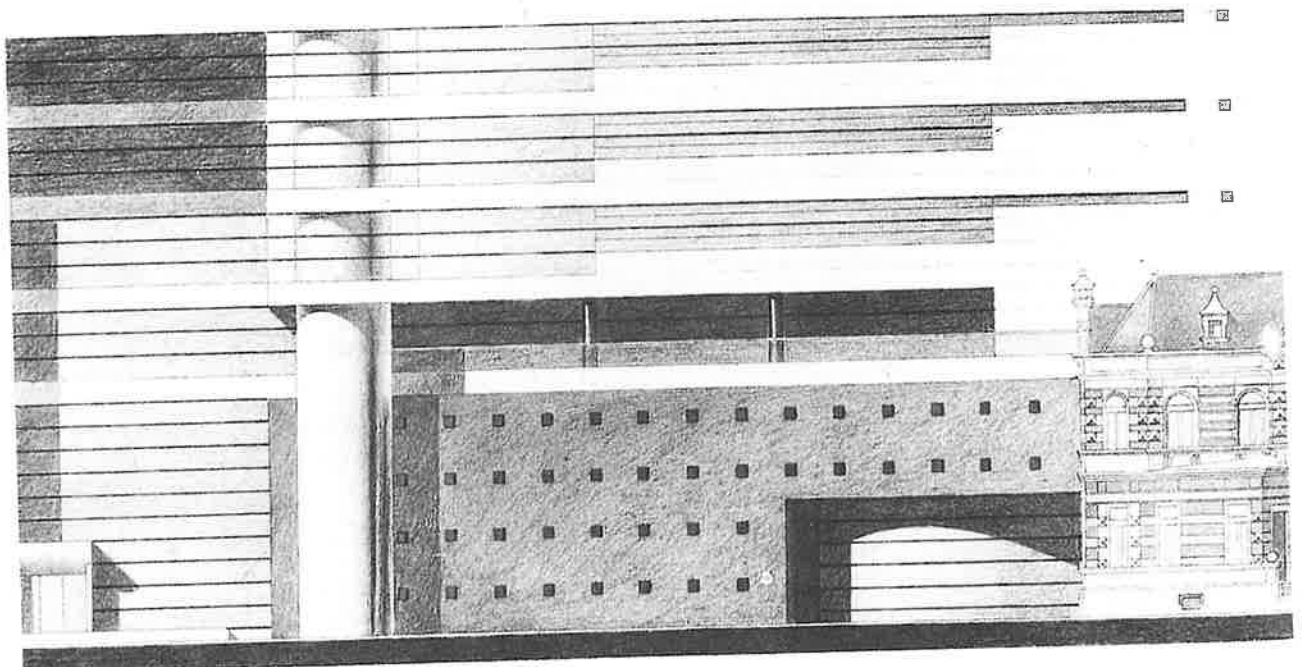


Fig. 2, 3. Bucharest: headquarters of the Romanian Chamber of Architects, competition designs 1992



this principle.

Before 1990, architects were for the most part state officials, either within integrated design institutes or in the fields of administration or training. As the powerful design institutes were dissolved during the course of the privatisation process, architects were among the first specialists to set up private offices. However, the transition from the centralised economy with a wealthy client, the state, to a market economy where private orders have become less frequent and smaller has also influenced the way architects have practised their profession. Nowadays they are increasingly less concerned with complying with building standards and principles, which are in any case minimal, than with meeting the requirements of the private client. In order to be able to protect their interests, some of the architects have joined together in the newly-founded Association of Architects. In addition, their social status continues to be promoted by the Ministry of Public Works' Department of Urban Development and Town Planning and the technical departments of the local authorities. Not least those architects should be mentioned who occupy special positions on a political level (parliament, parties, government) and who also endeavour to support the interests of their colleagues.

As regards the conservation of historic buildings, possibilities remain limited as before, despite the gradual overcoming of the legacy of socialism. During the upheavals of 1990, the systematisation law and the old law for the protection of the national heritage were repealed. New institutional structures were gradually established, including the National Commission for Historic Monuments, Buildings and Landscapes and the central Historic Buildings Office in Bucharest, which is scientifically subordinate to the Commission and which belongs, administratively, to the Ministry of Culture. The Historic Buildings Office consists of around 110 officials, of whom only 30 are architects. A number of these formed part of the organisation's earlier incarnation. The Commission was able to form regional commissions in the seven historical provinces and in the capital. However, the office is still waiting for the conservation law which was put before parliament in October 1991 but has not yet been passed. However, the chances of the draft being accepted soon are remote, due to the complex political situation. The recently completed list of historic monuments which, with 22,000 entries and perhaps 30,000 objects, continues to remain below the level of other European countries, is unlikely to be brought into force. This also means that the Historic Buildings Office has no concrete grounds for exercising its controlling function and protecting the registered monuments on a legal basis.

Legal provisions

The absence of a binding legal basis resulted in a certain lack of discipline in the building sector. The poor coordination of the new legislation has also caused confusion. Even the new constitutional law makes no provision for this part of the nation's assets. Furthermore, it must be emphasised that the land laws etc. contain a number of provisions which are contradictory with regard to various,

albeit secondary, aspects. For example, the regulations on the conservation of archaeological sites and historic features lying outside towns are rather weak. In some cases, the local authorities, who unfortunately have no access to adequately qualified personnel, were granted too much authority in the area of conservation. A building permit within a protected zone can still be issued either by the Historic Buildings Office or the Department of Urban Development and Town Planning of the Ministry of Public Works.

In addition, the lack of a conservation law has encouraged those elements opposed to the goals of conservation and reinforced the lobby who do not agree with the National Commission's draft legislation. This legal vacuum (which has already lasted three years) has led to a lack of acceptance of the need to conserve buildings. In addition to the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Public Works, it has also affected the Architects' Association and the National Association of Conservators (whose members include many architects). This dispute, which unfortunately extends far beyond the scientific aspect, was in part instigated by architects, who naturally have a greater interest in the various aspects of redevelopment than in the questions of conservation and the protection of old structures.

The main problem remains the establishment of conservation zones. The last, not yet official list of historic monuments included squares, streets, urban areas (residential estates, industrial centres, green areas, etc.) as well as town centres with historically valuable buildings. Although the proposals were based on well-grounded on-site examinations by specialists, there were cases where architects from the local technical offices refused to extend the list of monuments to include conservation zones (groups of historic buildings). Local authorities resisted the preservation of old buildings on the pretext that completed development plans existed for certain sites, and that these had to be carried out even where such projects involved the demolition and redevelopment of an area of a town under the since-repealed systematisation law; or on the pretext that the surviving houses had been expropriated before 1989 and the necessary financing for the new housing had already been secured (e.g. Sibiu/Hermannstadt, Orastie/Broos).

A different position is taken by the town planners (these too are architects in Romania) who work for the Department of Urban Development and Regional Planning. They take the view that the competence of the National Commission for Historic Monuments must be restricted to individual objects. Zone conservation should only be regarded as part of town planning and, as such, should come under the jurisdiction of the local authorities. This disregards the fact that, before the change of regime, whole quarters, especially the historical centres of many of Romania's towns, were demolished or radically restructured. The technicians of the former central authorities, as well as those of the local authorities, were also responsible for this. In order to prevent such losses of historic buildings, it is necessary that the establishment of conservation zones should, at least temporarily, remain the responsibility of the National

Commission and the Historic Buildings Office (Signhisoara/Schässburg, Oradea/Großwardein).

A great many architects claim that conservation zones are not really necessary, that towns and villages should be allowed to continue their existence without restriction, and that any conservation measures ultimately prove to be insurmountable obstacles to the development process. In the move towards a market economy, where land is regarded as a veritable gold mine, most of the historical town centres are coming under severe economic pressure. Naturally, the owners want to exploit their properties intensively. However, what is remarkable is not only that they are supported by the architects, but that these sometimes go even further. With the intention of developing urban structures, they interfere directly and, without making any exception for the valuable buildings in historical town centres, alter their internal structure or external appearance through the use of inappropriate materials. For this reason, some architects only wish to allow the National Commission for Historical Monuments, Buildings and Landscapes, a limited, advisory function. In their opinion, the restriction of their design activity limits their freedom of creativity. In contrast, the conservationists, who include historians, ethnographers, archaeologists and art historians, claim that such views (encouraged by the continuing uncertain situation in the area of legislation) can largely be regarded as a relic of the old mentality which was widespread under the dictatorship.

Building projects

If one ventures to review the most recent building projects, one can generally observe, on a local level, the continued existence of traditional concepts and practices which have little in common with the more recent philosophy of conservation. Although the systematisation law has been repealed, its products — development of whole areas — continue to be in use. In Sibiu/Hermannstadt, the mayor's office proposes to demolish the remaining houses in an area of the old town, most of which was cleared prior to 1989. In Sigisoara/Schässburg, the newly-elected mayor is very concerned that a project for the lower town, which was completed prior to the fall of the old regime, should be implemented. Even in Bucharest, the Historic Buildings Office was unable to prevent the approval of an old proposal by the local project institute, whereby the widening of a street led to the demolition of one of the last intact city blocks of valuable buildings situated on an intersection.

The treatment of listed buildings usually also follows the same rules. The privatisation process meant that almost all ground floors in the historical centres of towns are being converted. Each new shop owner or entrepreneur wants advertisements and signs. The architects support such endeavours by sacrificing valuable old features and architectural details, resulting in the destruction of the unified character of the façades of entire streets. Examples such as the Temesvarer fortress in Banat can be found in many towns, but in this case the incompatibility of two sections of building of differing quality is particularly striking. There are also cases where parts of old buildings disappear because architects (again for reasons of status) apply the principle of purity of style, for example in the Sarat area (around 200

km east of Bucharest). Here a much-altered royal residence from the 17th century is to be restored, with the sections which were added later being removed without sources for the original architecture being available.

Not infrequently, listed buildings are reconstructed internally and externally, which is almost equivalent to a total destruction of the historical heritage. Several examples of this sort of situation can be found in Bucharest: the fashion house of a retail company is being installed in a rich 19th century apartment house which has been gutted, while the famous Manuc Inn in the old town centre is to be converted into a 4-star luxury hotel, which will require radical alterations. It is regrettable when architects make no effort to convince their clients of the value of a building, as in the case of the Gabroveni Inn on Lipskani (Leipzig) Street, one of the last examples dating from the late 18th century. It should be emphasised that the capital, which is around 500 years old, contains no secular buildings which are older than this.

Numerous conflicts arise where new buildings are constructed in old surroundings, especially in conservation zones. The trend towards the intensive use of building sites ultimately leads to solutions similar to those which were criticised prior to 1989. Some architects who have adopted the arguments of the conservationists have revised their original projects in order to make the planned new buildings harmonise better with their surroundings. The designs for the district schools inspectorate in Craiova (Oltenia) and for a Catholic church in Macin (a small town in Dobrukscha), which is to be built near a Muslim mosque, are worthy of mention. A controversial project in Brasov/Kronstadt, part of which had been commenced before the change of regime, was actually going to be completed, despite the stubborn opposition of a number of architects, conservationists and local residents. The builder — the University of Brasov — therefore commissioned the architects to adapt those buildings which had already been erected to an architectural form which was better integrated with the medieval town centre.

Usually, however, the architects use the principle already mentioned in order to justify the implementation of their projects, without taking the location into consideration. Unfortunately most of them are not willing to address the question of a harmonic juxtaposition of old and new. This assertion is illustrated by two examples which concern particularly important sites: the giant ecclesiastical building directly next to the famous wooden church in Cuhea (a village in the northern province of Maramures) and the gigantic laboratory building of the village museum in Bucharest which is being completed despite the repeated protests of experts, intellectuals and residents. None of these buildings has received final approval from the National Commission for Historical Monuments.

A final form of aggressive interference within the protected zones is represented by the new bank and office buildings of various Romanian and foreign companies which are establishing branches in the major cities as a consequence of the transition to a market economy. In Timisoara, a high-rise block with underground parking is being built a few

metres from the only remaining Baroque bastion. A bank building which, because of its dimensions, blocks the view of part of the remaining old town, has been designed for Tulcea (a port in the Danube Delta). However, in Bucharest, many more projects for high-rise office blocks are being submitted which, for lack of a town-planning concept, are not being planned at appropriate locations. The headquarters of the trading company 'Industriaexport' (an example of high-quality architecture) will scarcely blend with a residential area dating from the early 19th century. Nonetheless, it is not only the young architects who adhere to an approach which, like the two award-winning projects for the headquarters of the Romanian Association of Architects, illustrates the current relationship between this profession and the cultural heritage: either as a delicate ornament in crass contrast to the bleak modern architecture or as a historical relic to be isolated from the environment in a glass case.

Conclusions

The building boom which took place throughout Europe

from the 1960s to the 1980s coincided, in Romania, with the time of the dictatorship. Although much was built (especially housing estates and industrial zones), many architects felt restricted in their freedom of creativity. It is hard for them to understand why such restrictions should continue following the change of regime in December 1989. Some have even found new arguments for their old concepts which are derived from the transition to a market economy. They remain incapable of achieving that complex balance between economic development and conservation of the cultural heritage which might better reflect the new circumstances. In order to counteract such a situation, there is an urgent requirement for a conservation law which is correctly applied. However, in the long term, solutions must be found which can reconcile the thinking of most architects with respect to the relationship between urban development and cultural heritage. Only then might it be possible to overcome the radical urbanist ideology of totalitarianism and help establish normality in the relationship between architecture and conservation.