Ilinca Păun Constantinescu, curator *Shrinking Cities în România.* Between Reality and realities – an exhibition

National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest
April 20 – October 9, 2016

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Are cities a surprising exhibit in a contemporary art museum? Romanian *shrinking cities* displayed at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, precisely in the Palace of Parliament (the former Ceaușecu's monstrous House of People) did represent a surprising event. Surprising not because the museum hosted it – after all the MNAC already has a tradition to open very diverse exhibitions connected to nowadays art and realities – but due to its content and views, imbued with passion: the passion of the curator and the invited artists, the passion of participants at various events, the passion of visitors' reactions, all in accord with this moving topic.

Ilinca Păun Constantinescu, talented and enthusiast architect-curator, conceived, assembled and used the exhibition as both a vibrant, heteroclite *ad-hoc* collection and as an instrument/pretext for debates and other "orbiting" events: film projections, round tables, concerts, exhibitions-within-exhibition, workshops, theater performances. Together with her energetic extended team, she demonstrates the balanced ability to bring together the (needed) explanations of the concept, the dry, consistent (and alarming) data concerning the processes of change in Romanian cities, on one hand, with images, objects, models, drawings testifying the "realities" and their evolutions, and also the few, but both ingenious and ingenuous artists', architects', planners' and community members' reactions.

The exhibition is structured in three parts – (1) "The Information Filter", (2) "Urban Conditions: a Direct Investigation" and (3) "Reactions, Interventions" – and invites to an exciting journey from statistical data to communities and peoples' real lives and reactions. Thus, the three main intentions – information and education, arts and their synergetic views, and awareness and social mobilization – are brought together to reflect the dramatic changes affecting more than half of Romanian cities.

Setting the scene, the introductory part starts with a brief history of the concept itself – from studies in the 1980's in Germany and USA, to the already classical *Atlas der Schrumpfenden Städte* [Atlas of Shrinking Cities] of Philipp Oswalt and Tim Rieniets in 2006 – centering then on an impressive model-map illustrating in a clear manner the documented figures, showing how from the 320 country's cities, 163 cross a shrinking process between 1989 and 2012; moreover, 63 of them have lost more than 30% of their population. Much more in-depth explanations and interpretation of data, showing the complexity and the multi-faceted processes of change, are given in the exhibition catalogue, by Ilinca Păun Constantinescu, who excellently studied the subject in her PhD thesis.

In most of the shrinkage cases everywhere, it is mainly economic globalization that triggered the decline of some sectors (mining, metallurgy or machine industries, manufacturing of various types): the fusion of markets, globally or macro-regionally were critical causes. When this external *tsunami*-like cause had not been met with economic-restructuring responsive, coherent and quickly implemented policies at *both* national *and* local level, the shrinking process became harsher and with accelerated pace. In the all-too-well documented case of the former East Germany, not only the globalization was topped by the need to restructure a socialist-state

MUZEUL NAȚIONAL DE ARTĂ CONTEMPORANĂ

ORAȘE ROMÂNEȘTI ÎN DECLIN / SHRINKING CITIES IN ROMANIA

20.04.2016 – 09.10.2016

Curator:
Ilinca Păun Constantinescu

Artiști / Artists:
Ion Barbu, Andrei Dăscălescu, Tudor Constantinescu și ideilagram, Mihai Sima, Andreea Iancu, Raluca Sabău, Stejara Timiș, Anca Trestian, Ioana Cîrlig, Marin Raica, Irina Tulbure, Andreea Chirică, Celia Ghyka, Alex Călin și Asociația «cu a mic», Alexandru Belc, Teodora Ana Mihai

Arhitecți / Architects:
Iulia Curiman, Alexandru Păun, Laura Popa-Florea
Grafica expoziției / Exhibition Graphics: Gabriela Belcineanu
Coordonator MNAC / MNAC Coordinator: Daniela Calciu

Vernisaj / Opening
19h00
20.04.2016

Miercuri–Duminică /
Wednesday–Sunday
10h00–18h00
Acces / Entrance
Calea 13 Septembrie
www.mnac.ro

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1989
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2011
CREȘTEREA ȘI DESCREȘTEREA DEMOGRAFICĂ
DEMOGRAPHIC GROWTH AND DECLINE


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I. FILTRUL DE INFORMARE / THE INFORMATION FILTER
CĂ ÎN RAI*
ATE RĂDE?
E DRACU'!
*PATRIA
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economy, but the *opportunities* represented by the west in the re-unified Germany stimulated population migration close to an American pace (there, for various reasons, the people migrate much quicker in their search for new jobs — let us remember the ghost-cities), not only increasing the percentage of shrinking, but also dramatically changing the community balances, since the most productive, skilled, ultimately more determined people were leaving the towns and cities.

Romania was both a typical state-owned socialist economy and a country that, after the crucial 1989 events, decided to build a new democratic state; but at the same time, the economic situation was the result of an intensive, eastward oriented, false-self-sufficient industrialization, a process which dramatically influenced the in-country migration, with mono-industrial towns mushrooming here and there, with "new" administrative centers without the human resources and institutions (including their buildings) to assume a positive dynamic regional role, not to speak about discretionary decision of public spending or economic development taken by the dictator himself. Consequently, the "low-tide" was more spectacular and affected dramatically the more vulnerable cities and towns in terms of economy structure and competitiveness, in terms of migration, labor qualification and level of general education, and obviously in terms of type and quality of the "new democracy".

In her study, Ilinca Păun Constantinescu groups the Romanian shrinking cities in several classes using demographic criteria:
(a) large and rather stable cities above 200,000 — among which Braşov and Galaţi have suffered the most radical economy-changes, but with different impact (and we also must not forget that between 1992 and 2002, all large cities in Romania have lost at least 10% of their population);
(b) cities above 100,000 — relatively stable, but with a more variable pre-1989 history, many of which multiplied their population in three to four decades; among them, Bacău and Brăila seem the most affected, with more than one third loss in population;
(c) towns above 50,000 — many of them "young" county capitals, which are either stagnant or losing around 20% of population, with the notable exception of traditional heavy industry centers like Reşiţa and Hunedoara, where the decline is 40% or higher, because of their failure to re-built competitiveness for industrial activities;
(d) towns between 20,000 and 50,000 — more diverse in changes according to their differences in terms of economic profile, multi- or mono-specialization, or in terms of "personal history", which are also affected by shrinking in various ways (and probably here, the variation in population is less important, compared to the economic vitality and, in the last decade, to the more or less temporary over-the-borders work);
(e) towns between 3,000 and 50,000 — many of which mono-industrial, are under "decrease or metamorphosis"; among them, those whose economic profile was linked to mining, metallurgy, machine industries, are the most affected (with a little more than 20,000 inhabitants, Petrila is one of them, as are the rest of Jiu Valley towns, but also as many others spread within the country); for these cases, if there is no near *new pole* in terms of economic attraction, the trap of crisis is less breakable for them.

Completing the "information filter", printed on flyers easy to assemble "by choice" in a booklet, there are 30 short essays written by anthropologists, urban planners, architects, sociologists or geographers, economists or public policy experts, not only reinforcing converging views, focusing on specific subjects or processes, but also allowing a perception of the many consequences materialized in problems that need coherent and sustained responses via policies and programs, both national and regional/local.

From the *reality* of the shrinking processes of so many cities and towns, the second "step" of the exhibition plunges the visitors deep into *realities*: shaped as a metaphorical helix, "the state of facts" section assembles photos, videos, installations, objects, comics, all telling stories of individuals and families affected by the very changes that brought about by the cities' shrinking, or by its consequences.

Moving from production spaces ("the engine", the economy) and public equipment to public spaces and housing, the photos of Tudor Constantinescu and IDEILAGRAM, striking, geometric in construction, cruel in light and with poignant contrasts between shadows and strong colors, testify to "the Phenomenon": the abandonment, the decay and dilapidation, the deterioration to ruin. As synonymic as these words are, the nuances are discernible in images of production halls without machineries, of cultural buildings reduced to bare walls, of shops without merchandise, of flats without inhabitants, of windows without onlookers, of empty walls without window frames, of rooms without outer walls, of apartment buildings devoid of life, of public spaces without public. Only here and there, left-behind objects are suddenly visible, and more important, as witnesses of the by-gone human existences as they were in the daily life of the past, some of them accompany the photos. Ioana Cârlig and Marin Raica document in their "photographic project" destinies and attitudes in two mining towns, Brad and Petrila: the suitcase (one of the above-mentioned objects), nesting in a photo between a strong middle-aged worker and his wife with two apples in hand, becomes charged with evocative value – the need to move away, to find another community in whose identity to blend, to be part of.

Three other contributions are increasing the visitor sensitivity to the urban dynamics associated with shrinking and to the marks left on children, mature or old people's lives: "Waiting for August" (the month when parents working abroad are coming to see their left-behind children in home-towns) by Teodora Ana Mihai, "Cinema, mon amour" documentary (the death of cinema-halls as both technique and space, but also as education and meeting place) by Alexandru Belc, and "Site under Construction" – an installation by Mihai Sima, Andreea Iancu, Raluca Sabău, Stejara Timiș and Anca Trestian, about the socialist accelerated industrialization and the towns' decay under a chaotic economic restructuration, abandoned at to the mercy of the "free market forces", and resulting in sites waiting for new uses and in communities strongly affected to the point of breaking-away.

Irina Tulbure, together with Andreea Chirică, Celia Ghyka, Alex Călin and Asociația «cu a mic» focus on the "House of Culture", an epitomical architecture object for the *new centers* of most of the cities and towns in Romania, over almost four decades. In spite of clear propagandistic motivations and ideological control, the buildings had "their way" of evolving, reflecting both the traditional architecture influences (when national identity became a propaganda coined obsession) and sometimes surprising echoes of contemporary architecture (from Japan, to France or Finland). Caught in the ideological and political shifts after 1990, but surely because of the lack of (national and local) governments' preoccupation for their possible role within the community, and also damaged by the lack of institutional strengths, the "houses of culture" were in most cases transformed in *receptacles* of virtual any economical or leisure activity, shipwrecked in the new crisis of small and medium cities, with distorted, if not lost, meanings. And hence, the failure of both institutions and built objects to play a pro-active and balancing role in the storm generated by the economic restructuring (either on a *laissez-faire* basis or on accelerated shut-ups and decay of non-competitive activities), precisely in the towns and cities more affected by the shrinking processes. On the one hand, the visitors may understand via a documentary the *saga* of the architectural programs and styles, and on the other, the *new referential role* is reflected in comics-style drawings, imbued with humor and sometimes sarcastic irony.

The third part of the exhibition is more precise in space and concerning personalities: "Planeta Petrila" was transformed from a humorous name, to a reality-based virtual identity, to a local group's initiative, a social alarm bell and community mobilization instrument, arriving at a somehow *school without the school* level and *creative spirit forging* almost-current. Ion Barbu's stage (as the catalogue defines it), Planeta Petrila is testifying not only about the artist's prolific talent (reputed cartoonist, but also as photographer, street artist, pedagogue and *aktion*-maker), but about his fight (so close to literary sense) with preconceptions, prejudices, narrow-minded politicians, ferocious pseudo-investors, even with indifference and ignorance within Petrila community. The artist-as-fighter, in "culturally conquering the decaying industrial spaces" (as the catalogue poignantly phrases), and the resulting perception of what happens in Petrila (an extreme case of a shrinking mining town in the very depressed area which is the Jiu Valley) are documented

by director Andrei Dăscălescu's film "Ioane, keep walking"; the documentary is complemented by a second projection showing the last working days before the Petrila mine was shut down.

Despite the spectacular presence of Ion Barbu's bitter humor and the passion (the word is not used by chance!) proven by individuals, groups and organizations to save/protect buildings or other artifacts, but also to contribute to community mobilization and public perception and actions articulation, in this third part of the exhibition, the question is persistently growing: AND....?

Let us go back to Ilinca Păun Constantinescu's study: "We could group the perceptions of "Shrinking cities" in the following types: (a) disregard, (b) observation without acceptance, (c) certain acceptance, but without public communication, (d) acceptance with response-measures. The cities' and towns' governments in Romania are grouped in one of the first two types, but ignorance [or/and, I will add, "un-active complaining"] is dominant in the general perception". And there is, in fact, no coherent attitude from the national level, and no answer in actions, consequently; when evoked in political discourses, the shrinking processes are a pale presence, a fatalistic change that we have all to accept as being implacable in both rhythm and sad consequences.

Not only that strategies or public policies targeting shrinking cities processes are lacking the very important component which is defining *methods of social mobilization* (to use the words of John Friedman when he examines the virtues of *planning in the public domain,* in his cardinal 1987 book), but these strategies or policies are non-existent, neither at a national level, nor at a regional or local one, in spite of all types of elaborated plans and programs intended to "strategically build the sustainability" or to "access and absorb EU funds". The investment projects, the settled institutions, the social support programs are all "brand new", ignoring the already existent resources — and this is truly noticeable in spatial development, in failing to take advantage of the potential for conversions, in ecological reconstruction or in tailored social-assistance projects which are not ready to go beyond "palliative care". However, the fact that positive changing processes are possible is clearly supported by existing projects and programs; even if scarce, they proved that urban planning *and* community involvement actions can contribute to both a better understanding of changes and a more viable shaping of the future, like in "Brăila-laboratory" event and its "exhibition-within-exhibition", introduced by Angelica Stan and her colleagues.

The exhibition played an important educational role also for students from various universities, "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Planning being in poll-position: study tours, debates, round-tables and event tests were held in the welcoming spaces of the National Museum for Contemporary Art, validating somehow the courageous decision to host an exhibition dealing with economic and spatial realities.

Even if evidences might be gathered for supporting the definition of a "post-shrinking" stage in urban development of many Romanian cities, the lack of coherence in addressing the urban issues via consistent public policies at all administrative levels will generate more waste, more regional imbalances, more local polarizations and less intelligent uses of (still) existing resources.

Thus, "How to constructively manage a de-construction?", in Ilinca Păun Constantinescu's words, remains an open and loud question, even if it seems difficult to be heard (by decision makers mainly, but not only) from the "hardly accessible rear façade of the House of the Parliament" – as Ana Maria Zahariade points out in her introductive words for the high-quality catalogue of the exhibition.

Connected Events:

April, 20:	The Brass Band from Petrila
May, 28:	Teatrul Sub Pământ, „The Jiu Valley after 1989"
June, 17:	Auăleu, Timișoara, „The Farm"
July, 21-22:	Romanian-Norwegian architecture workshop: BRĂILA LABORATORY; exhibition and international round table
July, 28:	UrbanEye film nights, „ After the Factory"
September, 16:	Screening of the documentary „Cinema, mon Amour"; debate
October, 4-5:	Philipp Oswalt and Tim Rieniets conference


GALAŢI
ORAŞE MARI
> 200.000
- 18,85 % (din 1989)
centre de regiune,
BRAŞOV
ORAŞE MARI
AZUGA
ORAŞE
< 20.
- 32,49 % (din 1
BABADAG
ORAŞE MICI
< 20.000
- 15,02 % (din 1989)
dezvoltare limitată
foste sate sau comune cu profil agricol
erau în plan de restructurare în anii 1980,
ce nu a fost decât parțial implementat
SLATINA
ORAŞE MIJLOCII
50.000-99.999
- 18,6 % (din 1989)
centre de județ declarate în 1968
creșteri mari, constante
în perioada comunistă (x5,5)
intervenții în centrele orașelor, schimbări de imagine radicale
SLOBOZIA
ORAŞE MIJLOCII
50.000-99.999
- 11,3 % (din 1989)
centre de județ declarate în 1968
creșteri mari, constante
în perioada comunistă (x5,6)
intervenții în centrele orașelor, schimbări de imagine r
CARACAL
ORAŞE MIJLOCII-MICI
20.000-49.999
- 21,68 % (din 1989)
regres continuu
foste capitale de județ interbelice
regres artificial provocat în comunism
TURNU MĂGURELE
ORAŞE MIJLOCII-MICI
CONSTANŢA
ORAŞE MARI STABILE
> 200.000
- 10,14 % (din 1989)
centre de regiune,
-40%
-20%
-20%
1989


Focșani
Buzău
Brăila
Fetești
PIN IT!