

Looking down on or looking up to Bucharest's public spaces

Militari and Drumul Taberei between vernacular design and urban policies

by Ioana Tudora and Mihai Culescu

Bucharest today is a city confronted with rampant political resignation: the seven town halls (both the six sector or municipal ones and the main metropolitan one) are hotbeds of corruption, and civil society is too weak to form a credible resistance against the construction and development mafia since the population remains, for the most part, passive. In this rather grim context the future of public spaces cannot be very bright. Usually neglected by the municipalities, small public spaces (squares, street alignments, parks, etc) are nevertheless once in a while subjected to huge and useless investments such as for exotic plants or kitsch 'amenities'. This kind of 'care' for public spaces is reinforced particularly during the regular electoral campaigns, in order to impress the awed population.

Meanwhile, important public spaces, such as parks, lake shores, sport clubs and swimming pools are dismantled in order to make place for malls or other real estate developments. This happens in the most discreet way, far from the public eye. In addition, the public spaces surrounding the communist apartment blocks are more or less abandoned by the municipality, and if not they are mutilated by weird and expensive ornamental objects. Where public administration is generally ignoring these small (but extensive) spaces, neighbourhood dwellers are using them in a variety of ways. Green surfaces are transformed into parking lots, garages are placed on the vacant and 'free' land, and little shops are erected.

Those spaces which have fared better are usually cared for by neighbourhood dwellers. Some people, those that live on the ground floors of the former socialist apartment blocks, create their own private gardens in front of their windows, on what is in actual fact public space, thus increasing the inhabitable surface. Others are creating shared do-it-yourself spaces, improvised and used by groups of neighbours, indicative of a DIY mentality that has the potential to transform temporary spaces (Haydn and Temel 2006). Yet, in spite of the lack of coherent policies at the municipal level, the Administration of Public Spaces sees it fit to sometimes destroy these informal and improvised

arrangements based on small personal and collective investments in the name of 'civic' values or aesthetical or ethical arguments.

In this context it is appropriate to talk about a fight for public space and public spatial resources. The city authorities, in tandem with the big developers, are imagining public space as a repository of all sorts of empty plots, ready to be filled with huge structures, according to a sort of logic of exploitation that defines these public spaces as unused capital (Haydn and Temel, 2006). Ground floor dwellers, on the other hand, are imagining the very same plots as private spaces, as tentacles of their apartments, while others have appropriated them to park their car, fighting with the other neighbors over whether a parking lot can be 'owned' and if so by whom. Women are dreaming about informal playgrounds for their kids, men are dreaming about grills, beers and backgammon. Meanwhile different professionals are imagining perfect mono-functional solutions: architects are dreaming about new houses to be constructed, town planners are imagining new streets or other kind of infrastructural solutions, landscape architects keep talking about urban ecology and the maintenance of green (non-ornamental) areas.

In this conflicting ambience we have tried, together with our students, to imagine how to create a congruous environment in the Drumul Taberei and Militari areas. Those are two of the largest assemblies of communist apartment blocks in Bucharest, with more than half million people living there today. The usual approach to such a project would be to start with a birds-eye-view strategic plan. This is the 'professional' attitude, consistent with the way in which those neighborhoods were initially conceived anyway (what the Danish architect and urban designer Jan Gehl has called bird-shit urbanism, where the architects' droppings are deposited on the land underneath). This top-down perspective does not pay attention to the little gestures nor the little spots of conflict or harmony. It is an abstract image of a future city that nobody can imagine in every detail. Nevertheless, as Mies van der Rohe taught us, "God is in the details", so we have tried to

approach a large scale project from a bottom-up perspective, starting from the details in search of a more general vision. Thus, in the framework of an urban landscape planning project the students analyzed the vernacular spaces around the blocks, as well as the general open space framework of the whole district, aiming to understand both private necessities in the proximate spaces of dwelling but also the urban general layout of green and public spaces.

The project, which students develop during the fifth semester of their studies in landscape design, has two aspects. The first is a more anthropological one, focusing on actual space uses, and on individual and community behavior in and approaches to public space. Interviews and observations made *in situ* reveal a series of appropriations of public space, generating both conflict and cooperation between groups of dwellers or between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. The 'insider' status is not necessarily granted on the basis of one living in the neighborhood, but rather on forms of participation in joint activities such as gardening, spending time in the self-built pavilions, sharing the play-ground or other public spaces. Thus, along the lines of Norbert Elias's concepts of 'involvement' and 'detachment' (Elias, 1987), it is possible to discern a detached 'outsiders' approach and a parallel vernacular construction of public spaces and of the community, generated by common practices and involvement in DIY projects for a shared benefit. In the light of the fact that the decisions that matter are usually made on a higher political level, this kind of vernacular interventions are normally temporary intrusions in a site that seek to make alternatives evident (Haydn and Temel 2006). Where the 'insiders' are explaining their actions as a reaction to the lack of care shown by the local administration and as a solution for their needs, the 'outsiders' (authorities, developers, urban designers, or even the uninvolved dwellers) are often claiming the illegality of the vernacular occupations, an attitude that is more often than not also motivated by their own private projects.

The second aspect of what students are doing is to design an urban plan, focusing on green

infrastructure and public spaces networks, which aims to propose a coherent and comprehensive green system, integrating and connecting peripheral natural areas, urban parks, and wastelands recovered through landscape design. At the same time, based on the first part of the study, the aim is to integrate the vernacular perspectives and practices of the 'insiders' and to propose further detailed projects that can be matched with and incorporated into the 'outsiders' perspectives. Thus the strategic plan is not generated by a 'general' vision, but is rather the result of a process of negotiation between the existing realities and daily practices of actual space use and the more 'abstract' necessities of the entire city, like public health, accessibility, social integration, urban ecology and sustainable development.

Unlike most urban design projects our aim is not to search for aesthetical solutions, i.e. design for the sake of creating generic beauty, but to try to develop an ethical approach, based on functional, social and ecological requirements which can respond to both the general strategic demands and small communities' needs and identities.

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Chart created by students: Simona Boboceanu, Andreea David, Raluca Dincă, Cristina Stănescu



Biographies:

Grăia Bădescu is a urban design consultant at Space Syntax Romania. In 2009 he finished his Masters Thesis with the title *Public space in the post-socialist city: the case of Bucharest*, at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He received his BA in geography and European studies in 2007 at Middlebury College, Vermont, USA (thesis with the title *Architecture, identity and politics in the reconstruction of German cities after the Second World War*).

Irina Botea is a visual artist, whose works combine cinema verite and direct cinema with reenactment strategies, auditions and rehearsals. She lives and works in Bucharest and Chicago, and she is currently teaching at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. Solo and group shows include: New Museum (NY), National Gallery Jeu de Paume (Paris), Reina Sofia National Museum (Madrid), Gwangju Biennale 2010, U -Turn Quadriennale (Copenhagen), 51st Venice Biennale, Prague Biennale, Kunst-Werke, (Berlin), Casa Encendida (Madrid), Salzburger Kunstverein, (Austria), Kunsthalle Winterthur, Argos Center for Art and Media (Brussels), Artefact festival (Leuven), Rotterdam Film Festival, HMKV Halle (Dortmund), Casino de Luxembourg, Kunstforum, (Viena), Foksal Gallery (Warsaw, Poland), MNAC (National Museum of Contemporary Art (Bucharest), Museum of Contemporary Art in Szczecin (Poland), Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle (Warsaw).

Călin Dan. With a background in art history and theory, Călin combines in his work research and free invention, developing projects that bring together social concerns with aspects of entertainment and pop culture. Călin received international recognition with his videos and photographs from the series *Emotional architecture*, where he explores the delicate balance between people and their habitat. His work has been showcased in international film festivals (Osnabrück, Oberhausen, Rotterdam, La Rochelle), art biennales (Venice, Sao Paolo, Sydney), art museums and galleries in Europe, the USA and Australia. His videos are distributed currently by Video Data Bank, Chicago.

Mădălina Diaconu is Dozentin at the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Vienna. Between 2007 and 2010 she was project manager of the research program 'Haptic and Olfactory Design: Resources for Vienna's Creative Industries'. Relevant publications include the monographs *Tasten, Riechen, Schmecken. Eine Ästhetik der anästhesierten Sinne* (Würzburg 2005), *Bukarest – Wien. Eine kulturhistorische Touristik an Europas Rändern* (with Lukas Marcel Vosicky, Berlin 2007), and *Sinnesraum Stadt. Eine multisensorische Anthropologie* (forthcoming). She co-edited the volumes *Sensorisches Labor Wien. Urbane Haptik- und Geruchsforschung* (with Gerhard Buchbauer, James G. Skone, Karl-Georg Bernhardt and Elisabeth Menasse-Wiesbauer; Berlin, London 2011), and *Senses and the City. An Interdisciplinary Approach to Urban Sensescapes* (with Eva Heuberger, Ruth Mateus-Berr, and Lukas Marcel Vosicky, Berlin, London 2011).

Ger Duijzings is Reader in the Anthropology of Eastern Europe at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London, Director of the Centre for South-East European Studies and Co-Director of the Urban Laboratory at University College London (UCL). He published widely on the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, and is author of monographs on Kosovo (2000) and Srebrenica (2002), and co-editor of a

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Simona Dumitriu teaches at the Photo-Video Department of the National University of Arts in Bucharest and is a member of the visual research project Ro_Archive. As a New Europe College fellow, she does research on post-1945 Romanian art. She has a PhD in visual arts, with a thesis on the archive as instrument and concept in contemporary art.

Aurora Király is a visual artist, curator and cultural manager. Since October 2001 she is the director of Galeria Nouă Association – a NGO which supports and promotes contemporary art. Between October 2001 - March 2008 she curated an important number of exhibitions and events at the Galeria Nouă exhibition space. Starting from 2007 she coordinates *Witnesses XXI - Revisiting the Past* (project in progress) – a collection of video interviews with Romanian artists, art critics and curators from different generations. In 2006 she was the editor of the bilingual book *Photography in contemporary art. Trends in Romania after 1989* published by Galeria Nouă at Unarte Publishing House, Bucharest. In 2007 she joined the research team of the National University of Arts Bucharest and she started to teach at the Photography and Time-Based Media Art Department.

Margareta Kern is a London based artist, originally from Bosnia-Herzegovina, whose practice explores the potential of image-making as a critical engagement with the social and political sphere. A graduate of Goldsmiths College (BA Fine Art, 1998), and University College London (MA Visual and Material Culture/South East European Studies, 2010) her work has been shown extensively including Impressions Gallery (Bradford), Tate Modern (London), Museum of Contemporary Art Budapest, Institute of Contemporary Interdisciplinary Arts Bath, HDLU Gallery (Zagreb), Kurt-Kurt Gallery (Berlin), and Margaret Harvey Gallery (University of Herefordshire). www.margaretakern.com

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Mircea Nicolae was born 1980 in Romania. He studied at the University of Bucharest, where he earned a degree in European Cultural Studies from the Department of Literature, with a final thesis on the House of the People. Then, he enrolled for a Masters in the Anthropology of Space at the Ion Mincu Institute for Architecture, Bucharest. Nicolae currently lives and works in Bucharest. He has developed a distinctive body of work researching the economical and socio-political structure of Bucharest through anonymous interventions in public space. He reflects on the social consequences of consumption, urban legislation and architectural production. His latest work called *Romanian Kiosk Company* won the Special Prize at the 2010 edition of the Future Generation Art Prize. The jury consisted of Daniel Birnbaum, Okwui Enwezor, Yuko Hasegawa, Ivo Mesquita, Eckhard Schneider, Robert Storr and Ai Wei Wei.

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