

# Ascanio Damian, Trade Fair Designer Extraordinaire

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**KEYWORDS:** Ascanio Damian; exhibition design; international trade fairs; Expo '58; modernism

## Introduction

Large-scale commemorations, such as this year's First World War centennial, often prompt extended overviews of all human endeavors, in search of spectacular biographies or accomplishments that would sustain our unabated faith in humanity. Every profession or nation looks for its cornerstone events and heroes: the 2014 Venice Biennial is one eloquent instance in architecture. Joining in the commemorative atmosphere, we have looked for remarkable characters that impacted on Romanian architecture during the last century. The following text is the result of an attempt to correctly position the oeuvre of Ascanio Damian in the European architectural and political context of the time, while writing much needed notes on his puzzling biography. Born in 1914, Ascanio Damian was one of the hardcore modernists, a Corbusian *par excellence*.<sup>1</sup> His leftist views put him in a privileged position at the start of his architectural career (at the end of the Second World War) and throughout his professional life. But the same convictions spelled his tumultuous exit from public life and consequent forgetting.

As we follow his career in exhibition design in the European context, the structure of the article reaches a consistent interlude, which seems strange, as it revolves around the absence of Ascanio Damian. In fact it regards the focal point of exhibition design and propaganda of the era, the 1958 Brussels Universal Exhibition, in which Romania was absent. But, given the architectural importance of the event, a comparison, even in absence, is essential. In fact, Expo '58 is a very fertile subject for architectural history research as it provides a rare occasion for significant comparison and that is "the common ground".

## On Looking out for Common Ground

When researching recent architectural history in any of the former European communist countries, there appears an overwhelming need for comparison, especially when it comes to attesting its Modernist lineage. First of all, there is the need for a regional and political context and that is usually provided by one of the umbrella terms such as "Socialist Block", countries behind the Iron Curtain or plainly Central-Eastern European countries. Then there is the need for comparison to Western countries, where architectural Modernity originated. And while any of these pursuits is legitimate and can yield interesting results, they are always in danger of rather collecting reasons to exacerbate a sense of uniqueness in each national case, instead of accomplishing a real comparison. The researchers are in danger of exclusively putting forward the unique traits and forgetting the common ground they started looking out for. The local experience is very different in all these countries. As the architectural profession was institutionalized to various degrees, the political involvement manifested itself in specific ways and, as a result, the built environment differs; this hinders a comparison on a general level in the absence of detailed local architectural history. Thus, we would rather advocate finding a common ground situation and then looking at the individual manifestations.

<sup>1</sup> Never one to write much, Damian published a monograph on Le Corbusier, in 1969: Ascanio Damian, *Le Corbusier* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1969).

We identified such common ground conditions in international trade fairs and exhibitions. Of course, one could argue that these events are exceptional and thus are far from rendering an authentic image of the architecture practiced in any of these countries or in the Western countries as well; that they are ideologically infused products of propaganda on both the communist and the capitalist side. But they are also, most probably, the expression of what each country thought best of itself; trade fairs' architecture and design are (and have always been) a strong vector in the political message. The force of representation that architecture is summoned to explore reaches its peak in these international "confrontations".

The fact that international fairs and exhibitions were occasions for a sort of "soft" Cold War is not a new idea. It usually refers to the two main poles of the Cold War, the USSR and the USA, in relation to the idea that domestic architecture and design played a role in depicting desirability for both opposite fronts.<sup>2</sup>

In 2009 the Central European University in Budapest organized the workshop *Sites of Convergence*, aiming "to improve the understanding of cultural, social and political interactions across the systemic divide between the social orders construed as 'capitalism' and 'socialism' in the cold war era."<sup>3</sup>

Professor György Péteri sums up the conclusion of the workshop, emphasizing the role of international exhibitions as common ground situations that allow the researcher to draw comparisons:

"international fairs were indeed major sites of interaction between different nations and systemic 'camps': an interaction out of which no side could come entirely unaffected. They were 'sites of convergence' in the admittedly (and deliberately) ambiguous, contradictory sense that they promoted the mutual assimilation of norms, values and standards, at the same time as they prompted with renewed force the efforts among the elites of state socialism to articulate and assert the distinct and independent nature of socialist modernity."<sup>4</sup>

Professor Susan E. Reid approached the soviet case referring to the 1958 exhibition in Brussels<sup>5</sup> and in her contribution to the *Cold War Kitchen*<sup>6</sup> volume, in relation to the American exhibition in Moscow in 1959. The latter resulted in the so-called famous "Kitchen Debate", between Vice-president Richard Nixon and prime-minister Nikita Khrushchev.

Capitalist propaganda functioned as well, in opposition to the socialist one. For instance, "People's Capitalism", the American propaganda meme, became the title of a travelling exhibition, which depicted the life of a typical "all-white" family, in their home.<sup>7</sup>

Some individual cases of national participation in outstanding exhibitions, such as Brussels 1958, the first international gathering after the World War, have been discussed on different occasions and we shall address them further on. Romania did not take part in this particular meeting, but it was present in other trade fairs and exhibitions.

2 Apart from the fictionalized character of the "secret agent" of the Cold War, there was another popular character who was at the center of the propaganda war: the housewife. The desirability of the lifestyle in capitalist countries vs. communist countries was often employed in exhibitions. Some of the effects of this household propaganda on Romanian design are detailed in our article: Miruna Stroe, "One Yellow Kitchen, Millions of Grey Ones," *Arhitectura* 2 (2013).

3 György Péteri, "Sites of Convergence. The USSR and Communist Eastern Europe at International Fairs Abroad and at Home," *Journal of Contemporary History* 47, 1 (2012): 5.

4 Ibid.

5 Susan E. Reid, "The Soviet Pavilion at Brussels '58: Convergence, Conversion, critical Assimilation, or Transculturation?" in *Cold War International History Project*, Working Paper 62 (December 2010).

6 Susan E. Reid, "Our Kitchen Is Just As Good: Soviet Responses to the American Kitchen," in *Cold War Kitchen. Americanization, Technology and European Users* ed. Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009), 83-112.

7 Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 111-138.

This paper tries to establish the Romanian position on the “stage” of international fairs and exhibitions and to assess its commitment to architectural modernity. This endeavor overlaps an outlook on the oeuvre of an important Romanian architect, Professor Ascanio Damian. He emerges as a peculiar character, involved in designing many of the Romanian exhibition pavilions abroad and at home after the war and until late 1960’s.

The emergence of such a character, especially involved with exhibition pavilions, is not a surprise. An overview of the design activity in some of the other former communist countries shows the existence of architects specialized in temporary architecture. Given the emphasis on typified architecture of the time and the centralized, institutionalized character of the profession, exhibition design could be seen as a creative outlet for some. It must have been a privilege to be working on unique projects, instead of the typified ones.

Some might say that those architects were especially chosen as propaganda tools and on a certain level they would be right. For sure the architects were among those considered ideologically “safe”, if they were not overtly left oriented. But they were also among the best of their generation.

When judging architectural quality in the case of temporary pavilions, one must also look into their response to what is “fashionable” in exhibition design at a certain moment. This is a particular trait, somehow exacerbated, of exhibition design compared to architecture in general, which is less prone to shifts dictated by fashion. Some pavilions are, indeed, remarkable feats, exhibiting timelessness, but most must be judged in a narrow context of fashion, economic and technological capacity, as well as of propagandistic and political purpose. This is also a reason why the architecture “exhibited” is likely not akin to the architecture practiced in the country of origin.

In this historic context, the pavilions designed by Ascanio Damian stand as proof of commitment to modernism, even while the officially preferred architectural style was socialist realism. The fact that the architectural requirements for fairs and exhibitions were different from those of housing, administrative or industrial buildings meant that the architects in charge were chosen from a few specialized ones.<sup>8</sup> In a fateful twist, it is exactly the connection to international exhibition design that enabled Damian to ignore the socialist realism requirements on architecture and present modernist approaches to his projects.<sup>9</sup> So, on one level we could consider Damian as an “indigenous alien” in the architectural scape of the Stalinist period. For a while he would be at the forefront of the return to modernism both professionally and, more importantly, in architectural education. Later in life he would prove to be a political alien, desynchronized with both the regime and architecture as well.

### Romanian Exhibitions in the 1950’s

Ascanio Damian would be involved in exhibition design very early in his professional career. As a student, he joined Octav Doicescu’s design team in 1939 and then went on to the Romanian Railways design office. His decided modernist approach is not surprising, given that his education in interwar Romania overlapped the peak of activity of Marcel Janco, Horia Creangă, G.M. Cantacuzino and Octav Doicescu’s.

After graduating in 1942, he worked for the exhibition service of the Ministry of Propaganda until 1944. The war proved to be an important hindrance as with other biographies. In 1943 Damian won a scholarship at the Romanian school in Paris (Fontenay aux Roses) but was drafted and could not attend. For a while, after the war, he took part in designing other building types, such

8 A further privilege was the possibility to travel abroad, but this came at the price of rather thorough surveillance.

9 Ascanio Damian was part of the team that designed the Romanian embassy in Warsaw and that is the only project with some remote influences of socialist realism. In fact, the building is rather an example of monumental modernism, with very discrete decoration. The main façade with a portico resting on stylized columns and the decorated window parapets are the only concessions to classicism.

as the APACA clothing factory and the Băneasa Airport.<sup>10</sup> He was part of the design team led by Horia Maicu for “Casa Scânteii” (the official press headquarters) but a mention in his resumé lets one know that his contribution was not substantial - most probably it was not a reason to be proud, as Casa Scânteii is the most prominent socialist realist building in Romania.

After this intermezzo, he returned as director of the Exhibition design team in the Chamber of Commerce, from 1949 to 1958. Thus he took part in designing the Romanian exhibitions in Leipzig, Poznan, Moscow, Plovdiv, Cairo, Stockholm, Palermo, New Delhi, Peking, Barcelona, New York and others, all in all more than 60. In some of these exhibitions and fairs the pavilions were already built, but in other cases, national pavilions were built for the occasion, such as Vienna 1952, Damascus 1956/ 1957, Zagreb 1956, Moscow and Paris. In the tradition of awarding certain participations to these fairs and exhibitions, the Romanian pavilions were granted prizes in Damascus (golden medal) and Zagreb (1st prize) (Fig. 1&2). These were not architectural prizes by any means, but certainly some recognition went to the designers of the pavilions.

It is interesting to note the modern image of the pavilions, their structural expression, in opposition to the exhibited objects, which are in general the products of a mainly agricultural economy. We could speculate that it was exactly in order to promote an image of a developed country that Romania stayed true to the modernist principles instead of playing its traditional cards, as demanded by socialist realism.

The requirements of these two exhibitions,<sup>11</sup> as well as the economic shortages of a post-war country inspired rational solutions, based on steel frame structures, which were prefabricated in Romania and transported and assembled on site.

From the few images available from the Vienna fair of 1952, the contrast between the Romanian exhibition and the USSR pavilion is striking (Fig. 3). The geometric composition in the Romanian pavilion is an attempt at classifying the agricultural products: wooden grids, boxes and low tables in a free plan composition hold, in a disconnected way, baskets with produce. On the other hand, the soviet pavilion is still an example of socialist realism, if somewhat abstracted: a symmetrical, monumental façade, with a spired tower and a statue of Stalin placed in the axis (Fig. 4).

The other photographs available from the National History Museum, representing other Romanian exhibitions abroad in 1951-1952 (Leipzig, Milan, Prague), show the same modernist aesthetic, somewhat minimal, most probably because of economic restraints (Fig. 5, 6 & 7). Moreover, the editing methods of the time - cutting the photograph and gluing it on neutral background - emphasize the perspective grids and strict geometry.

Towards the end of the 1950's Ascanio Damian had created a team of architects who were working in the exhibition design studio at the Romanian Chamber of Commerce: H. Novac, D. Papaconstantin, I. Ressu, Al. Steriadi and others. He took on the role of design advisor.<sup>12</sup>

Fig. 1. (opposite page, top) The Romanian Pavilion in Damascus

Fig. 2. (opposite page, middle and bottom) The Romanian Pavilion in Zagreb

Fig. 3. (following pages, top left) Inside the Romanian Pavilion in Wien, 1952

Fig. 4. (following pages, bottom left) The Soviet Union Pavilion in Vienna, 1952

Fig. 5. (following pages, top right) The Romanian Pavilion in Leipzig. Courtesy of the National History Museum of Romania

Fig. 6. (following pages, middle right) The Romanian Pavilion in Leipzig. Courtesy of the National History Museum of Romania

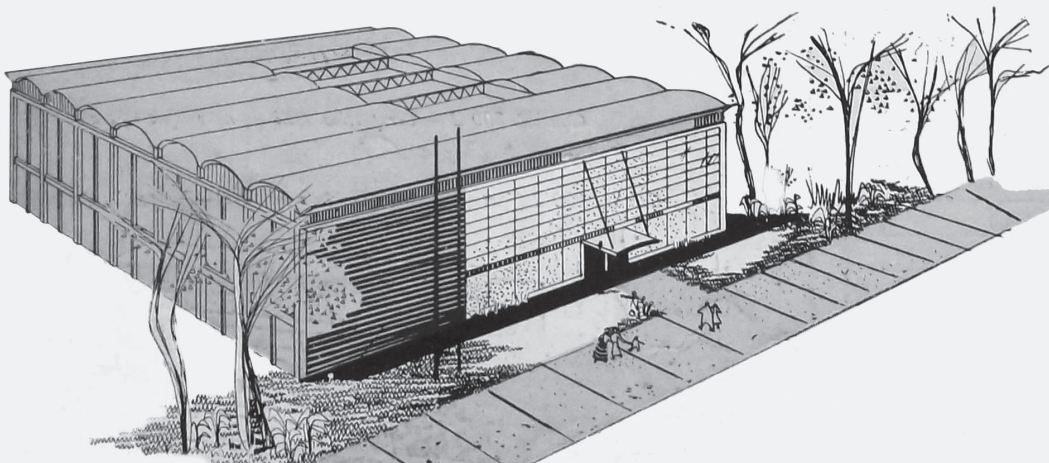
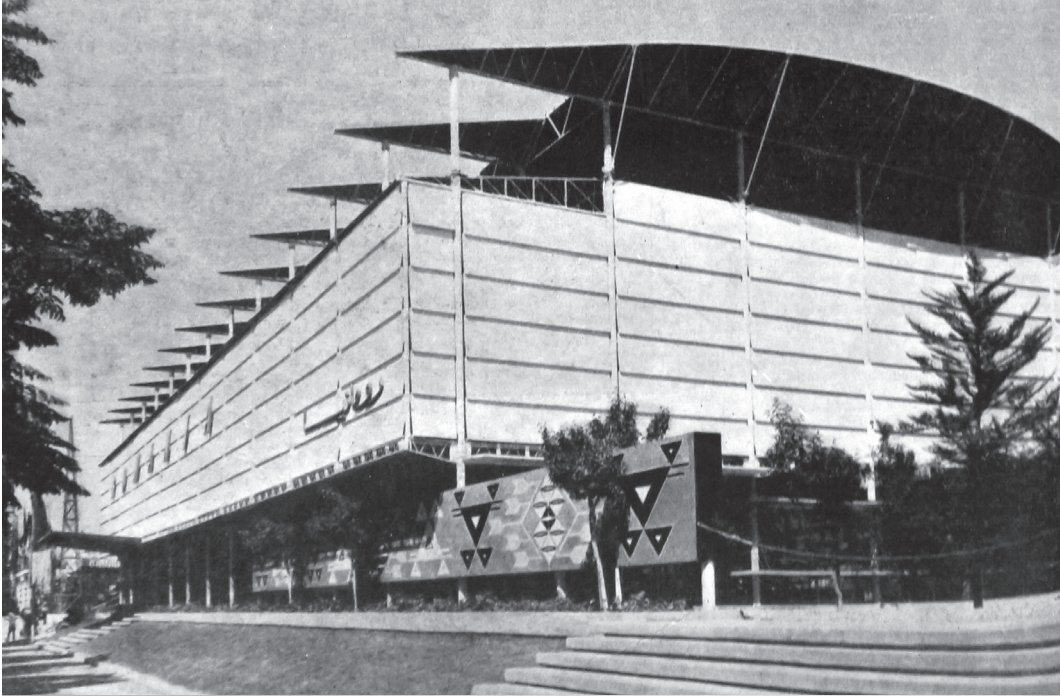
Fig. 7. (following pages, bottom right) The Romanian Pavilion in Prague. Courtesy of the National History Museum of Romania

<sup>10</sup> The Airport was designed by a team composed of Cleopatra Alifanti, Mircea Alifanti, Nicolae Bădescu, Ascanio Damian, T. Ionomu, Pompiliu Macovei and Al. Șerbescu.

<sup>11</sup> The Syrian capital was just starting to organize international fairs and required new pavilions - the first edition took place in 1954.

<sup>12</sup> There is a long debate on the authorship of architectural projects during communism in Romania. It is refreshing to see Damian, by 1959 also a professor in the architecture institute, step down and only be an advisor, a rather rare position in a time when the chief architect in a design studio was often assumed as the author of the projects.











## The Story of an Absence

Clearly, the main event of the decade was Brussels 1958, the first universal exhibition organized after the war. A massive propaganda occasion on both fronts, Brussels '58 was not only telling the traditional story of West-East opposition, but it was also tackling the tensions inside the united front of the "peoples" democracies'.

Only two years after the invasion of Hungary by the soviet military, the USSR, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia put up a friendly display. Poland, having its own ambitions, produced probably the most influential unbuilt project ever.

The site plan for the exhibition is relevant for the geopolitical story being told: the massive USSR pavilion with Hungary and Czechoslovakia sited closely, faces the pavilion of the United States. There is a volumetric interplay as well, since the USSR pavilion is a parallelepiped, while the American one, a cylinder, possibly the square peg and the round hole?

So why, if Brussels '58 was the scene to be on at the time, Romania opted out? In fact, Romania intended to take part in the exhibition, signed up for it, but it withdrew, together with Poland, India, Pakistan and Indonesia. One can speculate around the reasons for this. First of all, the participation fees were higher than expected, because the exhibition turned out larger than initially planned - with the USSR and the USA grandiose pavilions, the surface of the exhibition rose by half. The Romanian centralized economy was already showing its drawbacks, it proved less successful than expected, after using up the resources brought by nationalization. This phenomenon, which affected all socialist countries, coupled with the destalinization process initiated by Nikita Khrushchev, brought about great changes, particularly in architecture.

Moreover, two political events impacted on Romania's participation. First, the lengthy process of Soviet army withdrawal from the Romanian territory, which was due to finalize in 1958 with the actual departure of forces, put additional tension on the relationship with the USSR. And second, one of the prominent figures of Romanian communism, Petru Groza, former prime minister, died in January 1958, prompting a public large-scale mourning. 1958 was proving an eventful year and, with a strained economy, Romania decided, as a newly admitted "enthusiastic" member<sup>13</sup>, that it was preferable to just send its representatives to the UN pavilion and retrieve its participation in the fair.

The question is unavoidable - if Romania were to take part in the exhibition, would Ascanio Damian have been the architect chosen to design the pavilion?

It has been said on numerous occasions that Brussels '58 was a triumph of modernist architecture. One notable exception is Bruno Zevi, who wrote an extremely critical article in *L'Architettura*, noticing the propagandistic charge: "*elephantine trade fair in which every building clamors for the attention of the public with the most crass propaganda.*"<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, seen from the eastern side of the iron curtain, it must have looked as a modernist triumph. After almost a decade of socialist realism, the architects were returning to creative principles they adhered to before the war and the fact that they could not call themselves "modernists" seemed like a minor drawback.

The enthusiasm of the projects coming from the socialist countries is easy to notice. Some countries such as Czechoslovakia waited for the 20<sup>th</sup> Soviet Communist Party Congress to take place in 1956, in order to follow the new Soviet stylistic directives but once the "rational" approach was set, they went with it with gusto. The freedom to use the latest technologies was seen as a great creative resource and most pavilions raced to expose great technical accomplishments.

<sup>13</sup> Romania was admitted in the United Nations on 14 December 1955, after a vote that saw the USA and China abstain. It was another occasion for communist propaganda inside the country and it prompted strong opposition from the Romanian exile on issues related to human rights.

<sup>14</sup> Bruno Zevi, "Bruxelles 1958: primi interrogative," *L'architettura* (May 1958): 4, cited in David Crowley, "Humanity Rearranged: The Polish and Czechoslovak Pavilions at Expo '58", *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 19, 1 (2012): 88.



The Czechoslovak pavilion was crowned with the golden medal as the most successful and it was no surprise that its architectural innovations would translate into a “Brussels style”<sup>15</sup> back in the country. The architects František Cubr, Josef Hrubý and Zdeněk Pokorný worked together with artists to bring to life a new style of immersing multimedia show, named “Lanterna Magica”. The artistic freedom of the Czechoslovak curators played an important part in the reception of their exhibition; the idea to stir away from presenting the reality of the country and focusing instead on a fantastic, possible reality, was a stroke of genius.

The Yugoslav pavilion is, in its own right, a remarkable oeuvre. One of the spectacular structures, the project by Vjenceslav Richter embodies the search for identity of a country only recently created out of three nations - their unification is not related to a common past, but towards a common, modern future.

The initial idea of the pavilion was a structure suspended on a central mast but it was, indeed, too adventurous. Mil de Kooning<sup>16</sup> notes the importance of the pavilion for Yugoslav architecture, as it is the first modern building commissioned by the political power and it also represents the continuity of pre-war modernism.

Richter's career can be paralleled to that of Ascanio Damian in their involvement with exhibition design and also in their distancing from recurrent design themes of the time, such as housing for workers and representative headquarters for the political power or ambitious town planning. We can take this as a privilege, especially as their careers were spared the socialist realist experiment.

As we previously mentioned, Poland withdrew from participating in Expo '58 but left behind an extremely influential project, that would inspire architects to come. The project was chosen as a result of an architectural competition. The winning project, BX 58, was designed by a team lead by Jerzy Sołtan. Here is another biographical parallel to Ascanio Damian. Sołtan was born in 1913, just one year before Damian. In 1939, during the September Campaign, he was taken prisoner. While on prison camp, he translated *Quand les Cathedrales étaient blanches* and exchanged letters with Le Corbusier, which resulted, after the war, in the invitation to continue his studies in France and work with Le Corbusier himself. How different would have Damian's path been, had he been able to go to Paris in 1943?

Jerzy Sołtan returned to Poland for a while and put together a team of enthusiastic architects for the competition. The project was ambitious, it was supposed to offer a complete experience of the senses - projections and sound experiments were going to populate the space; its vast proportions were not accepted by the authorities and in 1957 they stopped the production. What was left behind was a sense that Polish architecture could manifest itself outside ideological barriers, having found its freedom of expression. Being the exponent of this modern freethinking, Sołtan was not welcome as an architecture professor in Poland and left in 1959 for Harvard.

Hungary must have been the most surprising presence at Expo '58. György Péteri explains the decision to participate as the need of the Kádár regime to legitimate itself to the world,<sup>17</sup> to be seen as something else than a soviet puppet. Not only did the regime decide to project a legitimizing image abroad, but it also employed different internal tactics to accomplish the task, as opposed to the previous, Stalinist terror. To the great surprise of those involved, there were no perceptible ideological requirements; the pavilion need not transmit a socialist message to the world. Of course, we could speculate that self-censorship was a force to reckon with and very much functional. Nevertheless, there was a sense of freedom of thought in the conception of the Hungarian exhibition. Lajos Gáboros, the architect who designed the pavilion and Iván Boldizsár, the curator, were given this freedom but were under understandable financial constraints.

15 R. Švácha, “Un itinéraire d'ouverture et de rapprochement. Le pavillon tchécoslovaque,” in *L'architecture moderne à l'expo 58*, eds. Rika Devos and Mil de Kooning (Fonds Mercator et Dexia Banque, 2006), 286.

16 Mil de Kooning, “La navette spatiale de Vjenceslav Richter. Le pavillon yougoslave,” in *L'architecture moderne à l'expo 58*, eds. Rika Devos and Mil de Kooning (Fonds Mercator et Dexia Banque, 2006), 291.

17 György Péteri, “Transsystemic Fantasies: Counterrevolutionary Hungary at Brussels Expo '58,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 47, 1 (2012): 138.

At the time of the decision to participate in the exhibition, Gádoros was the Director of the Public Design Company and an important figure in Hungarian architecture after the war. One of the figures to gracefully sail from functionalism to socialist realism and then neofunctionalism, Gádoros was, expectedly, the chosen one. Boldizsár, on the other hand was just reemerging as a public figure after being detained and questioned on his relation to the previous regime.<sup>18</sup> The resulting exhibition was not, in the socialist propagandistic tradition, a display of national accomplishments since the ending of the war. It was more a crisp and simple way of explaining to the world what Hungary stood for. Its aesthetic was heavily influenced by the position of the pavilion, between the USSR and the USA: no monumental ambitions, but rather open space.

These are few of the stories surrounding the socialist states at Expo 58; they all converge toward one obvious conclusion that architecture seemed to experience a newfound freedom. There is a whole other subject to discuss, that is how representative this new modernism was for the political regimes of these countries, but it is hardly the place to tackle it. Even though Romania did not take part in the exhibition, this sense of freedom was manifesting itself in Romanian architecture, as well. Ascanio Damian was taking part in creating a modern image of the country: the Băneasa Airport (1948-1952), the discreet but exquisite “H” pavilion in Herăstrău Park (1950)<sup>19</sup> and then, the National Economy Exhibition Pavilion. The latter is, probably, his most notorious accomplishment, with a rather complicated history of its own.

### How to Improve a Copy

Romania was preparing to celebrate the end of agricultural collectivization, due in 1962. This was a huge propaganda occasion so, starting in 1959, preparations were underway for a grandiose celebration. A large exhibition pavilion was going to be built on a very sensitive site, the former hippodrome, close to “Casa Scânteii” (Fig. 8). The new pavilion would erase some of the bourgeois past, represented by such a decadent pastime as horse racing, but it would also be in a tensioned relation to the most prominent socialist realist building in Bucharest - the new politically approved style facing the previous, stalinist one.

But, as there was no other structure similar in size and complexity in Bucharest because of the large span required, the creative freedom of Romanian architects and engineers was restricted from the beginning. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej was cautious in respect to the local architects’ ability to design such a building. In fact, he voiced his concern regarding their ability to design any other building higher than a four storey block of flats.<sup>20</sup> So, the designers were conditioned to follow the example of the “Z” pavilion designed by Ferdinand Lederer in Brno, in 1958. In Czechoslovakia Lederer was a pioneer in large span steel structures and his proposal was a 93.5 m in diameter building with a 20 m high dome. Impressed by the structural aspect of the structure and, more so, by the relatively reduced use of steel, the Romanians decided to use it as inspiration. The Romanian pavilion was going to have a 93 m diameter dome, placed on a 125 m diameter building, 42 m high.

With all the precautions, disaster still struck. The pavilion was recently completed when, in the winter of 1962-1963, a snowstorm deposited uneven loads of snow on the dome, making it turn on itself. As the pavilion was not used at that time, there were no casualties. The main problem seemed to be how to keep the event out of the press. This is why the project, in spite of its size, was rather ignored, even by the architectural press. Only two articles appeared in *Arhitectura R.P.R.*, the official magazine and it was rather discretely awarded an architectural prize in 1964.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>19</sup> Ascanio Damian was part of the team designing the pavilion for sample exhibitions, with architects Gustav Gusti, Harry Stern and engineer E. Țîțariu. The pavilion is covered by a flat vault on lamellar wooden arches, a remarkable structural accomplishment. At the time, in the beginning of socialist realism, the pavilion was criticised as an example of “formalist”, “capitalist” architecture.

<sup>20</sup> At the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers’ Party Plenary in 1962, when discussing the reinforced concrete prefabrication industry, Dej voiced his concerns regarding the capacity to build high prefabricated buildings.

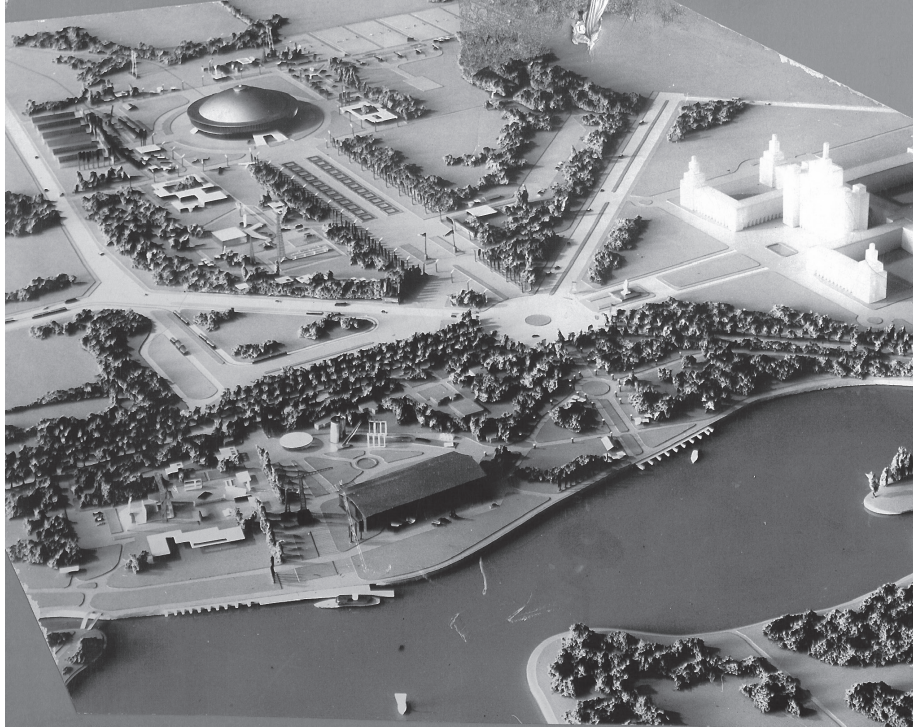
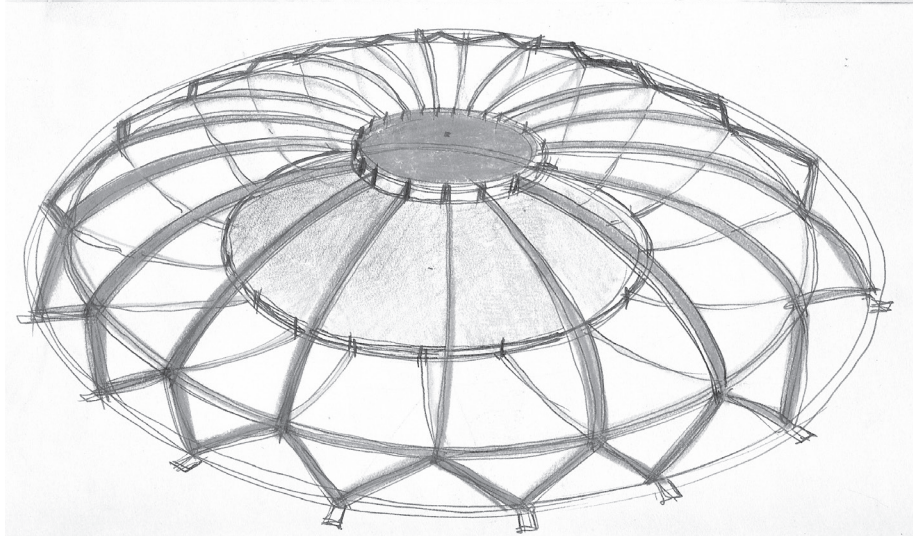
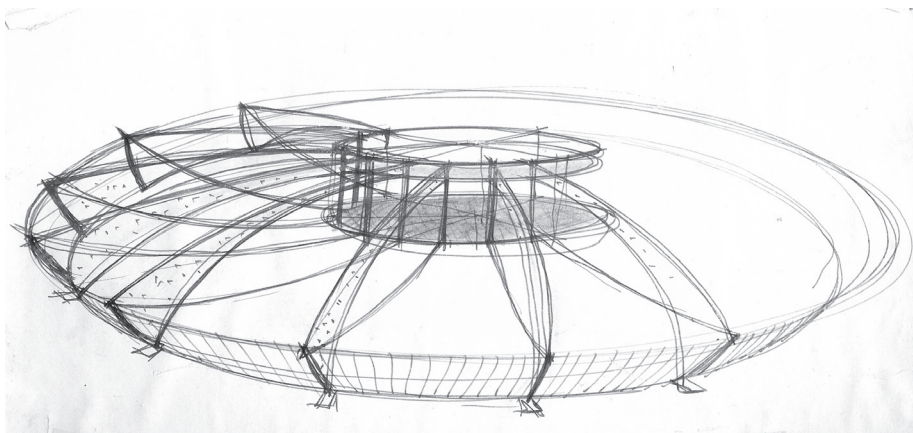


Fig. 8. Photograph of the model. On the right, "Casa Santeir"  
 Fig. 9. Sketches of the structure of the pavilion





The fact that the event was not publicly acknowledged gave birth to a sort of urban myth about it, with people still being able to tell the story of the sound the structure made while collapsing. Clear, verifiable information on the accident is still scarcely available.

The architects and engineers were cleared of any wrongdoing, the error was not in the design, but in the execution, the investigation said. And the design team was back to the drawing board, to produce a better structure for the dome, to be ready by 23 August 1964, the year of an important anniversary - 20 years from the moment Romania joined the Allied Forces, turning away from Germany. For this purpose, a spectacular exhibition of the Romanian economic accomplishments was going to be organized in the pavilion.

In a meeting of the Central Committee of the Party on 18 April 1964<sup>21</sup>, Dej was rather nervous about the project, the accident and the future exhibition:

“Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej: I would like you to gather at the Ministry Council, call whoever you want, talk, because time is short. In fact, there were rumors that the pavilion would not be ready, because of the huge delays, it turned over and it’s also oversized. I said, let it be, just make it work. (...)”

I regretted that in the previous meeting we did not think to resort to an experienced foreign company that previously organized exhibitions and assembled buildings. I regretted that we put our trust in the hands of people who made a thing that collapsed on us, just as it happened in Cluj.<sup>22</sup> Had we called a versed company from abroad, Maicu<sup>23</sup> and the others would have been a little ashamed, but this is nothing, we would have spared the state of the expenses and would have had an exhibition. In Belgium there is a good pavilion; in other places, as well, beautiful and accomplished designs. Too bad we did not think of this, we could have taken the project from them. It was said before that we are copying the French and the Yugoslavs. You know how it is with this copying; they copied and copied, all the way to hell.

Emil Bodnăraș:<sup>24</sup> If it came to copying, they could have copied from the best.

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej: Every time something happens before we learn. Had we asked a foreign company, it would have cost us some money, but infinitely less than it does now. Indeed, they went abroad, they saw things, but this is not enough. (...)”

This is just a glimpse of the attitude toward originality in the higher political ranks in Romania. It is not meant, in any way, to discredit the works of architects and their creativity. In fact, this story needs to be told in order to point out the fact that Ascanio Damian and his team<sup>25</sup> were not happy with being copiers of someone else’s work, but given the imposed inspiration, they improved the model (Fig. 9).

We are talking about a modernist building par excellence, one that used cutting edge materials and technologies available at the time, deriving its aesthetic from a spectacular, elegant, completely visible structure. The dome was assembled on the ground and lifted with hydraulic pumps on reinforced concrete pillars. The external structure was made with encased steel beams and posts and prefabricated floors. The stairs were prefabricated as well, with frequent stringers and no risers. The main entrance ramp was made by using prestressed concrete on Freyssinet cables. Staying true to the idea of structural sincerity, the designers kept the finishing to a minimum, emphasizing the expression of the structure. One of the most interesting details is the glass façade of the main gallery, which, together with the dome, creates the iconic image of the Romanian pavilion, setting

21 Romanian National Archives, Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party Fund, Chancellery Section, vol. II, 1954-1965.

22 A similar accident took place in Cluj.

23 Architect Horia Maicu was the chairman of the Union of Architects of Romania at the time.

24 Emil Bodnăraș was vice premier at the time.

25 The attribution of the project, as it appeared in “Pavilionul expoziției economiei naționale a RPR” [The Romanian National Economy Exhibition Pavilion], *Arhitectura R.P.R.* 4 (1962): author: prof. arch. Ascanio Damian, co-author: Mircea Enescu; collaborators: architects V. Ursache, Adrian Stănescu, R. Popescu, S. Miculescu, Vera Hariton, N. Nedeleescu, V. Cantunari; engineers: Em. Baiculescu, M. Săvescu, Liana Popovici, A. Nefian, D.D. Niculescu, M. Soare, N. Potrîniche.



it apart from its model. Each two of the 11 m high windows form obtuse angles, creating a dynamic surface. The slanting façade also enhances the dynamic volume (Fig. 10).

The fact that this is an accomplished oeuvre can be easily seen from its nowadays intensive use with minimal interventions on the initial structure. Its iconic status for architecture in Bucharest is undisputed, though its urban presence is affected by two skyscrapers recently built at the entrance of the exhibition center.

Ascanio Damian's activity as exhibition designer ends up with this pavilion. It would be mere speculation to say that the accident stopped his career, but the atmosphere of the times might imply it. He went on to design the city hall of Turnu Severin in 1970 and, as a counselor for the Electric Energy Ministry, was involved in the design on the "Porțile de Fier" hydroelectric power station (1963-1972).

The unfortunate accident in the beginning of the construction deprived Damian of public authorship pride, yet one must acknowledge that the pavilion is his most remarkable architectural creation. But his great accomplishment must have been his impact on the architectural education during communism.

### A Parallel Career

As a matter of fact, Ascanio Damian's main function was in the Institute of Architecture<sup>26</sup> since 1945, when he was invited to join Duiliu Marcu's design studio as an Assistant Professor. He moved on in his career to a Lecturer position in 1949, Associate Professor in 1952 and Professor in 1959. His ascension in the higher ranks of the institute coincided with the return to modernism after the socialist realism episode. First as Dean and then as Rector (from 1959 to 1969) he encouraged a rather freethinking, bohemian atmosphere in the school, with a clear direction towards rational architecture. The period was indeed one of general "liberalization", experienced as such in all the countries of the Eastern Block. But the leadership of a Professor who knew what kind of rebellious manifestations he could allow was important in creating generations of architects who remember their time in the institute in a positive manner.<sup>27</sup>

The transcript of the debate<sup>28</sup> that took place prior to appointing Ascanio Damian as a Full-Professor shows the appreciation of his colleagues. The wooden language of the time gets in the way of assessing the truthfulness of the opinions, but some of them show a sort of naïveté. For instance, Professor Marcel Locar noticed that even though Ascanio Damian was the rector of an institute with lots of highly professional employees, he still asked for and listened to the opinions of others. This says a lot about the expectations people had at the time. Professor Horia Maicu talks about the need to control an "explosive temperament" in his leadership position. But all those who expressed an opinion agreed that Damian was a talented architect and a remarkable teacher, deserving of the title of Professor.

As studio tutor, he is remembered rather as an unpredictable person:

"Were he in a good mood, he would give good criticism you had a lot to learn from and the solution of the project advanced; while in a bad mood, he thought everything was clumsy and unsatisfying; his criticism would be brutal and sarcastic."<sup>29</sup>

26 The name of "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urbanism during the communist regime.

27 At the end of Ascanio Damian's mandate as Rector, the Romanian architecture education went through a radical change: an exam was introduced after the first three years and only the students who passed could go on to the next three years. The decision was actually meant to produce two kinds of graduates: some, who studied for three years would be a kind of college graduates, while the ones who went on to finish six years were actual architects. This changed the academic atmosphere from collaboration to fierce competition.

28 Courtesy of the archives of "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urbanism.

29 Eugenia Greceanu, "Sovietizarea învățământului de arhitectură" [The Sovietization of Architectural Education], in *Arhitecți în timpul dictaturii, Amintiri* [Architects during Dictatorship, Memories] (Bucharest: Simetria, 2005), 128.



But he could also be a great advocate for his students in their thoughtless confrontations with the political aspect of education. Mihai Enescu tells the story of his colleague, Cristea Condacci and his final examination; one member of the commission saw his project as “a bomb placed at the core of the socialist scaffold” and only Damian’s intervention helped the otherwise brilliant student through this strained moment.<sup>30</sup>

At the end of his activity as Rector he was awarded the title of Professor Emeritus of the Socialist Republic of Romania.<sup>31</sup>

### **Alienation**

His strong convictions, both architecturally and politically, saw him transformed into an alien in more than one way. His relationship with the political milieu ended up brutally in 1987, when Damian publicly renounced his party membership, in a unique, unprecedented gesture. He must have thought that his socialist beliefs were betrayed by the dictatorial regime. This saw him turn from an important public figure to a person under surveillance (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Surveillance image of Ascanio Damian and his wife; it appears in the surveillance dossier for the ambassador of the Netherlands, Coen Stork. He was, nevertheless, an objective of surveillance, because of his “inadequate political conduct”. *Dosarul de securitate al unui ambasador: Coen Stork*, ed. Cătălin Strat (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2013)

At the time he voiced his discontent with politics, the architecture was also changing and not in a direction he would appreciate. The resurgence of the “national style” theme did not agree with his modernist ideals, as well as the pervasive interventions of Nicolae Ceaușescu in architectural decisions. In fact, the amateurish tendencies in architecture must have been hard to watch for any accomplished professional. Damian also renounced his position as vice-president of the Union of Architects.

30 Mihai Enescu “Scurt jurnal de amintiri” [Short Diary], in *Arhitecți în timpul dictaturii, Amintiri* [Architects during Dictatorship, Memories] (Bucharest: Simetria, 2005), 98.

31 By the decree no. 493/1969.

The late 1980's were a trying time for all and there were quite a few intellectuals, including some communists, who chose a life of dissidence, by criticizing the regime. But Damian's disillusionment was not only about politics, it was also about architecture.

The divide that was gaping between Damian's beliefs and the architecture of the moment is perfectly summed up in the last article he published in *Arhitectura*:

"In this place and in this context I would like to address the architecture that calls itself "postmodern", proclaimed as being beyond the time and, moreover, the understanding, purposes and obligations architecture has towards its "consumer". Here the term consumer is better fitting for the hopefully fleeting passage through the world and through history of an insignificant production, self-proclaimed and self-propelled as such, which remains, deliberately or out of ignorance, the vulgar, mercantile version of architectural production, promoted by the efficient means of publicity and exclusively seeking financial gain.

This distortion phenomenon can only be explained through the existence of other sickly, unbalanced and unbalancing tendencies already noticeable in the behavior and evolution of parts of nowadays society. And I cannot help but liken it to some of these deviations from the norm. For instance, the widespread use of drugs, the emergence of "punk", of garish, trivial, weird clothing, intentionally unaesthetic and provocative, of pornography, hooliganism, violence and terrorism."<sup>32</sup>

These are the words of a man disillusioned with everything that surrounds him, not only with architecture. Postmodern architecture as punk, pornography and terrorism - these are strong words indeed!

He slowly slipped into a rather startling oblivion until 1989, though he kept his teaching position. Owing to his dissident statute, on December 1989 Damian became a member of the Committee of the National Salvation Front (the temporary governing body right after the overthrow of the communist regime) and then joined the Provisional Council of National Union (the legislative body). The strong opposition to left wing ideology and communist legacy manifested in the "Piața Universității" protests of April - June 1990 prompted a critical response from Ascanio Damian and this, in turn, led to public conflict between Damian and other dissidents or anti-communist politicians. Once more he left the political stage abruptly.<sup>33</sup>

In 1990 he was elected the first chairman of the Union of Architects after the Revolution, a most welcome bow to a prominent architectural figure. He passed away in 2005.

His activity after the 1989 revolution was rather discrete and some might say he is an undeservingly forgotten character. As there are not many representative buildings bearing his signature, he is mostly remembered by former students and colleagues. A rather clean-cut personality, much like the modernist architecture he loved, Ascanio Damian retains his indigenous alien position even today. His controversial political stance must have been a hindrance in approaching his architectural oeuvre until recent years.

32 Ascanio Damian, "Arhitectura știință/artă" [Architecture Science/Art], *Arhitectura* 4 (1985): 43.

33 We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for providing information on Ascanio Damian's political activity after 1989.

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- Fig.3. Inside the Romanian Pavilion in Wien, 1952. Courtesy of the National History Museum of Romania.
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