Professor Alifanti's Notebooks

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We have the unique opportunity of looking into several unpublished, hard to classify documents: forty notebooks witnessing the existence of Professor Mircea Alifanti (1914-1999), one of the most remarkable architects and, paradoxically, one of the most inconspicuous professionals of the communist era. We knew about them. They were almost a legend...[1] We are grateful to the Florian family, the professor's heirs, for making them available to us with such gracious generosity.

Professor Alifanti's notebooks[2] are not exactly a *diary*, the stereotypical routine of daily notes is missing, although they accompanied him throughout his entire life. Neither are they *memoirs*, since there are no explicit commentaries of external events (though many of those can be easily inferred - and testify to a drama that was not only his); nor are they simple "sketch books", though, to a certain extent, they are a kind of an illustrated "Bildungsroman":

> *I wish I worked more; I wish I made my viewpoints clear in whatever I do, in particular, there where I falter; and I wish I learned more for all that ...*[3]

The notebooks were vital for him: *I like this theorising of my intentions; I can live on it.*[4] They are the discontinuous yet systematic chronicles of an intellectual, artistic and human intensity, selectively yet meaningfully reflecting the outside world (and everything in it: event, painting, music, photography, love, triviality of the everyday…), sometimes from an analytical distance, sometimes with bitterness or even with tormented writhe.

Numbered, but not always rigorously dated, the notebooks commence during the 1950s as methodical exercises preparing what were to become his lectures in architectural detailing (remembered as outstanding by all those who attended the course).[5] In time, his entries gain in depth, collecting (sometimes under his own *vignettes*) annotations and excursuses on the books he read (fiction, architecture, art), or comments on the music listened to so avidly, or descriptions of events and contexts filtered through his vulnerable, yet passionate nature; adamant and often anguished retrospections alongside amusing collections of "imbecilities". Eventually, the notebooks seem to become the conversation partner in his ever-growing and self-imposed solitude; yet he replaces them in the 1980s with the artistic drawings he gathered in other set of notebooks, probably lost.

The notebooks are unsettling and artistically admirable at the same time. They gather stunning drawings – *the drawing, the faithful friend; the silent and generous friend* [6] – whether technical

1 He sometimes showed them to his friends, as the notebooks also served as *aide-mémoire*. Towards the end of his life, he had allowed himself to be persuaded to organise some of the ideas he followed in the notebooks, with the help of one of the authors of this article. The latter lacked in tenacity and dedication to see this endeavour to an end, a fault which she hopes to repair by this posthumous retrieval and by a future monograph.

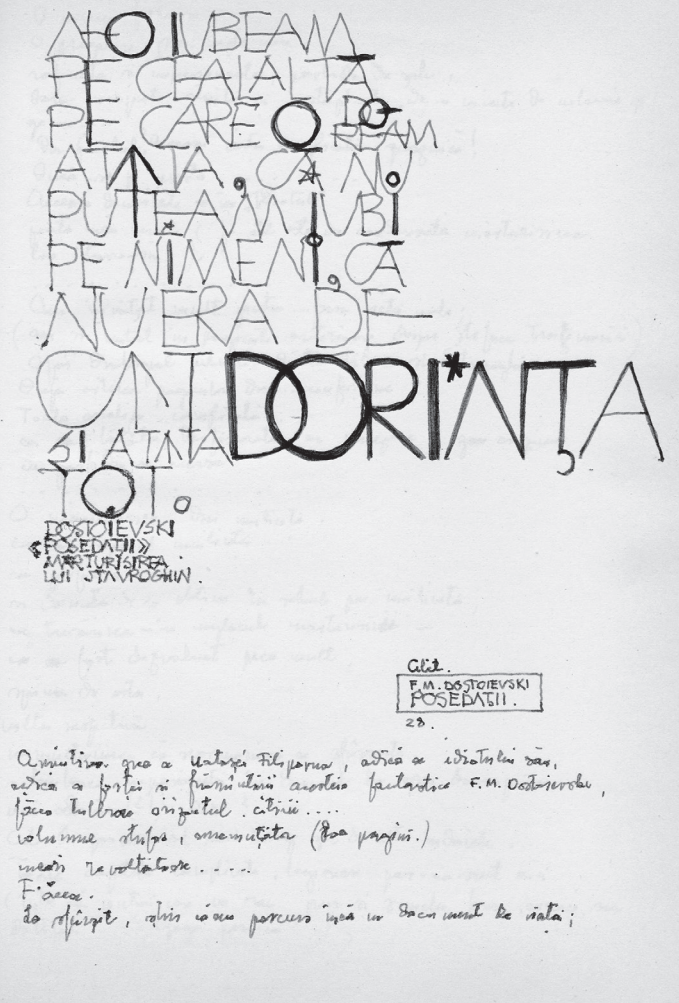
2 The notebooks are recorded as follows: the Roman numerals refer to the running number of the notebook, and the Arabics point to the date of the cited note, if known, or to an approximation of the month and year, if no date is specified in the original text.

3 LIII/15.12.1955.

4 LXIII/30.07.1976.

5 This is unanimously confirmed by oral history, which we have to rely on, in the absence of the coursebook itself, which seems to have been written.

6 LX/12. 1973.





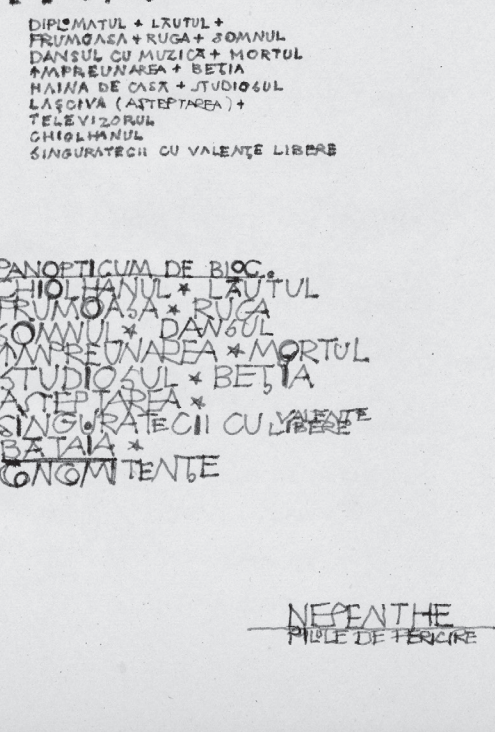


Fig. 1. Mircea Alifanti, page from XXXII (left)
Fig. 2. Mircea Alifanti, page from XXXIV (right)

or sketches (in pen point or, later on, in ball-point pen, his favourite instrument for graphic works – collected in separate portfolios or sketchbooks); texts –of which some are impulsively written while others are revised or revisited; sophisticated personal graphisms (either amusing or pedantic, including a typeset of his own design, vignettes, and all kind of private marks); collages; quotations (*the personal diary of borrowed* "*intelligence*"[7]); they all create a complicated, yet coherent whole, the fascinating display of the cultural (self) construction (*my cultural makeup*[8]) of an architect who demanded a lot from himself and his profession, while dissenting to his time and absorbing it with bitterness and disappointment, with fear, but not without courage. In a way, he sets himself under a microscope, anxiously and somewhat perversely:

> *I am trying to define myself in the sense of seeking the human nature within me, if I relate – without hypocrisy – whatever I know about myself to whatever I know about those surrounding me or those who once were swarming "ants" or had "genuine value".*[9]

We find in these notebooks – the fruit of a collector's zeal he acknowledges: *I am selfish and thrifty, thus a collector.*[10]

7 LXIII/01.03.1977.

8 LXII/03. 1975.

9 L/18.11.1969.

10 LXIII/12.05.1976. This collector's passion is a recurring theme. In some other notebooks (i.e. LX, LXI), he also puts together ironic "inventories" of his collections and accomplishments.

However, for this article we are less concerned with the complex character (undoubtedly an artist) hidden behind these remarkable pages; nor are we interested in the literary fineness of the text, extraordinary at times. Our sole aim here is to delineate the architect, within his epoch and place. It is about the way in which Mircea Alifanti understood architecture, the architectural project and their pedagogy in a period when international modernism is progressively exposed to criticism, while the local modernity, still busy to solve its tense relationship with the classical tradition, is forced to obey the party ideology, and the professional discourse is dissolved into over-standardized formulae: *Even sand castles have standardized designs.*[11]

This study is about the unique personality of this architect who asked "universal" questions in a world defined by the clichés of the *sunny diktat* [12], a world to which most of his colleagues had adjusted. He had adjusted as well to a certain extent, yet he also remained on the outside, aware of his own, almost unbearable, duplicity; perhaps this explains his obsession with theatre and masques, which haunt both his texts and sketches:

> *I wrote "a play" […] a play with nothingness… yet it has preserved what I think is "the essence of the theatrical" … the idea of masque. The human need of disguise, of masques,* […] *the idea of cheating, of ingratiating oneself, of deceiving,* […], *of seeing without being seen, of borrowing – at least for the grand ball – someone else's skin* […], *namely the constant desire of concealing, of lying, of staying out of sight, of hiding behind someone's back.* […] *And this idea of the masque and of the lie is contained in what I call "theatre of suggestion". Its essence is spun, thinned to its limit, and all is transferred from the stage into the representational potential of drawing.*[13]

Professor Mircea Alifanti lived and worked on a stage (*a masked ball* for which he had his own *dance card*[14]) where free, critical thinking is hidden behind a mask. But his notebooks unveil it. We shall not look at it as a mere literary testimony of a period, but as an attitude that is put forward both in his projects and in his life choices. We shall illustrate his stance with two moments: the design for the Baia Mare Prefecture and his withdrawal from the professional scene. More is known about the former: it was published, it was the object of study trips, of his colleagues' amazement and admiration, and also of their innuendos.[15] To the contrary, little is known of the final moment of his professional career; those who know about it are reluctant to talk, since his unusual withdrawal spotlights the embarrassing issue of a collective guilt.[16] Yet, these moments are essential to describe him; both speak of an unusual understanding of the profession; both are exemplary within the Romanian professional milieu of the time and, we dare say, in the modern European context as well.

11 *There is a type-project even for sand castles.* (LXV/1983).

12 LXII/04. 1974.

13 LX/02.1974.

14 LX/08-09.1977.

15 The sneers on his dear assistant's (Adrian Panaitescu) role in the project hurt him; he entrusted obsessively this sorrow to his notebooks. In fairness, it was a great injustice; not accidentally, all his old collaborators on this project start by saying that Baia Mare belongs exclusively to the professor.

16 The contribution to the "distructive /demolishing architecture" of the last years of Communism is generally passed over in silence; very few have had the moral courage to refuse it at the time, or to acknowledge their participation afterwards. See A.M. Zahariade, *Arhitecture in the Communist Project* (Bucharest: Simetria, 2011).


23.V.77

Pieces of a Biography

Born one hundred years ago[17] in an educated middle class family, the young Mircea Alifanti graduated as an architect in 1939.[18] He adhered to the communist ideals and joined the underground party activities as a sympathiser. In 1944, upon returning from the anti-Soviet front he made his political stand official by his fully-fledged membership in the Communist Party, holding important positions in its hierarchy despite his "unhealthy social background". At the same time, he became a member of the faculty of the School of Architecture in Bucharest.

Although extremely committed and regarded rather as a hardliner,[19] he was excluded from the party in 1949-1950 due to his allegedly hostile activities on the Eastern front.[20] This exclusion (*an odious drollery*, as he labelled it later[21]), which wore him out emotionally and left an indelible trace on his entire existence, did not trigger his dismissal from the school, as it was customary back then. He continued his teaching activity, not without recurring moments of insecurity, still shrouded in mystery.[22] At first he taught the course on architectural detailing at the Department of Constructions, and after 1954 he started tutoring the design studio for senior students (the 4th – 6th years of study).[23] He retired in 1984. He held no position in the administrative hierarchy of the school – in fact, he made efforts to avoid this. Within the academic landscape of the time he had an informal and indefinite authoritative status, a unique case, rather difficult to describe or explain.

As a professor, he charmed his students and many of them still recall staying up late at night for project revisions turned into inciting reflections and discussions on architecture, long after, everyone else had left the School.[24] Number of students strived for his mentoring, which was rather unusual since he did not provide with ready-made solutions (as it was customary in other studios) and in the final jury panels he was not arguing for higher marks for them at any cost.[25] His pedagogy was driven by the uncomfortable principle of doubt and relentless search, not by certitudes or recipes leading to short-lived success:

> *By complicating things, by making them ask real questions, they couldn't achieve in their designs even that modest "naught" which their lack of culture, their poor graphic skills, and their laziness had allowed them to achieve when they had fewer questions.*[26]

Neither can his deliberately inconspicuous appearance explain much: "clothed in grey, even when he did not wear grey" (as they said in jest at that time), he always passed unnoticed; in fact, he did not show any mark of the "bohemian-Beaux-Arts-architect" look, an appearance to which many of his peers held on stubbornly, especially in those days when the anonymity imposed by the new ideology threatened to even out everybody.

Fig. 3. Mircea Alifanti, unnamed graphic (opposite page)

17 4.10.1914

18 The school of architecture in Bucharest, which was faithfully following the tradition set by the Ecole de Beaux Arts in Paris, witnessed the rise of groups of adherents to the modernist language, some even convinced followers of Le Corbusier; Alifanti was one of them.

19 He is mentioned with resentment in the memoirs of the architects Ion Mircea Enescu and Eugenia Greceanu. See Ion Mircea Enescu, *Arhitect sub comunism* (Bucharest: Paideia, 2006); Viorica Iuga Curea (ed.), *Arhitecți în timpul dictaturii* (Bucharest: Simetria, 2005).

20 It is about the actions from 1941 against the partisans from Odessa, of the 61st Royal Engineers Battalion, of which Alifanti was Chief Commanding Officer (autobiography from 24.11.1952, in the personnel file from the Institute of Architecture, 60).

21 LXIII/05.1976.

22 His personnel file shows that he was hired at the school of architecture in Bucharest in 1944. Apparently, his exclusion from the party was followed by moments of incertitude regarding his position.

23 He is appointed Associate Professor in 1963, and Professor in 1965.

24 In the 1980s, even in candlelight since electricity was being cut off at 9 o'clock.

25 This refusal to defend too much a project does not mean that he did not care. The notebooks show how he was being tormented by his students' failures to the point of doubting his own qualification, just like he was getting depressed when his students' approaches were not appreciated by the other professors.

26 LX/7.05.77.

Fig. 4. Băneasa International Airport, as illustrated in *Arhitectura*
Fig. 5. APACA textile factory, as illustrated in *Arhitectura*
Fig. 6. Casa Scânteii Printing House, as illustrated in *Arhitectura*

The most paradoxical aspect lies, however, in the construction of his professional prestige – the indisputable respect he was granted even before he officially authored architectural projects. Most likely, it was not a popularity vote, since he was not really well liked by many of his peers, and he had also drawn political hostility, of which he was bitterly aware:

> *A certain terror to which I subjected them unwillingly* (*the political and professional terror I introduced while I was the Union's secretary and they hated me as a young apparatchik with no portfolio*) *has come back to take its revenge now* […] *hidden under formal deference*.[27]

This kind of professional respect might have been born at the "students' stock exchange" (he would be neither the first, nor the last such case). It was confirmed by his pre-war practice, reinforced by the quality of his *Detailing* course and furthered by his post-war practice.[28] What we do know is that the "professional folklore" attributed to him "beyond any doubt" (sic!) some highly valued buildings designed immediately after World War II (the APACA factory, the Băneasa Airport). Yet, until the mid 1960s, his name was mentioned only as a member in the design teams of various design-workgroups where most of the aforementioned projects have been drafted.[29] Yet, his professional prestige had been already established, since – in spite of his "excommunication" from the communist party – he was kept in the "leading team" working on the *Casa Scânteii* project, a building with a high political significance of the early 1950s.[30] Whether his (officially) subordinate status was the consequence of the political stigmata is still an open question. What comes out clearly is that Mircea Alifanti was an irrefutable authority in the professional consciousness of his time, a standing that turned out to be stronger than the political blame, theoretically insurmountable. This is confirmed by the positions he held in various professional bodies, once again after his exclusion.[31] This is also confirmed by the articles he published, which were, generally, systematic, exemplary papers, diverging from the routine of the

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27 LXIV/05. 1977.

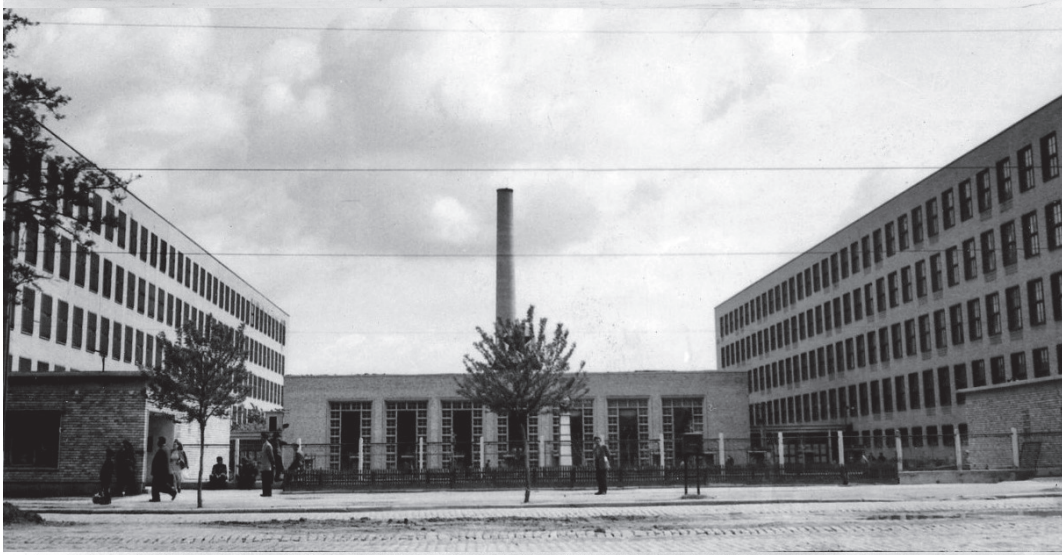
28 His works include one of the main pavilions of the *Aircraft Factory, Colibaşi* (1944), *The Palace of the Department of Defence, Secondary School in the Domeniilor Park, Housing for the public servants of the Department of Construction and Public Works* (under the direction of the architect Octav Doicescu), *Establishment of cold baths at Techirghiol, Public Bath, hotel and restaurant in Turda, project and construction details for the completition of the National Physical Training Agency Stadium, project for the rehabilitation of the Saligny wing of the Department of Construction and Public Works, projects for schools and culture houses in different regions of the country, The Băneasa Airport, the APACA Garment Factory, "Casa Scânteii" Printing House, the Romanian exhibition pavillion in Moskow* (1948-1949), *tribune of the Doherty sports field*. Apart from the projects that were actually built, Mircea Alifanti participated in a number of national and international competitions, which include *the International Competition for the train station in Sofia* (1938), *the Competition for the Trotting Racecourse, Băneasa* (1939) – 2nd place, *the Competition for the Savings Bank building* (1945) – 2nd place, *the Competition for the National Opera House* (1946), *the Competition for the Băneasa Airport* (1946) – 1st and 2nd places, *the Competition for the mausoleum of the working class heroes* (1958), *the international competition for the systematization of the city-centre of Berlin* (1959), *the competition for the systematization of Piaţa Unirii in Iaşi* (1959), *the international competition for the systematization of the city of Ploieşti* (1969), *the international competition for the systematization and construction of a rayon in South-East Moskow* (1960), *the international competition for the International Atomic Research and Conference Centre in Vienna* (1969), *the international competition for Beaubourg* (1971).

29 At a first glance, his personnel file shows that between 1942 and 1970 (when the academics are forbidden to work outside their educational institution) he held many positions. In fact, the length of the list is subsequent to the frequent changes of titles and affiliation of the same establishment. He worked mainly in the studios of "central" design institutes, another proof that his qualification was much appreciated and sought out. Many of the aforementioned projects are likely to have been conceived and conducted within these structures. However, his specific duties and projects will have to be clarified by future research.

30 As a rule, only the best architects were employed for the politically important projects. *Casa Scânteii*, the publishing and printing house of the party's daily newspaper, was the symbol of allegiance to the "socialist camp" under the leadership of the Soviet Union. The act, its significance and its architecture are found in almost all capital cities of the satellite countries.

31 The information was found in the personnel file: the Union of Architects (secretary 16 July 1954-30 September 1957): the Scientific Association of Engineers and Technicians (member of the Board of the







period and which, once published, were avidly studied. Most of them were focused on the design of standardized collective housing, a programme he worked on in the 1960s and he pursued faithfully and with quixotic passion, in parallel with his teaching activity:

> *…I do believe it is possible, despite several temporarily unbridgeable difficulties, to show that our mind is still at work and we are still able to study, to draw conclusions, to persuade, and to wipe off the overwhelming routine from what we call "the better dwelling".*[32]

He seems to have embodied sort of "professional terms of reference",[33] with a passion that merged with freethinking, generating an original reflection on architectural design. He was the authority that young students surmised and honoured, while the School seems to have protected.[34] This only lasted for a while and, in the 1980s, the *raisonneur* appears to have become uncomfortable; the more the school was submissively declining under the political burden, the more undesirable professor Alifanti became.

My trade … perhaps I practised it to the full only once[35]

Meanwhile, the years 1966-1968 and the design for Baia Mare Prefecture place his career in more clearly defined coordinates, as a project of his own is commissioned. The new coordinates are also unexpected, since they define a teoretic and expressive path of his own, almost unprecedented in our local culture and for which the context was far from favourable. The originality resides neither in the "rational ideality" that he looks for in theory, nor in the expressive sophistication he seeks in the object, but in the idiosyncratic way he is seeking them, namely through a lengthy gestation, nourished by personal experiences that he dissects analytically. This is a very rare design attitude in our architecture where, generally, the thirst for novelty annihilates doubt, leaving little room for critical approaches.

In the overall architectural landscape of the period, dominated by an arid, standardized modernism following worn out clichés, the building in Baia Mare comes out as uniquely optimistic and fresh.[36] Its uniqueness is also corroborated by the architect's explanations, published in the only architectural periodical of those days, *Arhitectura*.[37] For the first time in the magazine's life, one could find a real theoretical approach to a project, a design account formulated in reflexive, conceptual terms (not in descriptive or technical words, as it was customary). Twelve notebooks dedicated almost exclusively to the design of this building complement the information in that article.[38] Written in a more spontaneous manner, being more genuine and much more generously illustrated (from preliminary sketches to final details), these documents define a substantial and genuine creative deliberation from the birth of the idea to the construction.

> *I've designed a few buildings. The one in Baia-Mare is interesting, singular. Its design offered me the opportunity to define what I do think about how a building design should be.*[39]

Architecture Section starting with 1960); the *Arhitectura* magazine (member of the editorial board from 1958 to 1974, when the *editorial board* comes out of its previous anonymity with no. 8-9/1958).

32 LVI/11.04.1972.

33 He was always asked for his opinion, although he disliked acting as judge (the judge, who has the power to irrevocably decide the fait of others, is another obsession of his drawings).

34 He is awarded emeritus status in 1970 – an administrative ploy to keep him in the School, as he refuses to get a PhD degree, a *sine qua non* condition starting from 20 April 1970. (Order of the Department of Education no. 392/28.IV.1970).

35 LXII/17.03.1975.

36 A number of prefectures were built under the Law 2/1968 (regarding the administrative division of the country), each being entrusted to a "consecrated" architect of the moment. However interesting, none of them reveal any true innovative approach; some of the later projects (such as the one in Vaslui) will take certain ideas from Baia Mare, but only superficially.

37 Alifanti, Mircea. "Baia Mare, sediul politico-administrativ al judeţului Maramureş" [Baia Mare, Political-administrative headquarters of Maramureş county], *Arhitectura* 6 (1972): 19-30.

38 Out of the sixteen that Alifanti refers to, see infra.

39 LXIV/ 08-10.1977.

When looking at the building with a contemporary eye, it is obvious that it matches certain critical stances against the modernist mainstream (or categories of the post-war avant-garde movements)[40]. This correspondence can be sustained at the formal level: the building's appearance seems explicitly close to Brutalism, although the use of materials, their engineering and their finishing betray a different philosophy of the relation between the final expression and the original substance of the construction, and a different mode of conceiving the decoration from what Banham coined *New Brutalism.* It is not the purpose of this article to go deeper in this sort of analysis and frame the project for Baia Mare either stylistically or in terms of design theory. This would be inconsistent with the architect's indifference towards any direct affiliation to a consecrated trend, as he never sough for such legitimation of his work.

However, his affinity with the post-war international architects that tried to enrich and nuance the modernist stance becomes transparent when looking at his reflections (a design theory of his own) that add richness and meaning to the work. More specifically, we refer to the author's understanding of the representative character of a public building as having an indispensable, two-folded quality: on the one hand, it was meant to call up the architectural tradition of the region; on the other hand, it was supposed to result from the negotiation with the immediate urban context.

Along with other significant intentions that substantiated the design process, this approach (that the built forms of the ensemble suggest) is explicitly, yet subtly, put into words in the lengthy notes that Alifanti called *the way I designed*.[41] The published article is thus substantially enriched with the reflections consigned to the sixteen notebooks that cover the entire progress of the project, from conception to construction site. Together with the later notes, in which Alifanti retrospectively reviews the entire undertaking, these bring to the surface a meaningful context of preoccupations, circumstances or stories, which uncover the inner mechanics of a complex design process, unusual at that time, even unique.

At a first glance, the article from *Arhitectura* magazine appears surprisingly fragmented. After an introduction that mainly accounts for the emotional experience of working on this project, the author provides a dry technical outline of the project brief (it is the only concession he makes to the routine of the time); he then pushes his argument back to the definition of the urban setting and to the interpretation of the building-type; this is followed quite unexpectedly by an interlude on the wooden churches of northern Maramureș (the region and county of which Baia Mare is the seat), thus referring to a meaningful cultural background. In the last part of the article, the author sums up his major design intentions and explains how they were translated into practice. The page layout is also misleading since these fragments are graphically separated one from another. The illustrations, that apparently split even more the text, in fact provide a parallel and extremely substantial discourse, to which the uncommonly elaborated captions contribute to a large extent.

Reading between the lines and fragments, the article offers us a glimpse into a complicated logical construction that almost disallows a linear discourse. This structure reflects a long deliberation meant to juxtapose numerous intentions, questions and convictions and to find their proper balance in the project.

Some of these conditions (concerns) are certainly of an idiosyncratic nature, yet they are subsequent to an objective analysis of the functional programme and its interpretation considered within the urban, cultural, and political context. Thus, Mircea Alifanti speaks of …*a correct, yet difficult design, a preserver of several concerns, images I contemplated, and some "encryptions"*...[42] This confession suggests that we are looking at a project particularly important to the author as many of his long-term obsessions and worries seem to be stirred up by it.

40 We are specifically referring to the pursuits of Team 10, but also to the later works of Le Corbusier.

41 In a later note (LVI/02.1972) – a draft for the project presentation, which we find rephrased in *Arhitectura* 6/1972: 19 – Alifanti writes that: *Writing about the project for the Prefecture of Maramures County I should have titled this text "HOW I DESIGNED" […] beyond everything that is built and – inevitably – subject to direct and global perception […].*

42 Ibid.

Opposite page:
Fig. 7. Baia Mare overview, as ilustrated in Arhitectura
Fig. 8. Sketch of the general layout overlaid with bird's eye view of the ensemble, undated entry, XXXVII

Following pages (from top left to bottom right):
Fig. 9. Draft layout for intended publication on the wooden churches of Maramureș, XXIV
Fig. 10. Undated entry XXXIII with indications regarding proposed measuring system
Fig. 11. Drawing of the main façade showing a second layer of "interventions" of the author, explaining his main intentions and frustrations with what he is yet to accomplish, undated, XXXVII
Fig. 12. Several sketches of the corner of the offices slab showing the solution the author chose, XXXVII

These *encryptions* could allude to: (1) his earlier survey of the Maramureș churches that he intended to publish;[43] (2) his special interest in perspective as a measuring tool for design; (3) his concentration on detailing, therefore on his obsessive studies of the main façade and its sophisticated and strange articulation; (4) the professional awareness of someone who stands in-between two schools, a man whose education was classical, yet has aesthetic affinities with modernism, or (5) the architect's leftist political convictions.

The convoluted way in which these underlying concerns intersect each other and fuel the design work is still locked in the architect's "laboratory", of which the notebooks are only the visible surface. The hundreds of sketches from his notebooks that track the almost countless fine point variations of the project allow us to trace the architect's creative path. Apparently, all the information is there:

> *I brought home* (*from my office*) *the 16 notebooks of my design for Baia Mare* […] *They hold the whole range of concerns for each "moment", for each separate form, along with my vacillations before any decision was made* (*sometimes this meant a step back, a loss, even something ugly); there often stands out – considering the countless pages of "insistence" – the importance I bestowed on a particular element or the difficulty I encountered along my stubborn pursuit…*
> *I wish I would annotate them and underline some important moments, mark the pages when a certain form was decided* (*not always the one I wished…*)[44]

In the absence of these annotations, it is difficult to find the right course through the maze of notes and drawings, but we can rely on certain paragraphs that cast more light on some of the *encoded dimensions* of this unique design.

One of the recurring ideas that seem to underlie the conception of the Baia-Mare building places it in some kind of continuity with his studies and thorough surveys of the Maramureș wooden churches. It is not the intrinsic value (otherwise remarkable at the time) of this endeavour that matters at this moment; it is the modern key in which he interprets the heritage that is at stake. First, he refers to a kind of expressiveness *organically connected to all the attributes of the building and to its ambiance*. He attributes to this relation a role both active, as a source of inspiration for the project, and passive, as the setting that enhances the experience of the whole:

> *This architecture [of the wooden churches] is not only beautiful or appropriate to its function and its surrounding landscape; it is also vigorous and daring. It "respects" the landscape in a conscious, diverse, and intelligent manner, at times by yielding to it, at times by using it as a component, at times by challenging it. Perhaps there are but few architectures in wood that succeed, through such modest means, capable of such an in-depth dialogue with the ambiance in which they grew.*[45]

The author explicitly states that his interest in this heritage resides in its affinity with modern architecture, which relies on *their simple vocabulary, especially in the treatment of major elements.*[46] He insists on the three-level way in which architecture can be conceived within and alongside an *ambiance*: the first is the daring expressive gesture of the more striking elements of the building as seen from afar; coming closer, the second level concerns the refined formal

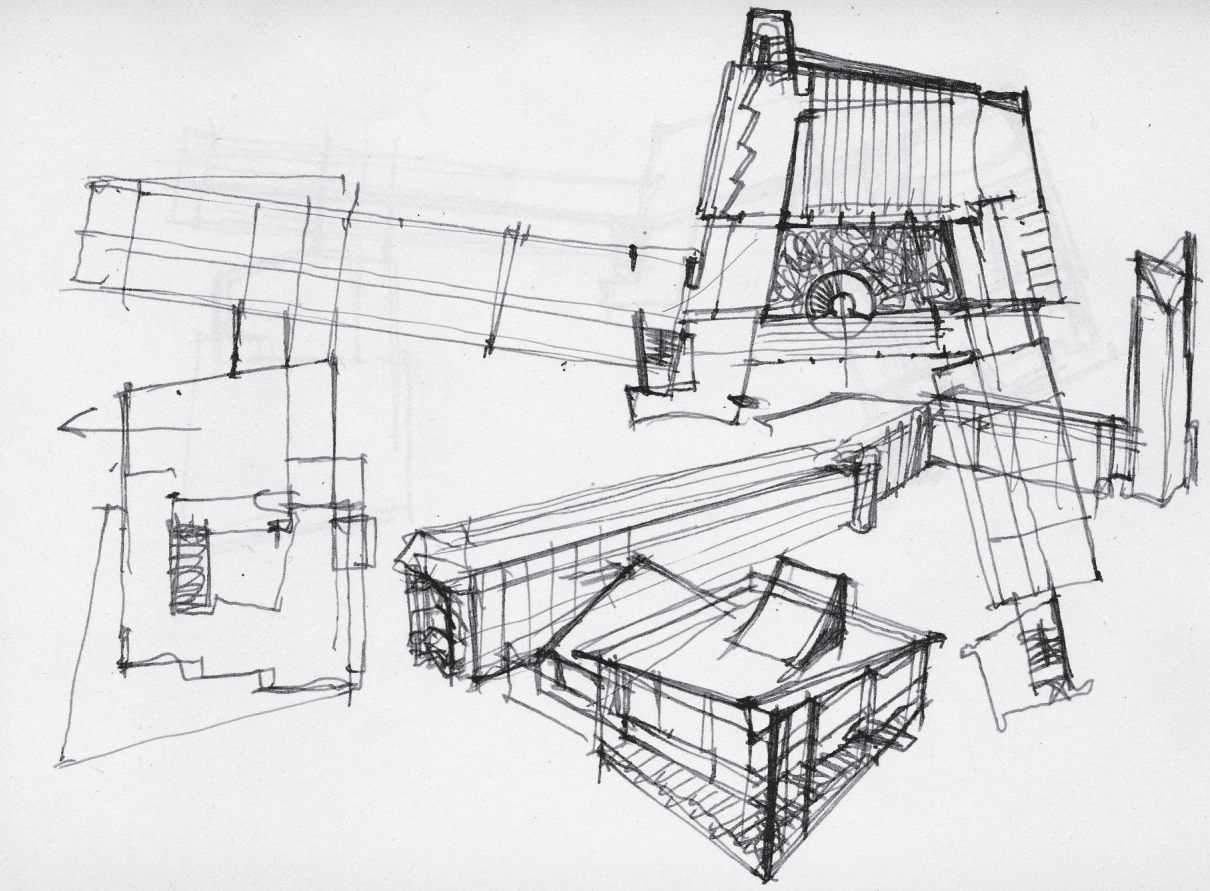
43 As it is testified by the notebooks, in the 1950s and 1960s, Mircea and Cleopatra Alifanti prepared a large portfolio containing their measurements and drawings of more than sixty wooden churches from the region. The Maramureș churches are currently listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

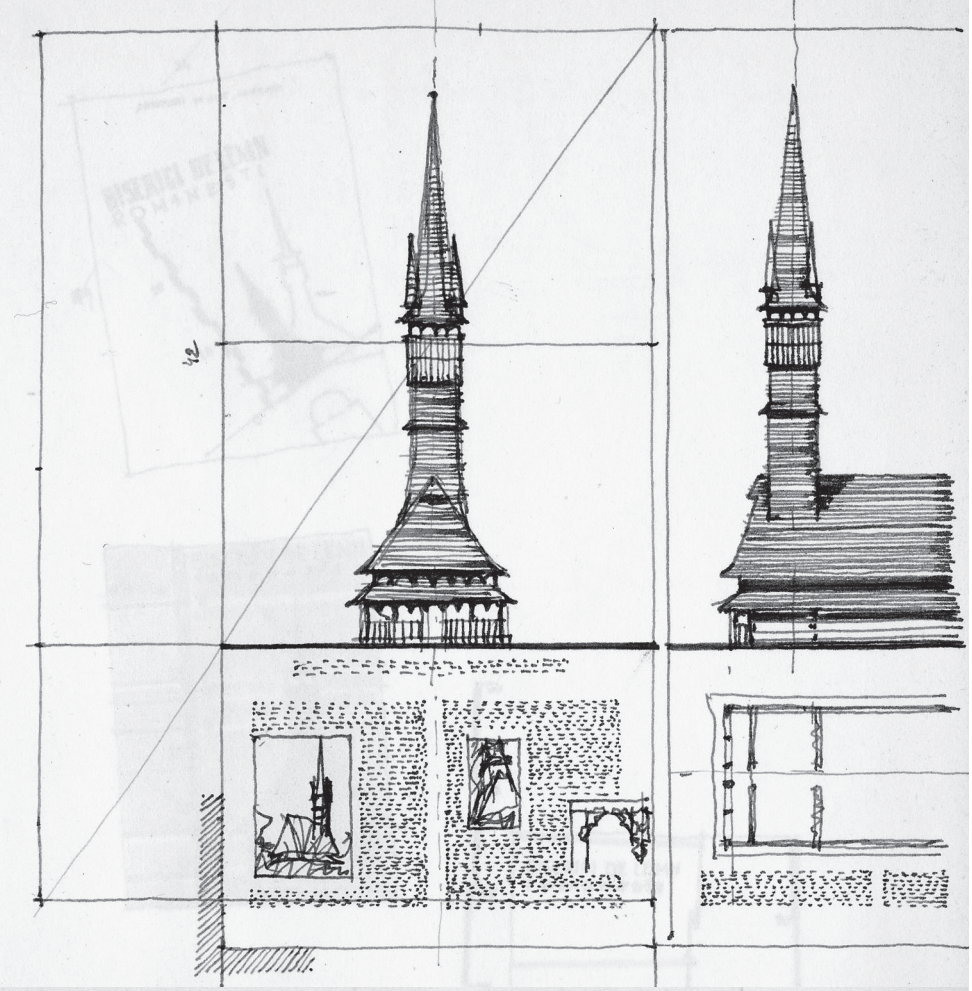
44 L/16.11.1969.

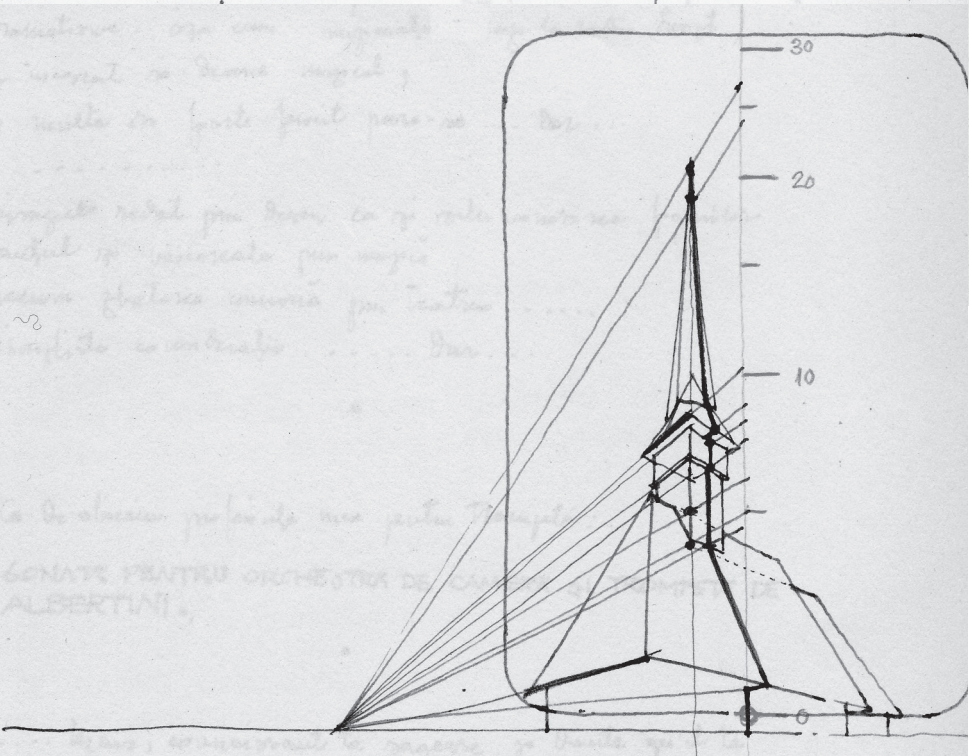
45 *Arhitectura* 6 (1972): 22, underlined by Alifanti in the article.

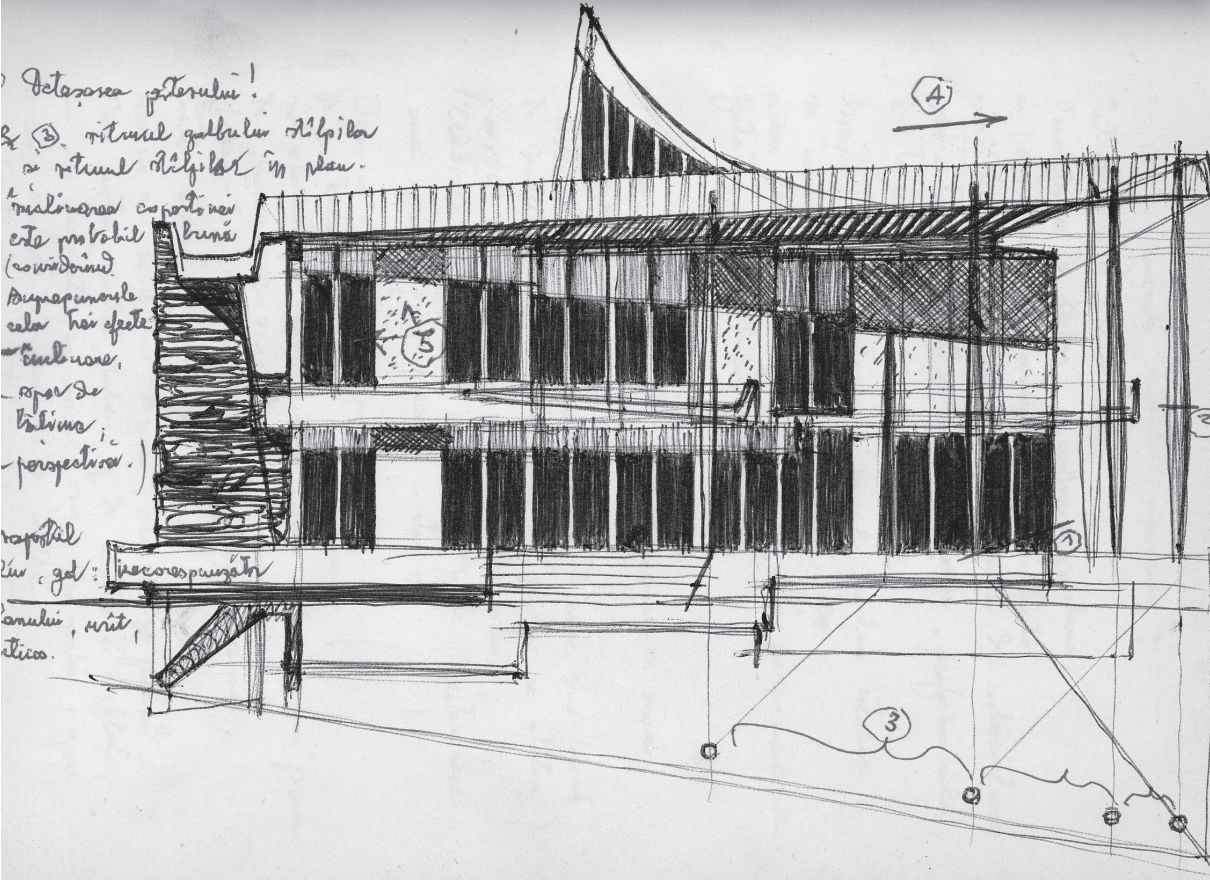
46 Ibid.

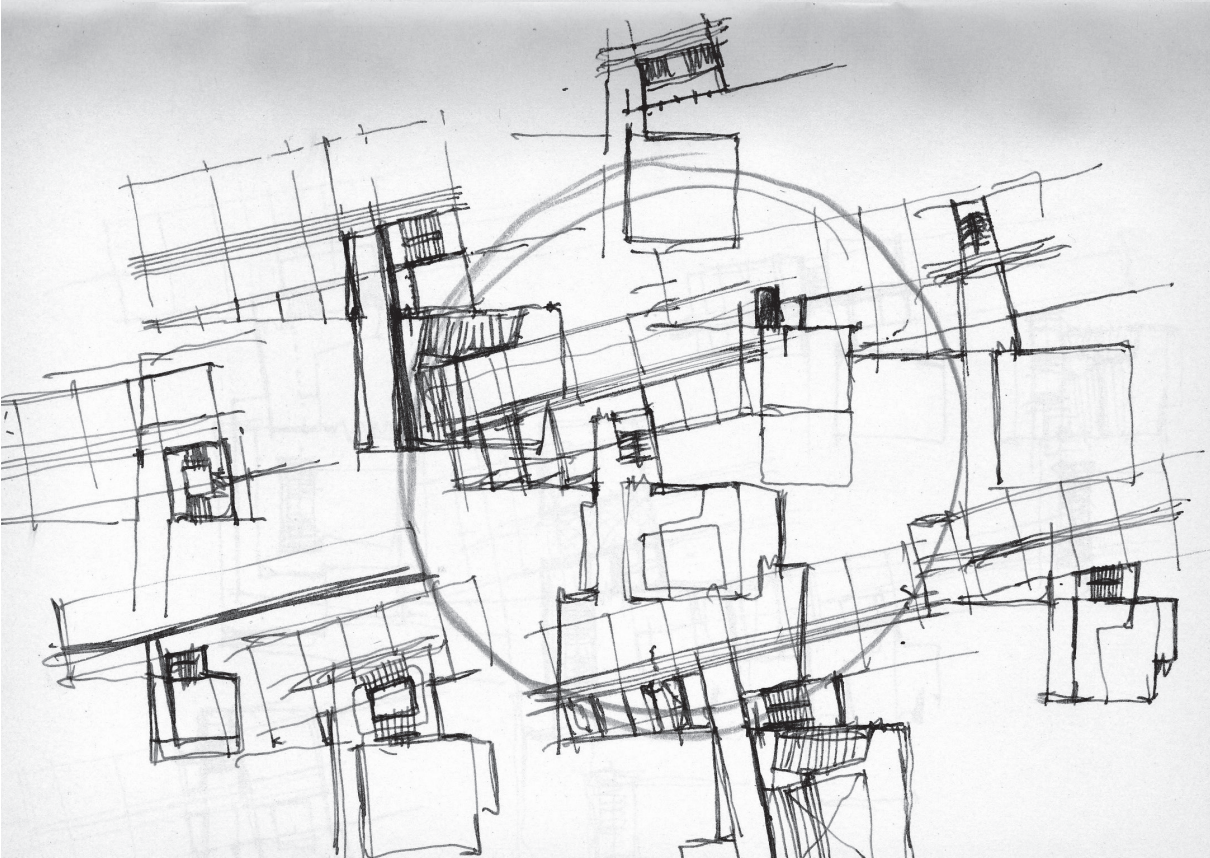







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Detașarea pătrului!
③ ritmul golurilor stâlpilor
și ritmul stâlpilor în plan.
④
⑤
③
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necorespunzător



Opposite page:
Fig. 13. The Baia Mare Prefecture: the image along the street shows the main elements of the composition: the corner tower and the main building, with its details – the cantilever, the skylight, the main access, the corner pillar, the balcony, etc.
Fig. 14. The courtyard/piazza open to the main street, undated drawing, XXXVI

Following pages (from top left, to bottom right):
Fig. 15. The main access portal, undated drawing, XLV
Fig. 16. The Prefect's balcony, undated drawing, XLVI
Fig. 17. The cantilever, undated drawing, XXXVIII
Fig. 18. The corner pillar, undated drawing, XXXVIII

vocabulary of the secondary parts, which in its turn allows the elaboration of the third level, i.e., the minute detailing intended for an even closer view. Hence, his decision to consider the traditional wooden architecture of the region a decisive starting point in his design – *the premiss (that is both a difficulty and an advantage) of a more powerful* "*spiritual vicinity*" *– the traditional architecture of Maramureş*[47] – is natural and modern at the same time. It comes from Alifanti's determination to establish a creative rapport with the surrounding cultural and symbolic background, which the building is called to epitomize (all the more when an administrative building is at stake). Interpreted in this manner, even the design brief becomes susceptible to this symbolic representation. For instance, in a fragment in which he elaborates on the issue of representativeness, the author refers to …*the possibility of suggesting the new through* "*daring and uncompromising actions*", *so familiar to the inhabitants of the region.*

Both the author's notebooks and the published article consistently dwell on the symbolic role the architect assigns to the ensemble considered in its context – the new, modern "administrative palace" turns an inhospitable site into a political centre able to gather up those emblematic connotations of the "primary" town halls of the Middle Ages. This idea shapes the architectural programme into a composition that creates a square and a tower. The former is the court of honour consciously pursued by the author, the un-built exterior space of the project to which he assigns an important role within the urban economy of the ensemble. The latter, suggestively *dedicated to setting up a small history museum of the town*[48] is the tower located at the extremity, thus, closing the entire composition.

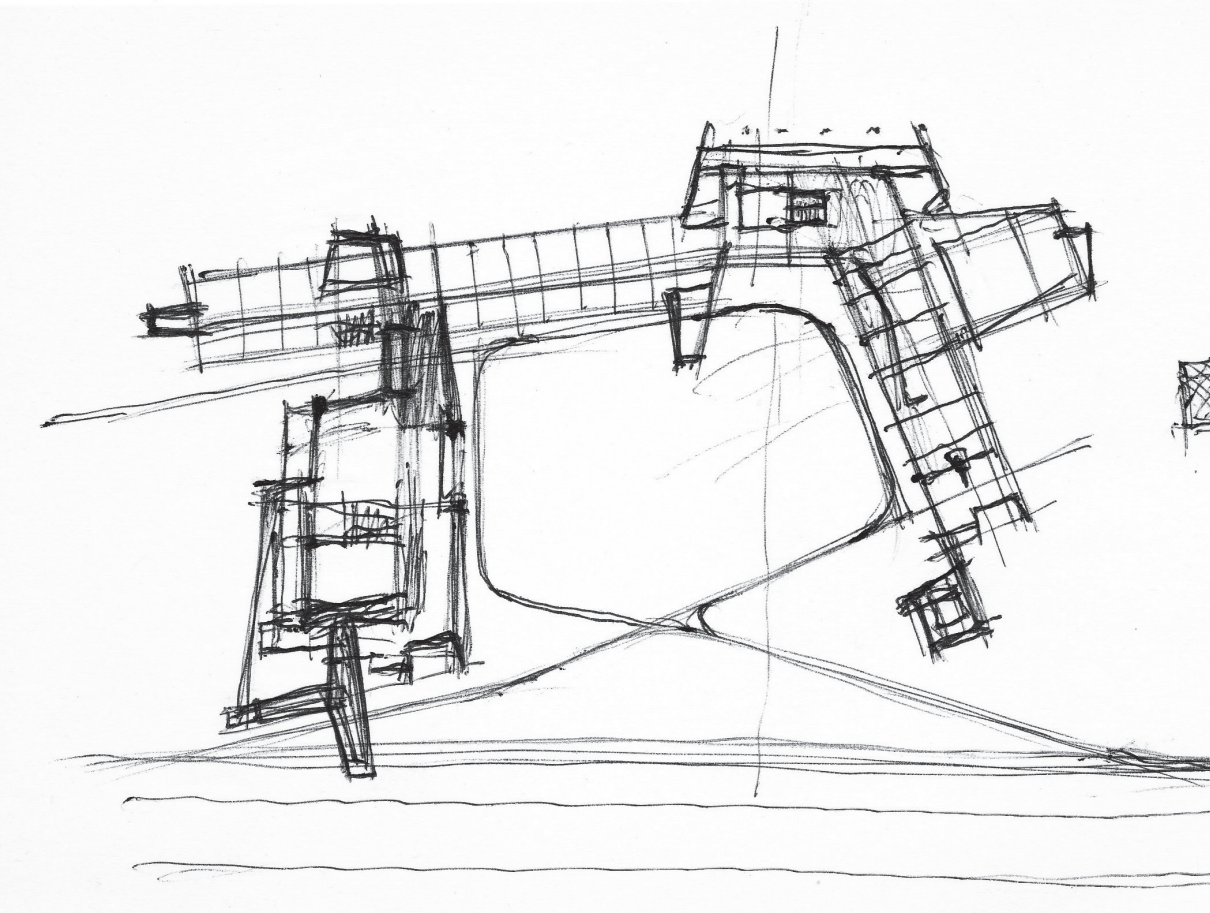
The same idea that places the design of the Baia Mare building in line with the major historic civic ensembles is further reinforced by the author's annotations on the links between the interior space and the city, through a *"transparency" of the interior* that would visually and symbolically connect the administrative activities hosted by the building with the city it represents. This transparency of the programme places Alifanti's approach in a rather paradoxical position against the political context of the moment: being the product of the negotiation with the architect's idealistic humanism, the building genuinely opens towards the public and the city, although the key feature of the communist regime relies exactly on the disjunction of the political discourse claiming democracy from the absolute opacity of governing acts. We can thus say that Alifanti designed a building that stands out of its time, dedicated either to a democratic society the author dreams of, or to that long-term architecture that looks beyond its own moment of conception and construction. Not only its major compositional features, but the building as a whole is conceived so as to address the city's daily life:

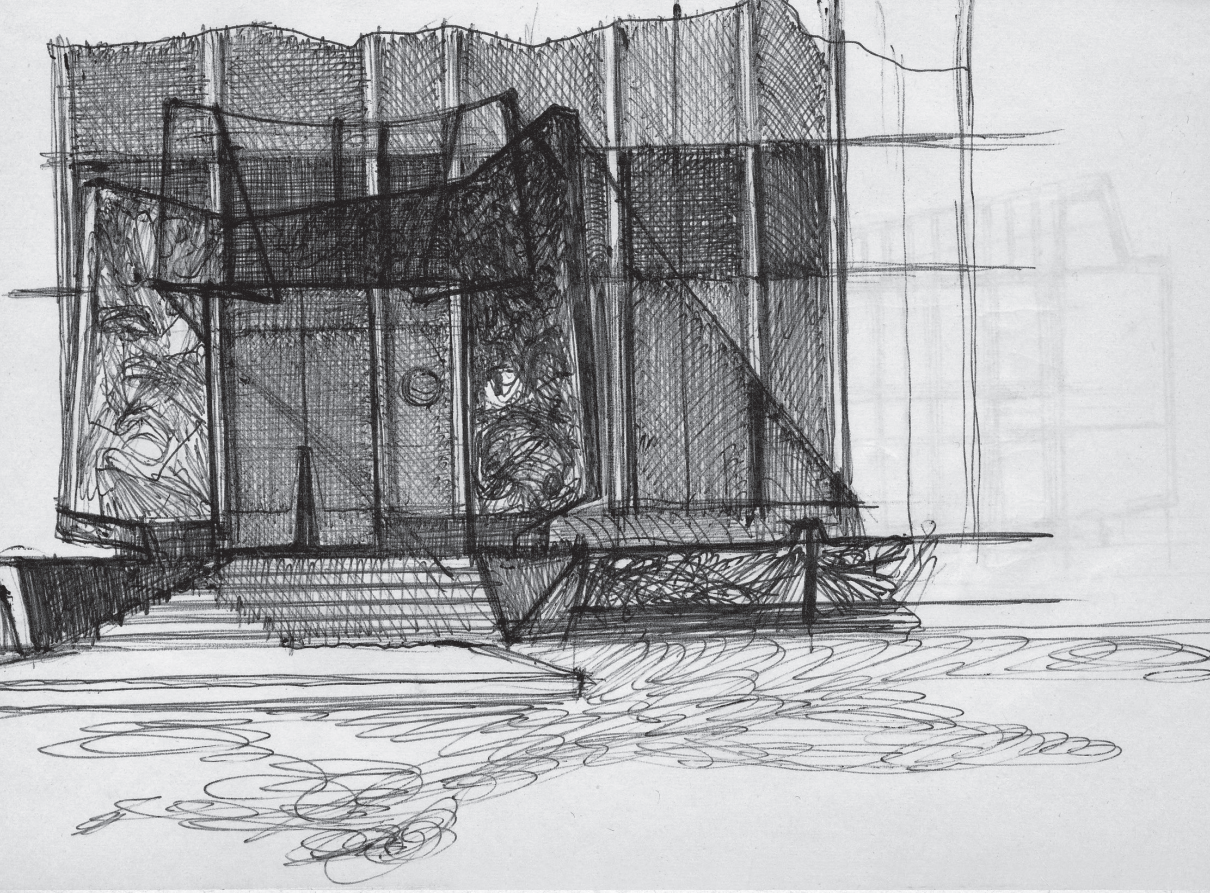
> *… the proximity of the two squares, the location of the building on the main road connecting these two squares and within the city's busiest place. Thus, there was a fight between the possibility of having a representative ambiance masterfully controlled from an architectural point of view and the difficult moulding of a mediocre* "*existent*"*, but one that is set in the immediate reality of the animated city life.*[49]

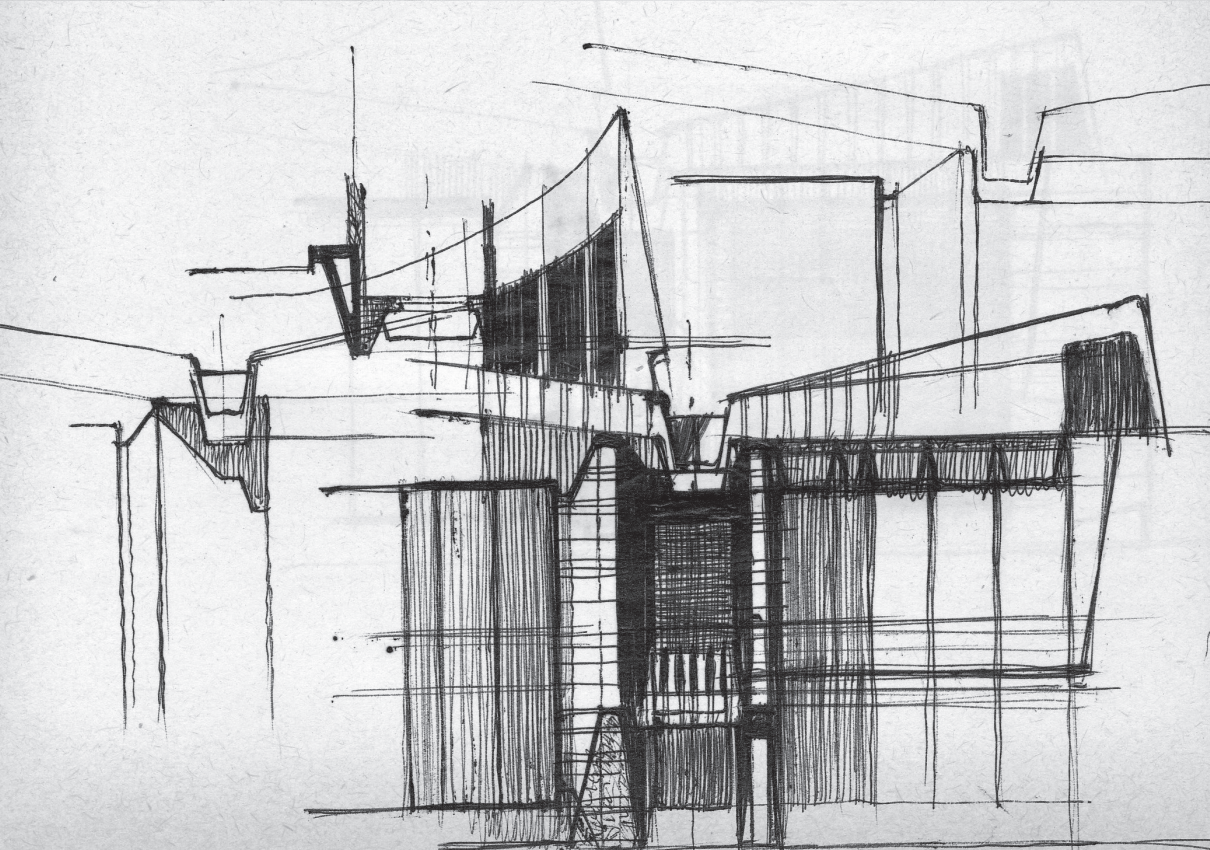
Compared with the typology of the period's administrative buildings, which were compact, self-contained and placed in an urban space they dominated, the Baia Mare ensemble makes use of it's location by enhancing it through a hierarchical composition that seeks to dissolve the

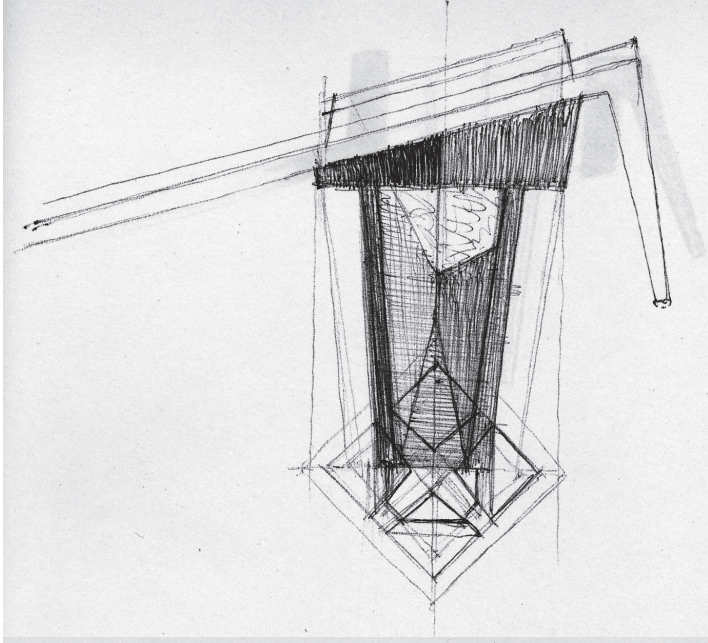
47 *Arhitectura* 6 (1972): 22, underlined by Alifanti in the article.
48 Ibid.
49 *Arhitectura* 6 (1972): 19.

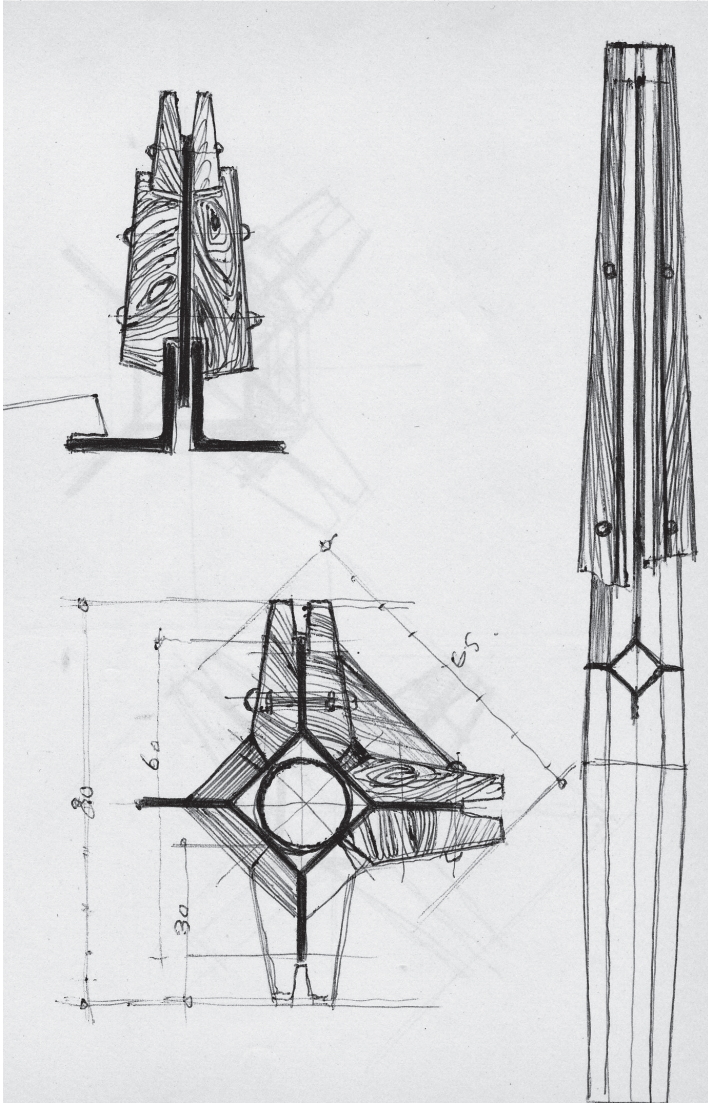











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contradiction between "space definer" and "space occupier" as Colin Rowe called the predicament of modernist interventions in the late 1970s. What is more, the design also takes into account the expected evolution of the town's existing physical facts.[50] From this point of view, again, the Baia-Mare design is singular among its contemporary public buildings, since the approach does not abuse the power that it might have enjoyed (given the political importance ascribed to an administrative construction of the region); instead it negotiates with the human and urban scales, which the author contemplates in their evolution:

> *In a way I had to choose between a vast ensemble* […] (*where the only tangible element was the administrative headquarters building which was to wait for a long time the edification of the other buildings* […] *and using a average location, bereft of any spectacular planning* […][51]

He chose the latter option. He also chose to conceive both the larger and smaller components of the ensemble in such a way as to address the visitor's kinetic perception through sequences of unevenly important moments:

> *…assuming that the whole building will be perceived by the passer-by as a sequence of moments, with a beginning and an end, some images of this display should be able to clearly "anchor" the building silhouette against the sky and the hills; the intermediary images offered to the viewer should be filled with sufficient personality so as to maintain the interest awaken by the first.*[52]

Approaching the ensemble from the main directions, the viewer's perspective is supported by the arrangement of the elements of the main wing and those of the tower that closes the composition. However, the designer's attention penetrates the details of the constructions as well; on the one hand, by highlighting various "moments" of these sequences (the main access, the corner pillar, the main balcony, the canopy, etc. – for which Alifanti filled tens of pages with sketches meant to define them in the most subtle details); on the other hand, by adding nuances through materials, textures, and various colours just to *remind, suggest, make up for* […] *the rich, valuable, and subtle ornaments* of traditional architecture.

Such differentiations aim to *emphasize diversity and discontinuity* as a resource able to articulate an interesting whole. In this respect,

> *… the details should listen to the same rhythms and measures so that, on the one hand, they ought not to exhaust one's attention, while on the other, they should modestly contribute to the unity of the whole.*

Finally, the stake of this unity is related to a complex and subtle manner of understanding architectural expression. More precisely, it implies the possibility of linking –at the conceptual, expressive, and symbolic levels – the tiniest decorative detail with the larger elements of the building, and all with the *ambiance*; they should all balance one another and mirror intimately the entire structural logic of the whole; they should all result from the architect's creative interpretation of the functional demands.[53] The search for this kind of "unity" is to be explained through Alifanti's belief that complex design problems should have a unique answer, which afterwards is modulated in order to help solve the secondary demands of the project. It seems that through such assumptions Professor Mircea Alifanti tried to develop what we call today a design theory, namely, a critical and daring synthesis in search for an expressive novelty adjusted to the site; a synthesis placed in-between the academic legacy (in the spirit of which he was educated) and the tenets of the Modern Movement (to which as a young student he had adhered out of his love for Le Corbusier), an "in-between" seen as a space of critical interpretation. He pursued a principle of coherence (a rational one, for that matter), where expression does not "follow

50 Alifanti considers the possibility of a new piercing that would lead to the main facade of the building.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., 24.

53 The interpretation of these fragments as references to the principles of symmetry or convenience is not far-fetched, given Prof. Alifanti's classical education, the experience of his early career governed by the ideological imperative to design in a neoclassical language (specific to the socialist realism of the 1950s in Romania), and his cultural amplitude.

function", nor does it result from the "truth of structure", but – even subtler – from merging the expressive potential of the programme (of the whole and of each element) with that of the structure and the materials, all tuned to the place and its indefinable tradition. Considering this synthesis from the viewpoint of architectural expression, Mircea Alifanti named it *logical singularity*. Although this appears to be a key concept of his architecture, one that infiltrates the whole design, it is insufficiently detailed in the writings we have consulted thus far. *Logical singularity* seems to be defined as an "*outcome*" *of the context, of special associations*. It is a lesser kind of innovation, which will never seek novelty for novelty's sake, but instead results from a constant, even obstinate search for the logic of the whole design to which it complies. This is also why Mircea Alifanti argues for the architect's unique contribution and (what should be) his total control over the building.

His notebooks sustain the search for this principle of unity, which the recent developments in architecture have done away with or have proven impossible, a search that at that time came against thinking and designing by means of clichés or worn-out models. This is, also, what he taught his students.

Moreover, in my early adulthood I sought to find out that element able to coordinate the functional scheme of the plan or the structural scheme (and to control the elaboration of a design).

Later I understood the DOWN FLOWING LOAD FORCES hidden within the functional scheme and, especially, in the structural one, and their power to stimulate my possibilities to create.

So, I deliberately began using the functional and structural solutions that I elaborated starting from the brief as inspirational schemes. I observed them carefully, just as I would observe the old schemes of "architectural composition" and I believed in them; I asked them to bring order to my creative possibilities, to direct them, and what is more, to STIMULATE them. I even tried – in search for greater EXPRESSIVENESS – to merge the functional and the structural in a one and only scheme.

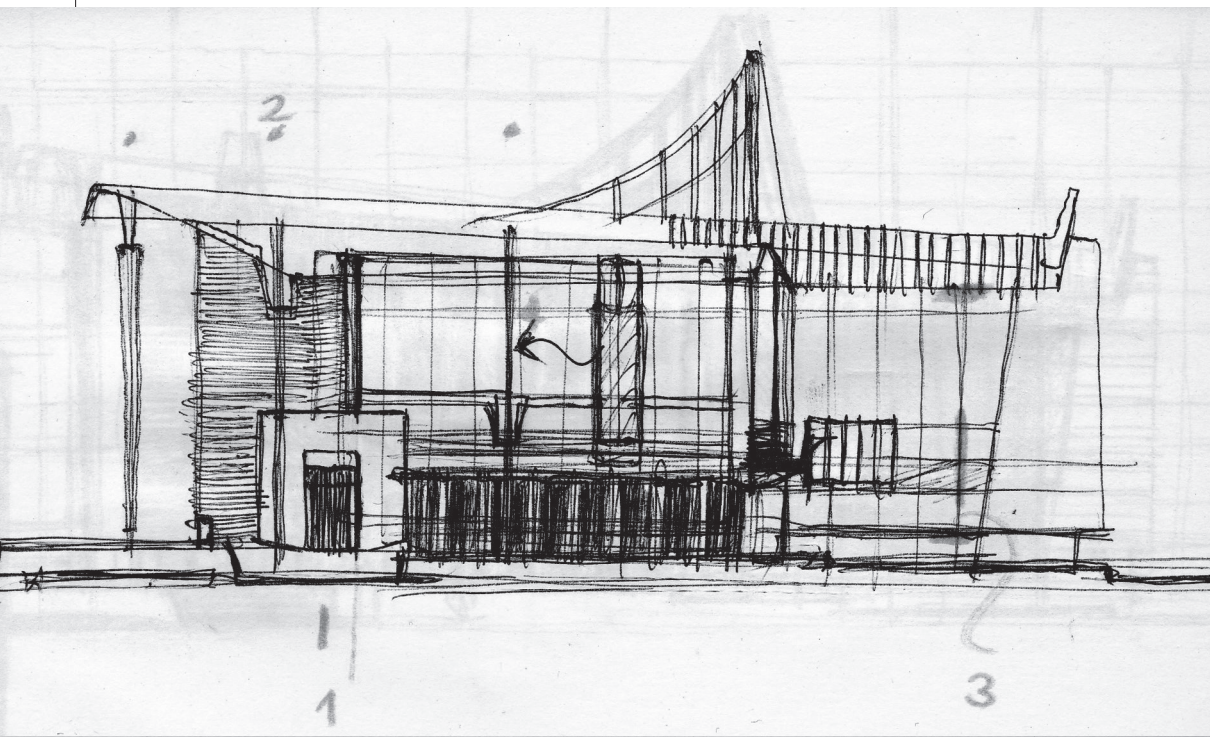
In time, this did not seem enough, so I tried to find a clearer order for this expressiveness, that is, to force it to obey to certain of the so called compositional (rules) habits; among these I have chosen those that entail the maximum potential for adaptation, for opening towards the new possibilities of architecture… in particular those that are closer, more appropriate to bring order into the instant when, in the process of creation, the IDEA and the MOVEMENT are turned into stone and become architecture. It is as if I had started to seek new meanings for the old, tiring attributes of utilitas, firmitas, venustas, to find in them something different from… the simple <u>confirmation</u> of a successful architecture.

They were so disparate and so exhausted by the passing of time, that it is highly unlikely not to question the possibility of finding them all in the same building. It was as if I had tried to find out whether a building could still be "utilis, ferma et venusta" at the same time, despite the fact that each attribute is the result of a self-sufficient rule.

Better said, I wanted to find out whether there was another rule able to connect these three attributes that today seem quite defining for a building. While trying, I allowed the function to engender an association of forms and the structure to censure this association.

Taking advantage of their harmony or (especially) of their dissonance, I watched the arguments thrown into the battle by each of them and, from all logical forms resulted from their competition, I chose the more expressive one, or the SINGULARITY, as I coined it once.

Then I ordered, I arranged and I opposed all these forms into an whole to which I tried to add an surplus of expression, by relying on the same human attraction for cadence, rhythms and shifting rhythms, on humans' interest in untangling mysteries, in solving problems, in grasping differences and contrasts (as it happened when some "notables" of our profession established the so-called 'laws of composition', analysing human sensitivity and habits). This is to say that I tried to flatter the viewer by giving him problems that, once he solved, he could feel more intelligent and more competent in appreciating architectural form; at the same time, I respected him and held him in great esteem because I thought he would enjoy solving problems.


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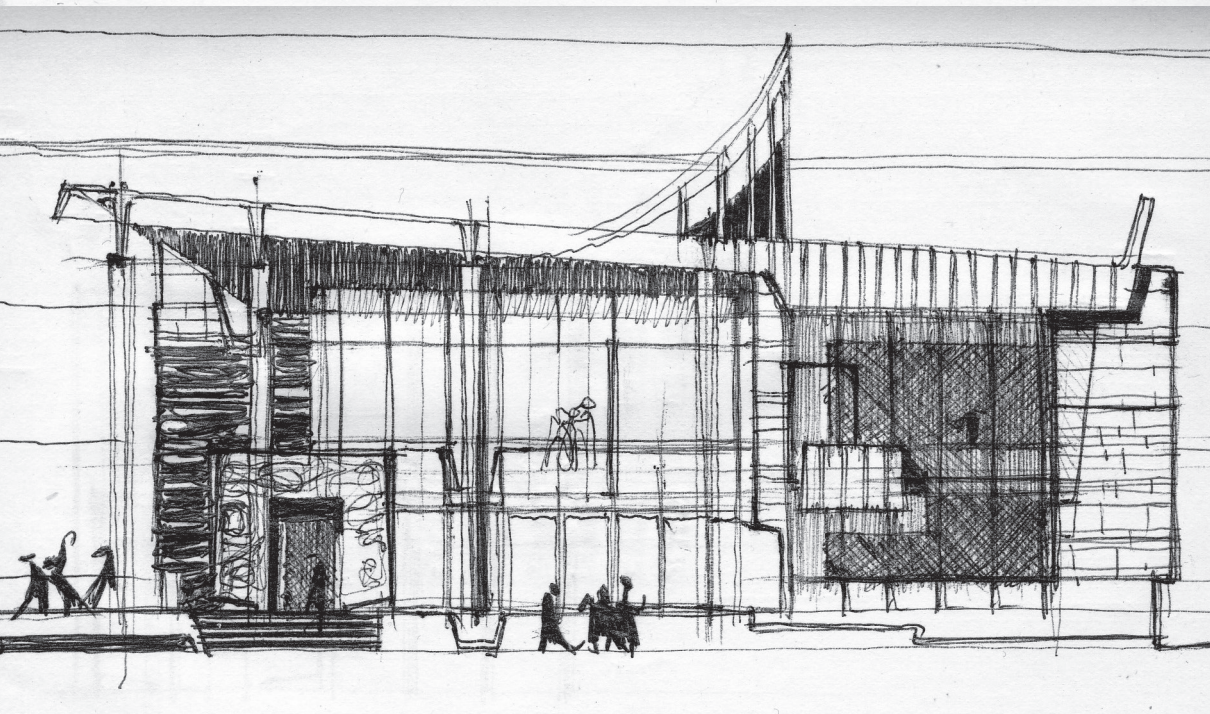


Fig. 19. The principle elements of the main façade numbered by the author, undated drawing, XLI
Fig. 20. The author's "preference for rhythm" as shown in the complex intersection of rhythms of the main façade, undated drawing, XLI

As I said, I used traditional compositional practices trying to turn them into useful tools for working with a very special material, a precious, less flexible, less nuanced, insufficiently expressive material, namely the set of functional and structural forms. I used these tools when needed and somehow as if I worked with my favourite file, chisel or lathe in my daily life; yet I did not worship all or one in particular … or maybe I felt a special preference for rhythm and contrast…[54]

I'm leaving architecture, is it leaving me? Neither one, nor the other… [55]

After Baia Mare, he works with the same team on a few other big projects: the town hall and a hotel in Bistrița Năsăud (both designed in 1969 and built in the early 1970s) and two important international competitions in Viena and Paris.[56] There is no room to discuss them here, although he obviously applied a similar design approach. However his emotional involvement was less intense, and the notebooks let us understand that he gave more latitude to his collaborators; he also loved them less; it seems that he was, somehow, disillusioned by these designs.

Beginning with 1974 the theme of "failure" comes up repeatedly in the notebooks. It is not the personal failure he is referring to (although that is also reiterated time and again) but rather the hopeless state of architecture "in troubled times". We should not wonder, since, at that time, the communist regime was viciously assaulting and radically limiting any sort of professional competence from two directions: on the one hand, the newly passed laws on planning and investments drastically reduced any reasonable chance for the architectural design and outrageously standardized any urban and architectural decision, enforcing total political control over them;[57] on the other hand, the government's policies in matters of education ruined the whole system, the humanities' studies in particular.[58] *With us,* "*architecture is being dissolved,*"[59] he wrote. The decline was obvious for whoever was willing to see it. The professor contemplates the disaster with bitterness and revolt; he is resolute about giving up on architecture:

> *I am walking away from the ranks of those who* "*do their job*"*… yet I am utterly honoured! There is nothing that would honour me more than assuming this attitude.* […] *I did not want to sell my profession down the river, I did not want to betray its lofty ideals, its great possibility of creation, its ancient dignity; a grand* (*emblem*) *lost forever under the surface of primitive forces in command*; *a surface of vulnerability and lack of culture;* […] *I did not want to accept them taking away my power to experiment and to decide* […] *Everything is lost for the wonderful profession …!*[60]

Things begin to rush out of control. The notebooks carry the complete account of the farce that was the so-called "competition" for Bucharest's civic centre,[61] to which Nicolae Ceaușescu had

54 LVI/02-03.1974.

55 LXIV/1977.

56 *The international competition for an international atomic research and conference center in Vienna* (1969), *the international competition for Beaubourg* (1971).

57 The Directives 1972 of the National Conference of the PCR on the systematisation of land, cities and villages in 1972, as well as the subsequent National Programme for Systematisation), the Systematisation Law (L58/1974), the Roads Law (L13/1974), the Systematisation of Industrial Platforms Law (L29/1975), etc. In direct relation to this, the mechanism for official approval of projects (and systematisation projects in particular) becomes more centralised than ever, as well as aberrantly complicated.

58 The Decree 14/1976 (turned into the Law 12/1976) for the establishment, organisation and operation of units for production, research, design and services for the integration of higher education with production and scientific research.

59 LXI/1974.

60 LX/1974. We still do not know if this decision also refers to a specific circumstance (like the ones that follow) or just to the general context.

61 Many of the events recorded in the notebooks are details in the broader picture of the outset of these distructive works, and constitute important documents in this complex and still unclarified case file. As for

Fig. 21. Mircea Alifanti, unnamed graphic

summoned him (along with other 18 personalities of the time). The architects were essentially compelled to come up in eight months with a project for restructuring a sizable part of the city, following a project brief that had to be generated up within a month.[62] Alifanti recorded the preludes of this insult to the dignity of architecture, namely the shameless way in which the new building of the National Theatre was disfigured,[63] and the urban project for the town of Zimnicea (drafted in fifteen days by a team from the School).[64] Under such circumstances, he declines the presidential invitation. The bitter intensity of the moment, the sickening experience is recorded in his notebooks:

> (...) *I talked incessantly, till I squeezed out all my poison,* (…) *I talked about the impossibility to practise our profession decently, about the moral need to stop doing it under certain circumstances … about the conclusion-decision of ending up my activity as an architect … etc., etc. All these are truths– perhaps not just mine.*[65]

However, he would not give up on the *"side" profession of teaching* [66](as he calls it with tender irony), although he is deeply affected by the school's decline. In the notebooks he denounces not only the rector's lack of morality, a rector who complacently accepts the way in which the profession is undermined to the point of stealing his colleagues' projects (although he was also the head of the Union of Architects, the professional association). He is equally disgusted by the way in which the absurd topics of the day were applied in education and by the manner in which students worked for their professors' commissions.

> *I am shocked by this blatant "callousness" and I can see no honest way to … guide these poor victims brought in to be educated – in terms of profession, morality, and civic spirit – in our school. The total disarray, confusion, arbitrariness enthroned by our infallible rector make things even "more impossible".*
> *Perhaps I have raised my hopes in architecture too high and now I am at a lost when looking for the proper words to describe infamously enough our rector-president and architect …*[67]

He sticks to his sort of moral resistance, in which he finds dignity. Thus, he declines the commission for the Oradea town hall.[68] After a just one visit of the site, he officially recommended that the project should be carried out by young architects from the local design

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the information published thus far, see *Arhitectura* 1-4 (1996), after the international competition Bucharest 2000 and Zahariade, *Architecture in the Communist Project.*

62 LXIV/04.1977: *A "meeting" for the transmission of insane-ridicule orders. 15.III.1977. The final form – conceptual – October 77. The "program", the layout, ready on 23.III.77. A change of deadlines along the way, announced on 11.IV.77 (perhaps entailed by a certain "slowness" originating in the professional response to this program that cannot coagulate out of nothing). A proposal (because the optimists say that this is only a concrete form of the program, represented for laymen and sublaymen) for what the entire ansamble of several kilometers shoul be, as a scale model 1/1000, by 19.IV.1977.*

63 At the end of a ridicule, if not tragic, epic, the project to modify the theatre built in the 1980s is given to Cezar Lăzărescu, although its initial authors were still alive. This is mentioned in the notebook LXII/1975: *the Lăzărescu Caesar of our sorrowful architecture, by undisputable command – takes over and continues the proposal to masacre the whole of national theatre.* Or, in LXIII/1976: *This butcher and tradesman – gravedigger of our profession has yet commited two "facades" of shame, which he bestowed upon "the great all", (where) he was asked to draw some more, because (regarding the two) some chose one, and some the other; (surmising the choice belonged exclussively to the family…).*

64 *There is – as prelude – a "lesser" insult: a plan for the systematisation of a new "town" (as small as 16,000 inhabitants), begun – commissioned – around the date of 11.III.77; already approved by 26.III.77.* LXIV/04.1977.

65 LXIV/13.04.1977.

66 LXII/17.03.1975.

67 LXI/17.09.1976.

68 How the architects in the school were commissioned these projects is still unclear; certainly, this must have been part of the "occult commissioning network" of the communist society. In all probability, Alifanti was asked to design the Oradea town hall through the local connections, due to the renown he have won with the projects for Baia Mare and Bistrița Năsăud.


15.2.65

Fig. 22. Mircea Alifanti, unnamed graphic

institute (by coincidence some of his former students whom he highly regarded). His exemplary symbolic gesture was turned into an absurd farce by the voracity of a fellow-professor who took over the project.[69] He will not cry out his disgust; he keeps it between the covers of his notebooks; he is afraid and blames himself for it:

> *Yes*! *This bloody fear stains my entire existence. Even my drawing is a merging of rebellion and fear; of sharp, violent protest in an almost ridiculous concatenation …*[70]

However, he was the only professor from the School who lucidly foresaw the enormity of the moment and the only one who had the dignity to say *No* from the beginning.

He transfers his turmoil to his drawing:

> *Now I enjoy the graphics of architecture, that geometric graphics – so different from my drawing, yet related to it – in a way, closer to my drawing than to architecture. I'm a graphic artist now*! (…) *Is this what I've always been?*
> *I am – in the worst case – a graphic artist who once took up drawing to architecture.*[71]

From the marginality of his position of *Mandarin*, solitary, unhappy, and failure-obsessed, Mircea Alifanti was a singular representative of the Romanian post-war modernity of whom little is known, much less than he deserves. This may also be because he knew when to stop.

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Fig. 14 XXXVI, undated entry, The Archive of Professor Mircea Alifanti, courtesy of the Florian family.
Fig. 15 XLV, undated entry, The Archive of Professor Mircea Alifanti, courtesy of the Florian family.
Fig. 16 XLVI, undated entry, The Archive of Professor Mircea Alifanti, courtesy of the Florian family.
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Fig. 21 Graphics Dossier, The Archive of Professor Mircea Alifanti, courtesy of the Florian family.
Fig. 22 Graphics Dossier, The Archive of Professor Mircea Alifanti, courtesy of the Florian family.

69 The event is recounted with all its anecdotal bitterness in LXV/05.1978. In the end, the project is not to be errected at all.

70 LXIII/05.1976.

71 LXIV/21.04.1977.

REFERENCE LIST

Notebooks 1-8, 24-29, 40-65, The Archive of Professor Mircea Alifanti, courtesy of the Florian family

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Articles by Prof. Mircea Alifanti in *Arhitectura*:

Arhitectura 1-2 (1952); 3 (1952); 9-10 (1952); 6-7 (1954); 6-7 (1954); 6 (1959); 1 (1963); 5 (1965); 3 (1971); 3 (1975); 2 (1976) and especially

Alifanti, Mircea. “Baia Mare, sediul politico-administrativ al judeţului Maramureş” [Baia Mare, Political-administrative headquarters of Maramureş county], *Arhitectura* 6(1972): 19-30.

