

From Monumental Modernism to Local Bricolage

An interview with Șerban Sturdza by Tudor Elian

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Fifteen years ago, Sorin Alexandrescu published an article called "Overlapping Culture"¹ where he separated Europe into centers (spaces of the avant-garde, generators of cultural models and original theories, carriers of waves...) and peripheries (spaces that synthesize several other spaces, receivers of cast waves often having little interest for theorizing received models). If we refer, in this context, to the emergence and coagulation of artistic and architectural modernism, past century Romania's "provincial" position resembles a culture of overlapping and synthesis which tame outside influences while continuing local tradition; a young modern culture as creative as the models it refers to. Key characters of this Modernist-bearing synthesis are interwar architects like Horia Creangă, Marcel Janco and G.M. Cantacuzino or Henrietta Delavrancea-Gibory and Octav Doicescu, who continued their activity after the war, too, when the way to filter modernism became more obtuse and encoded. However, as the architecture of newer generations became more compelled to obey political impositions within a planned system, the independent movement of overlapping and models seems to disappear as a general formative characteristic. When it does exist, it is more likely a matter of individual opinion, foreign to the tide it stands against. A critical stand difficult to discern in the "adjusted" mass, yet one that, nonetheless, leaves traces.

Born in 1947, architect, urban planner, product designer, active in the fight for saving national heritage and just as active in the consolidation of the profession (president of major professional associations in Romania), Șerban Sturdza is, perhaps, the best example of an architect who, starting from the 1970s, has worked undeterred, first in Timișoara and then in Bucharest looking for a certain local synthesis. His projects are the result of a long and refined process of cultural assimilation and experience which manifests itself as inventiveness, phantasy and play, and equally as experiment and bricolage.

We will follow his relationship with modernity, modernism and artistic and local cultural architecture as they emerge from his designs...

Tudor Elian: *What exactly lead you to the synthesis I'm referring to? Was it your education or your family milieu? Was it what you learned at the school of architecture? Your professional experience? The different models you had, you met and searched for in your professional life?*

Șerban Sturdza: I'm not the kind of person who likes mingling with "important people" or who likes having to do with them – this must have happened only a few times in my life; in fact, things just happened the way they did and several things bounced off. I've never eagerly searched for contacts, in fact, quite the opposite, I rejected them. In my adolescence I achieved the performance of avoiding as much as possible coming into contact with some famous names because I had the feeling that I would depend on them greatly. I was quite rebellious by nature and in those days I willingly avoided everything I thought would be imposed on me.

¹ Sorin Alexandrescu, *Identitate în ruptură* [Identity and Breach] (Bucharest: Ed. Univers, 2000), 35-42.

My first strong opponent was my father. He was an architect who had studied in Vienna and an authoritarian figure with clear opinions about all sorts of things I tended to question because I didn't have enough information. I chose my opponents from among my family's friends with whom they had strong ties: to a certain extent, I was the opponent of close family friends. I'm referring to famous cultural personalities, to the Noica² group who visited us at home and other remarkable people from my family entourage whom I programmatically refused to visit. Only seldom did I attend Vasile Drăguț's³ "lessons", or his conferences on different historical monuments, or the record auditions where Wagner was one of the most important presences.

Politics also confused me: when I was young, I was a firm and active pioneer and this gave rise to surges of laughter that I didn't quite understand. At home life was lived in a sort of cocoon; there were things we talked about and things that couldn't be repeated outside.⁴ For example, my parents didn't tell me many things because they were afraid I might tell my friends.

T.E.: Am I to understand that the "rebellious" nature you were talking about made you opaque to the intellectual scene at home?

Ș.S.: No, our house was full of remarkable people and I think this influenced me greatly. The cultural level was high; there were influences from various professions and fields. At home, we listened, for example, to musical stories – I remember the *Ring of the Nibelungs* – or we looked at books with Persian plates which my grandfather, a ceramics professor, used to spell out for us... Of course, in the meantime, I was preoccupied by the cat, the chicken, games and other of the kind. My education was a mix of things to be absorbed and childish antics. I loved it. It did me a lot of good. I was lucky!

T.E.: It's clear that knowingly or not, the family milieu had an important formative role. Did this make you choose your architectural career or did it dawn on you while in school?

Ș.S.: I never imagined doing anything but architecture. My father, as I already mentioned, was an architect, but he wasn't allowed to be active in his profession because of political reasons. In my teens, he was working as an ICRAL⁵ technician and he had to do measurements of building surfaces. I admired my father and we used to do surveys together. We surveyed all the houses on Elisabeta Boulevard. All of them! No exception. I would hold the measuring tape and he would draw. I found it extremely interesting! We entered various houses and commented on them extensively: father turned anything unpleasant into something funny, so I felt those moments as a privilege because we were working together and he looked pleased and this made me feel very happy.

Regarding school, I remember touring the city with my class – which surprises me now that I think about it. The city was so different back then. Observing it was a very important thing and we did it as a group, and there wasn't anything at random. We were given different assignments related to the city, and one of them was to count the TV antennas on the houses, because very few people used to have a TV, and having an antenna was so special. It was a sort of contest: who could count the most antennas. And this was a meaningful exercise because it made us pay great attention and check the town's silhouette. It was a matter of selection.

We also liked to watch and see, my friends and I, everything that was being built in our neighborhood: we went to visit building sites and we were thrilled. We knew nothing about architecture, we only liked the new and felt modern things were great. For example, I went to see how Sala Palatului Square⁶ was turning out as if it were my own work. No one had told me to do that: I was pleased to participate. I went "on inspection" and I felt really thrilled.

2 Constantin Noica (1909-1987), important Romanian philosopher, poet, essay writer, publicist and writer.

3 Vasile Drăguț (1928-1987), Romanian critic and art historian, author of important academic research on Romanian medieval art.

4 He came from a family descending from old Romanian aristocracy, people with "an unhealthy social record" who were persecuted in the Communist regime.

5 The Organisation for Constructions, Repairs and Locative Administration (ICRAL) was mainly concerned with administration and maintenance of the State Housing Fund before the Revolution.

6 Important building site between 1958 and 1960 in the capital's center. Area systematization: arch. Nicolae Bădescu, Duiliu Marcu, Horia Maicu, Traian Stănescu; Design of Sala Palatului: arch. Horia Maicu,

I remember a truly lousy apartment building on Sfântul Elefterie Street, but the fact that it had a corner which wasn't at a 90-degree angle, that it was slightly different and had something monumental about it, meant a lot. I was very interested in monumental things. In fact, many of my designs in the architecture school would be gigantic.

T.E.: In the context of our discussion I believe this intertwining of the cultural family milieu which alludes to a solid tradition and your curiosity and enthusiasm for the new is worth mentioning. What new perspectives opened up once you started studying at university? Obviously, it must have been a different world from that of your family and school.

Ş.S.: The truth is that during my academic years I lived two parallel lives. One was in the town, at the university, and the other in a kind of "wilderness", an adventuresome and strange one not in actual nature, but in the inhabited nature. I got in the habit of practising an unusual kind of tourism: I would tour villages on my own. Touring villages was, for me, adventure at its most. My grandparents had done this between the two wars and I tried to imitate them because their stories were extraordinary and the photos were fabulous. I didn't need Africa, Mato Grosso or all the expeditions I had read about in my childhood; I was travelling through Romanian villages in a certain order imposed not by the mountain peaks but by the pottery centers or any other place of interest, and my interest was connected to ethnography, folklore and, of course, architecture. These village explorations were extraordinary experiences: the fact that it was another world that I discovered by myself, the fact that I did not know what and how to talk to people taught me a lot. That was the beginning of some long friendships: at home I always had a place where people from the country with whom I had come into contact with could store goods that were sold in the market. Looking back at it, it seems that this proved a fairly good understanding of human interests. I think these experiences doubled what was going on in university.

T.E.: From your perspective, what important things were happening then at the university?

Ş.S.: I was very keen on school and the subject of architecture. During my studies I struggled to become Doicescu's student. For me Doicescu⁷ didn't mean the Opera House, he meant the buildings he had designed in Bucharest, or the Nautical Club, or the relationship he had had with *Simetria* magazine and G.M. Cantacuzino⁸. He was a man who knew how to play the piano, an educated man ... The kind of architecture he practised was to me a proof of good taste and sense of continuity. Delavrancea⁹, Doicescu, the continuity of architecture slightly influenced by the Balkans and vernacular architecture seemed to me, and still do, the natural way.

T.E.: So even then you were deliberately looking for this continuity.

Ş.S.: Not back then; as I had been accustomed since I was young to history loaded objects, to museums and the houses which housed them, this kind of architecture was familiar to me. The peasants' houses were familiar to me since I was 2-3 years old. And my father had a real passion for anything related to architecture and life in the countryside and for gypsies; the gypsy settlements enchanted me as I was too young to understand the filth they lived in and their tragic lives.

T.E.: How was this search for an architecture of continuity, usually domestic and mostly inspired by the vernacular, related to your appetite for the monumental in your school designs?

Tiberiu Ricci, Ignace Şerban, Romeo Belea; Design of adjacent buildings: arch. Tiberiu Niga, Leon Garcia, George Filipeanu, Anton Moisescu

- 7 Octav Doicescu (1902-1981), Romanian architect, professor and member of the Romanian Academy, promoter of a type of modernism that conserves past values, founder of *Simetria* magazine together with G.M. Cantacuzino, the only one which raised the question of modernism and its architectural heritage at the time.
- 8 George Matei Cantacuzino (1899-1960), Romanian architect and essay writer, known for his modernist architecture based on classical principles of composition and volume or inspired by Romanian traditional architecture.
- 9 Henriette Delavrancea-Gibory (1897-1987), Romanian architect, known for her Balkanic-influenced modernist architecture.

Ş.S.: I don't know how they related. Perhaps the interest towards monumentality also came from my family: books on Egypt and the mysteries of the pyramids were always discussed at home and, obviously, we also read about the Trojan War and others in the same line. But the interest for monumentality has to do with my nature; no matter how grand a space may be, I'm not afraid to play with it and inhabit it. During university I was highly interested in Paul Rudolph, in the utopians from the 60's and 70's, in Kenzo Tange, Takenada Komuten and everything printed in Japanese magazines. I was seduced by Brutalism. Beside the Utopians' influence, I was also influenced by the British trend, brick and glass and everything coming out of this. I liked everything modern.

T.E.: *How could you reach foreign architecture, since neither sources nor direct contacts were accessible?*

Ş.S.: Architecture magazines were the forbidden fruit at the university library. The professors were the first to get them and you would only see the magazines again after six months. Happily, I had my own subscription to *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, *Architectural Review* and *Baumeister*. You were allowed to in that period. And when the magazines arrived, we would organize a reading club in the studio.

T.E.: *Did the monumentality I mentioned earlier interest you in those times from the viewpoint of design, as a "work of art"?*

Ş.S.: No, the structural part was very important to me. In my 5th year I joined the Structures Club organized in the school by the engineers Noni Dumitrescu and Dido Greceanu, an amazing person who had organized a laboratory for spatial structures in the university which, at the time, was the most advanced work unit. It was then that we started working with space frames and tension structures. Spatial structures were in fashion, it was the time of the Japanese Pavilion ... these involved an out-of-scale architecture. Monumentality was only a step away. Back then all my designs revolved around it. I was very sure of these things. I was translating books by Buckminster Fuller, I was designing geodesic domes ... so I was among the students mostly focused on technical aspects. But I didn't feel there was a fracture between this passion and my other interests.

T.E.: *Was this passion fulfilled in studio?*

Ş.S.: To me all studios were alike. I was convinced Hanganu¹⁰ was the best... I liked him a lot as a teacher, he taught us to work with the terrain, to create and work with ground unevenness in a town where it barely exists. He was so enthusiastic when he talked to you; when he saw you hesitant, he would take your pencil and draw in your place. He was quite the opposite of Doicescu. When I was in 5th year, I got really bored of school and I couldn't wait for it to be over. But I didn't get bored of architecture: I wanted to get hired in "production units" as they would say. A construction site was the most pleasant place in the world for me.

T.E.: *How about other courses? What other important people did you meet at university?*

Ş.S.: I considered urbanism an important subject but it was poorly taught: they were teaching us stupid principles without any explanations. I had great respect for Ludovic Staadecker from the Urbanism department for his high professional conduct. I was very impressed when I found out that when he read a book, he used to draw the plan of all the spaces where the action took place and that he did illustrations for all the detective novels. That proved his profundness. I felt he had no relation to the socialism surrounding us. He was always in disagreement with the other architects and it was then that I understood that architecture, and more so urbanism, are political professions.

As my father had been accepted to work in a territory planning office in Constanța, I had had some contacts with urban planning and I respected it greatly. I trusted urbanism and I probably thought that what Le Corbusier had done seemed really good. I followed the projects of Candilis, Josic and Woods with great interest.

¹⁰ Dan Sergiu Hanganu (n. 1939), Romanian architect living in Canada and honorary member of the Romanian Academy.

Fig. 1. Diploma project, Șerban Sturdza, 1971 (from the "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urbanism archives)
top: site plan, bottom: floor plan (opposite page)

T.E.: But they already represented a different moment than *le Corbusier*... A different sort of utopia?

Ș.S.: Of course, they were different and they were preoccupied with the spatialization of infinity. I really liked Yona Friedman and all those searching for infinity. I considered the utopians very important because I saw them as "perfectly buildable". To me, Nicolas Schöffer's¹¹ tower was something which could have been erected immediately.

In fact, one of the turning points in my university years was the moment when I helped my colleague Adrian Fodoreanu with his diploma project when I was in my 5th year in 1970. His project was about the Apuseni Mountains. And he had treated it with the utmost attention, from the ensemble scale to its smallest details. Among other things, he had proposed a project of a 10 km long building which would unite Turda with Câmpia Turzii. This is why I mentioned Yona Friedman. The story with mega-structures seemed quite normal to me, I saw nothing wrong with a 10 km long building. In comparison, what I designed for my diploma project was nothing at all, really...

T.E.: What do you mean?

Ș.S.: I hit the jackpot with my diploma project. It was the first diploma project worked by a team; I worked on it together with my colleague Liviu Găgescu, and professor Doicescu gave us a 10 mark. It was an utterly stupid project: we connected Cetățuia hill with Feleacu hill in Cluj through a continuous steel construction which was supported by long pillars thrust unabashed in the historic center. Everything I did was really tough. Attention to monuments and "old things" appeared later as a reaction to what was happening around. I wasn't interested in old architecture at all or in protecting it. I only felt that it was a shame to have it demolished. I saw the historic object perfectly possible in a Mies van der Rohe type of space, and I still do. I have no intention of separating things. I think they can go well together.

T.E.: Was any of this visible in the architectural practice of those days?

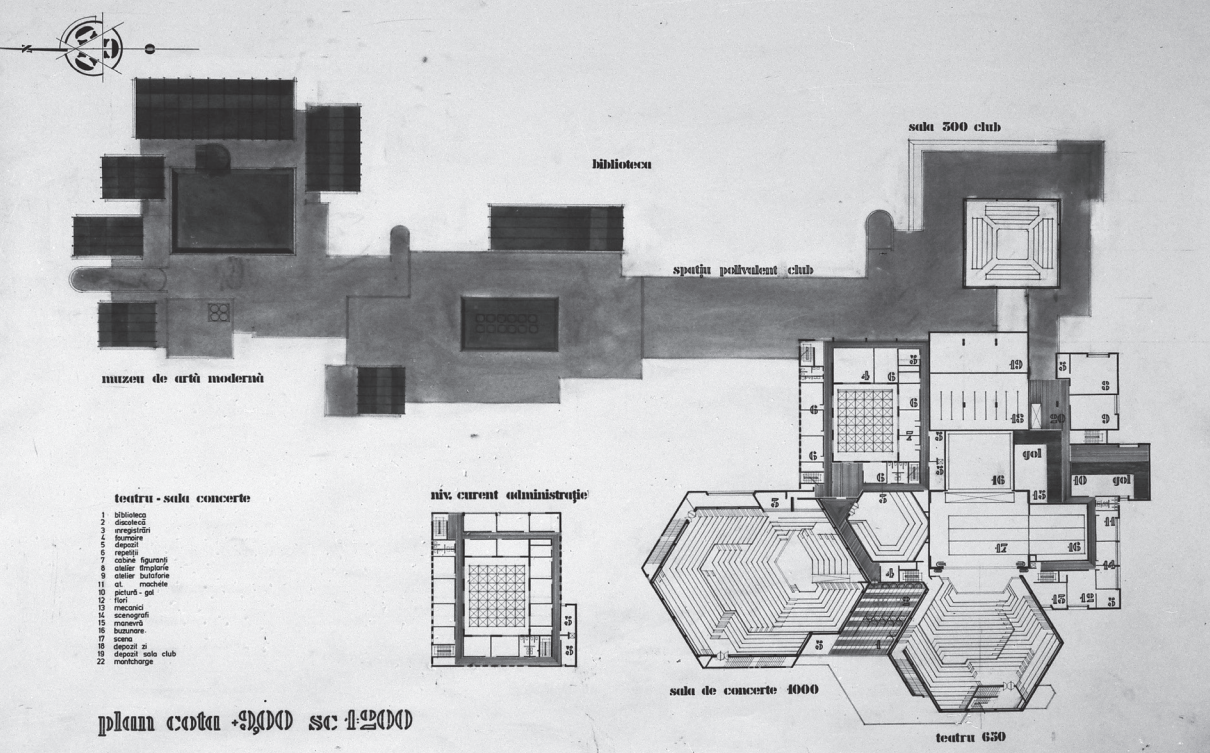
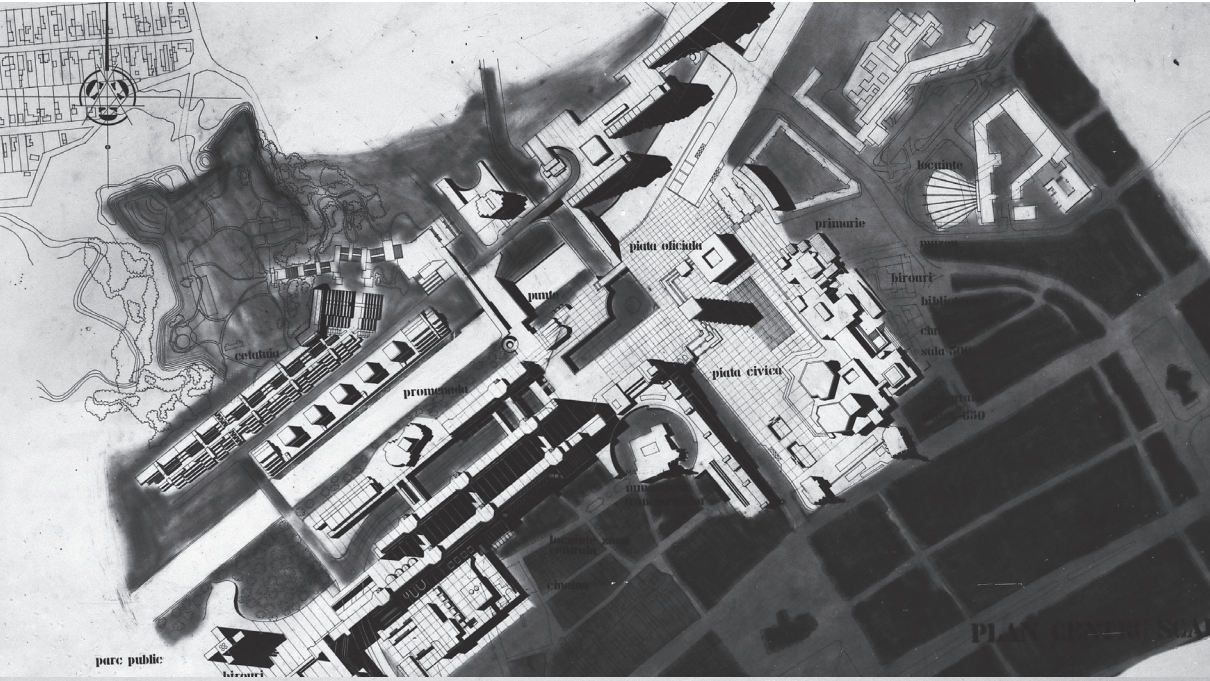
Ș.S.: Somehow. There was some research made in bolder structures for sociocultural programmes, in the town culture halls and sports halls of the 70's and 80's. Attempts with large span structures were firstly related to "national economy"; a directive had been given which imposed the economical use of iron in structures; restrictions were great and it was then that the concrete industry was in full swing. There was also an interest in using thin shell structures and space frames which had started to be used for sports halls. They looked antique if compared to foreign technology, but there was a group of architects and engineers who were very interested in this. The engineers were influenced by Nervi, while the architects were stepping in the line of Japanese architecture.

T.E.: It looks like you graduated from University as a relentless supporter of monumental architecture, somewhat indifferent towards the past. So what made you change your mind? Where and how did you consciously start looking back?

Ș.S.: I was crazy about sky-scrapers and Japanese architecture was obviously the most important thing for me. I had many notebooks with documentation from magazines. Nothing about restoration... My interest in "old things" started to develop much later, as a reaction to what was happening around me. It all started in Timișoara where I was "assigned" after my diploma project.¹² One day I saw how a bastion outside the city was being torn down to have a new block built instead. It was a brick fortification from the Austrian period. I went quickly to announce the management of the Timișoara Institute of Design (IPROTIM) where I was working, thinking it was a mistake. But in fact, it was something scheduled. That came as a shock, but everyone told me "mind your own affairs, it doesn't matter".

¹¹ Nicolas Schöffer (1912-1992), French artist of Hungarian origin, one of the founders of kinetic and interactive art.

¹² All architects in those times were placed within state-owned institutes of design where all final year students were assigned at the end of their studies; there were no other ways of working.



T.E.: Were you ever asked to take part in such demolition projects?

Ş.S.: At the time I was working for IPROTIM as well. I had a good relationship with my bosses there but made no compromises. Throughout my working time I had come to know the Banat region quite well and when everybody had to decimate villages (I also had around 5 villages to destroy in the South of Banat), I opposed it. I declared it wasn't possible invoking all sorts of reasons. Everybody said I would be sacked and yet, nothing happened.

T.E.: From what you're saying, one might think that your renewed interest in the past was rather the product of sentimental reactions of a political, ethical or aesthetic nature, rather than one emerging from your beliefs translated into clear concepts. Even if this is at the origin, could you tell me, after having experienced so much, how you see the synthesis of tradition and its continuity into modernism, especially now when you are considered a protector of the old.

Ş.S.: I find it quite odd that people think of me like this nowadays. I have no other motivation related to national heritage aside from the idea of the necessity to reach a balance: things are somewhat lopsided and leaning to one side, and so there should be people on the other side as well. I have nothing against the new and technologically evolved, although this might not be so obvious for others.

T.E.: Not having anything against doesn't necessarily mean being in favour of it...

Ş.S.: I'm rather cautious in vouching for technology in Romania because it only seldom leads to creativity and more often yields to imitation. Ceramics painted by a peasant or a peasant's house are more authentic than any "educated" work. As hard as you might study architecture at school, the deep knowledge inscribed in them will still elude you. I'd rather build a stylistically old-fashioned house, but which can be clearly understood, than an "avant-garde" house which will become outdated after three years. From this perspective I don't feel embarrassed to express myself as someone from an older, but easier to understand, period of time.

On the other hand, I see no contradiction in associating the old with the new. There are some contradictory things which when set together either the eye or the mind make them accept each other even though they never met before. Father was always arranging our room, he liked to decorate it all the time, to place one object next to another and test the acceptable limits of these juxtapositions. I also like this game which implies a certain attachment to objects. For me, this attachment has to do with the objects in the Slătineanu house: at a certain moment I was in charge of the museum's warehouse which was, of course, a great honour; so, living among objects made me grow attached to them. I think objects matter a lot and they are more than objects, they carry within them dimensions or limits which they may accept or not, which actually determines what in architecture is called "scale", but I think it is more complex than that.

T.E.: Allow me to go back to your experience in Timișoara. Between 1971 and 1978 you worked together with the Sigma group.¹³

Ş.S.: I went to Timișoara because I wanted to work with the Sigma Group, so I chose IPROTIM from the list of possible jobs. At that time, Sigma was the most avant-garde group and its personalities attracted me. They focused on Neo-constructivism and the structural part fascinated me; I actually went to Timișoara not to do architecture, I went to be in their group. And I worked with them from day one. To me, the constructive aspect was central to their work so tensile structures became my work field within the group. They, however, gave up this type of search pretty quickly because they found it limited as a means of expression.

T.E.: Besides the artistic production, the group was active in the life of the fine arts high school in Timișoara.

Ş.S.: Yes, when Flondor was headmaster, I also taught at the fine arts high school in Timișoara grades 9 up to 12. I had great freedom. I taught a class of Mechanics of Materials explained in

¹³ Neo-constructivist art group in Timișoara founded in 1969 by Ștefan Bertalan, Constantin Flondor, Roman Cotoșmanu, Lucian Codreanu, Ioan Gaita, Elisei Rusu and Doru Tulcan interested in interdisciplinarity and the use of a wide range of artistic media.

simple terms, I was translating courses and experimenting with models and structures. My big passion at that time was “tensegrity”, the tensioned bars of David Georges Emmerich, and of course Buckminster Fuller. On Sundays we would walk with our students to the riverbank of the Timiș and do two things: wrestling and structures on the beach. We built impressive things at the water’s edge working with ribbons and all sorts of materials that were reflected in the water...

T.E.: What did the presence of an architect mean to the Sigma group?

Ș.S.: As an architect I focused on the material side and I always started from being able to achieve something palpable; they judged things graphically as on a sheet of paper. The need for the two to meet - which the Bauhaus managed and Sigma stated - was urgent. But I was an outsider because they could not stand architects and architects despised them, no matter what they might say today. The truth was that the faculty of architecture in Timișoara began to lose ground to the Sigma group, who taught at the school of fine arts. The faculty was mannerist, while high school students were already confronted with working with models, drawing, industrial design and real projects since the 9th grade. The ELBA company¹⁴ gave real commissions to the school. What was happening there was very interesting.

The Faculty of Architecture realized the gap and wanted to hire Bertalan, radically changing its timetable to fit his demands. The relations between the University and the Sigma group are idealized today; in fact, the architects went in a completely different direction, they were pushed to fit the rules and prices of those times... The School of Fine Arts, however, could have tended towards Neo-constructivism, but it lacked the critical mass and intelligence to do it. When they made a model, they glued sticks, wire and tin together, but when it came to execute the project, it was a disaster. It was the same with Sigma’s projects of: after a somewhat naïve design process, a builder would swoop in – genuinely well-meaning, as Sigma had got some projects from the first secretary of the county, then Ion Iliescu¹⁵ - and implemented the project as well as he could... usually something horrendous! Any work done after such commissions were very primitive. In general, Mondrian colours saved the day.

T.E.: Did the realization caused by the demolition of the stronghold you were talking about earlier come after these experiences?

Ș.S.: Yes. But the greatest shock was when in the studio where we were working together and where I was doing all kinds of models and sculptures from bars and polyhedral shapes, I found some discarded peasants’ jugs behind a cupboard; they were beautiful traditional Transylvanian jugs. What shocked me greatly was that those items were set aside; according to my set of values they were extremely beautiful and valuable and in no way incompatible with the modernity that manifested itself brutally and emphatically in Sigma’s story. It seemed to me that the two things could coexist and I think the biggest disappointment was that men of such fine culture could not accept two different worlds. The irony is that later Flondor joined Prolog’s¹⁶ spirituality, and others became concerned with the close study of nature. So perhaps it was only a fringe of life that drove them at that time to an expression which was also a sort of denial of everything which was happening in Romania. This encounter between the polyhedral structure and pottery, between the reticulated and the solid, between a manifesto, speed and Nicolas Schöffer, on the one hand, and the continuity of an object created step by step, on the other came as a shock. I was actually looking for a balance between these two sides, while our joint experiments gave more weight to their Neo-constructivist manifestos; the second part had to be hidden.

Actually I found that many personalities chose to hide a part of their life to highlight another: for example, Wright didn’t emphasize the period he worked in Japan or Le Corbusier, who made

¹⁴ Factory, founded in 1921, which produced lighting objects and car headlights in Timișoara.

¹⁵ Ion Iliescu (n. 1930), Romanian politician, influential member of the Romanian Communist Party before being gradually estranged by Nicolae Ceaușescu. After playing a major role in the Revolution, he became Romania’s first post-communist president.

¹⁶ Group of Romanian artists founded in 1985, defined by a strong spiritual line and the use of Orthodox religious symbolism.

drawings of all kinds of Balkan architecture, never let it transpire explicitly in his work ... Maybe it's a way of surviving, while at peace with a certain image of yourself.

T.E.: You were talking about finding a balance. Is there a way to learn about balance? Or to teach it?

Ş.S.: Perhaps! The course on urban structures I taught at the Polytechnic Institute of Timișoara after the Revolution, within the Faculty of Architecture, was designed as a search for balance; I was obsessed with the idea that there should be both modern and old architecture.

But the important thing for students before reaching a balance was that they ask questions and think for themselves. We discussed Camillo Sitte, we discussed Christopher Alexander, his books, and produced analyses with practical simulations... I was aiming at a sort of therapy with students in order to release them the fear of thinking. I turned urbanism into therapy and play. This is how very interesting exercises came about, for example, articulating a series of urban squares on uneven ground (which seems quite valid even now): students had to do in a day what professionals would do in a year, no matter how bad, because this is how great ideas can be born. To read the surface of the city we looked at aerial photos and the students inferred the direction of water flow, the north... After that, there were "games" so I could keep them focused. This was one of them: everyone received a piece of paper with the outline of a made-up city; they started from a *cardo* and *decumanus*, from a watercourse and some plots of land and each had to occupy the most important spots considering other conditions, such as wind direction. After each decision, the students exchanged their sheets between them and had to continually adjust to what someone else had done before them. Their reasoning had to be quick and conditioned by previous decisions and then all sorts of unexpected developments arose as did the growth of the "town". Finally each had to detail a portion of his land. After a day's work, thirty great projects would come out because students were very focused on what they did.

The exam was with books at hand. They were given a text and successive development plans of a town and they had to imagine it as it is today, while adding some new functions such as an airport. All in free hand drawing. No matter how bad the result was, students came to understand how things evolved and started asking themselves all sorts of questions about continuity or sequential time and its graphic expression.

My theory was that if a town did not use its architecture school, and the school did not use its town, both lost their meaning; so I was very interested in the real issues Timișoara had, for instance, the issue of water (the river Bega) and the possible connection of the town with a hilly plain. And then, as I was also leading, at the time, the team that designed the first general urban plan of the town, I would start discussing these topics with students. I had discussions with students living in the lowlands and those who came from hilly towns; I was very curious to see the differences between them.

Once, I did something very interesting which was called "the resettlement of Banat". The project was being invented as it progressed; it lasted for a whole semester, and it involved both group and individual work: a map of the Banat region was drawn and each handled his "own" small town that was to be developed, and for that we drove through Banat, we saw how things stood with the Timiș and Bega rivers, we visited the deserted villages... Then the students started to place their invented towns on the map, to see how they developed and began exchanging economic or real-estate items and argue or negotiate. Eventually it became a crazy game, but one that allowed students to complete a series of experiences which they had no way of understanding in a class and which would have been diluted by too many details and technicalities in real-life practice. I thought it was a very valid and useful exercise that showed how we should develop this country and what type of professionals it expects.

T.E.: But still you resigned from the University.

Ş.S.: Yes. I felt school was too formal. I told them that as long as the city didn't use its school and vice versa, I wasn't interested in teaching. The art school was different, the students were more creative. You didn't know what your work would result in at the beginning, everything looked

chaotic, but it was a chaos that gave rise to more interesting things than the architecture school was able to. And there was more freedom there.

Later, what I didn't succeed in university, I tried to achieve by coordinating diploma projects. For all the diploma projects I coordinated in Bucharest or Timișoara I asked the student to design and actually build a piece of furniture for his project. It was very interesting! Of course no professor in the committee looked at these objects; they only looked at the plans...

T.E.: While working with the Sigma group and teaching high school classes and later on at university, you were working as an architect, urban planner, product designer and much more. You worked at IPROTIM until the revolution. Until then, designing architecture was possible only within the state institutions, which were supervised and controlled,¹⁷ and only the kind of architecture which “looked victoriously towards the future” was in demand. In this context, the main sources of inspiration (official or obtained under the radar with more or less free access) must have come predominantly from the West. Were these Western influences assumed openly? Were there any international connections to foreign Western architects?

Ş.S.: It's difficult to generalize. James Stirling and Sir Leslie Martin come to mind; I liked them very much, but they were not officially tolerated so there was a certain censorship in matters of sources of inspiration.

But there were also other kinds of censorship or self-censorship. For example, in the same period the American architectural exhibition came to Bucharest and Timișoara. It stayed for two weeks, but it actually set the whole city in motion. The exhibition was decisive for the people here and I, being then designated “responsible for relations with the Americans”, was “careless” enough as to invite them to the Institute. After seeing how we worked, they said that we were too narrow-minded and that we didn't realize that discussions and construction site supervision can be carried out just as well on drawings made on A4 sheets rather than on the big sheets we were using; then they delivered a great lecture for us about precast concrete, which was a key issue in Ceaușescu's regime. We remained friends with these Americans, but the interesting thing was that they split Timișoara apart into those who didn't talk to them because they were too afraid and the others who behaved casually. There was always a fracture of this sort. Sigma was regarded as a group of rather strange and dangerous guys as well after they had been abroad, to Kassel, to participate in Documenta.

T.E.: If there were some references – official or not – to foreign architecture, what was the connection to local architecture, to the architectural past? If the connection to foreign architecture was so ambiguous, how was local modernism seen during the inter-war period, for example?

Ş.S.: There was – unofficially but consensually – great respect for some interwar architects. In Timișoara, for example, Silvestru Rafiroiu had been rediscovered and was acknowledged by younger generations. He was a local personality and the pride of the town was fueled mainly by his name. Other architects like Henrietta Delavrancea weren't highly esteemed, not in the group I worked in anyway.

T.E.: But Henrietta Delavrancea was an important personality for you.

Ş.S.: Yes, the Delavrancea sisters¹⁸ were very important in my family; they were examples of authentic lives which influenced society. In 1980 I designed the Hematology Center in Timișoara in Henrietta Delavrancea's memory. I designed it in honour of her. Arches and bay windows that were unacceptable at the time in our modern architecture appeared there for the first time. It always seemed to me that our interwar culture was very valid, although it was hardly studied or taught; my personal experience channeled my interest and perhaps the elements inspired by

¹⁷ There were some exceptions to this rule, especially in the countryside where influential and rich people (such as politicians, doctors or musicians) came directly to the architect without passing through the design institutes.

¹⁸ He is referring to Cella Delavrancea (1887-1991), Romanian pianist and writer, and Henrietta Delavrancea-Gibory (see footnote 9), daughters of Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea (writer, lawyer, academician and mayor).

Fig. 2. Hematology Centre, IPROTIM, arch. Șerban Sturdza, Timișoara 1980

it. I mean it didn't come from my academic instruction, through concepts, so to speak. And I didn't perceive modernity as something violent or vulgar, imposed from the outside. The cult of the proletariat and others of this kind had nothing to do with the interwar modernity to which I related.

T.E.: *The project for the Hematology Centre in Timișoara was also an “outlaw” act, very risky at that time: after several versions of the project were rejected because they were declared too luxurious and after you banded in a project that was accepted, but you weren't very happy about, you secretly made another version that you finally managed to complete. It was a project with an adventurous history and, I think it must have meant a lot to you. Did you risk everything because the project represented an homage to Henriette Delavrancea? Or to some kind of modernism? Weren't the stakes even higher than that?*

Ș.S.: Indeed, there was a bigger and much more immediate stake. My intervention should have been some sort of “hinge” that could have made the transition from the small, shabby, and poor scale neighborhood to the bigger nearby Hospital building, were the green space could have played a solid architectural role, not a generic and neutral one. I searched for this through a combination of landscape design and attention to human scale. The detail, the immediate relationship between the sidewalk and the property boundary and the inside itinerary that was very long, all these were very important to prepare you for donating blood. I was concerned then, as I am now, with the intention to give time to the individual to perceive architecture, not consciously, but preparing him for a specific atmosphere. It is a way of spanning the gap of design and architecture, one through which you should wipe off the makeup of design, while architecture, which contains deeply inbuilt relations in my opinion, if it is to create a state of wellbeing should be perceived by the viewer in a subtle way, unawares.

What I want to say is that architecture ought to be cautious enough so as not to “perturb” too much and that it has a certain dimension of “caring”. That could be felt in Henriette Delavrancea-Gibory's works as well as in those of other interwar architects but less in the works of others like Marcel Janco,¹⁹ for example, who was brilliant, but too edgy; I didn't think that he was very much concerned with the people living in his houses, in any case less than Horia Creangă,²⁰ who was thinking about how one would use and inhabit a space, or Delavrancea who offered architecture the attribute of being a nest or shelter, something that's good for you. That was my feeling...

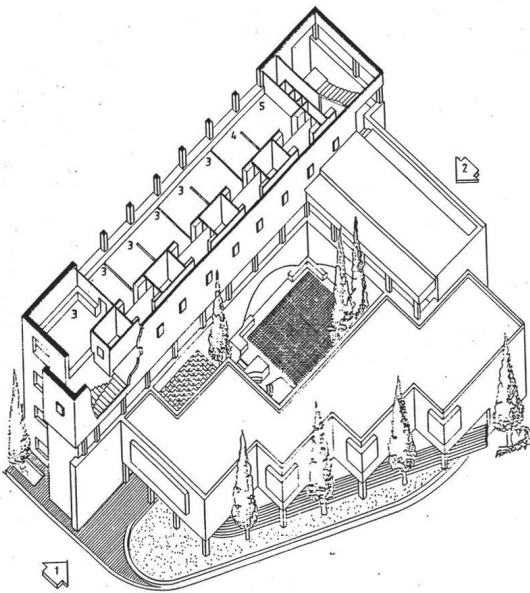
T.E.: *What was your position regarding the various moments of detachment from “hard modernity” through the recourse to the vocabulary of the past? I'm referring here to Postmodernism and later to the “national communist” style of the years leading up to the Revolution.*

Ș.S.: Modernity and Postmodernity are concepts that should be handled with measure and care; none of them, I think, sticks to me like a label. What I would rather say is that I find architecture whose main attribute is clarity quite stupid; I accept it, I admire its clarity, but I'd rather prefer paradoxes or things that make you think, something which doesn't talk to you explicitly, but through hints and suggestions. With regards to Postmodernism, I've always regarded it with a sense of restraint and relativity. Some imbecile projects were done in its name imitating embossed work and other things like that... A society which appealed to “barbarism” as a way of expression was born, one that obviously created and understood the examples of the past in a crude and superficial manner.

Regarding the “national communism” style, I was very circumspect; that was why I refused to be part of it. Furthermore, I refused to design apartment buildings because I felt that every line I would draw would contribute to something which wasn't right. There were all sorts of hindrances in the design of apartment buildings that were turned into “extraordinary” principles, into groundless laws. Instead I worked a lot after the apartment buildings were done, for the people

¹⁹ Marcel Iancu [Janco] (1895-1984), Romanian painter, architect and essay writer, one of the important promoters of the avant-garde movement in Romania.

²⁰ Horia Creangă (1892-1943), Romanian architect and important promoter of modernism in Romania.



living in them. I was often called to improve the situation, to repair the dwelling using various tricks. Actually, people expected from their dwelling much more than what the Romanian state could offer.

T.E.: How important was the theme of national identity back then?

Ş.S.: In the 1980's it was heavily emphasized and very often, but not always, with very weak results. The national theme was given by various instructions and programmes of facade embellishments. Imitations of roofs on facades, woodwork and other elements inspired by the national architecture appeared. It was hideous! And it wasn't just in architecture but in everything, starting with the entrance gate in the city and ending with the use of symbolic elements, wheat ears and others...

However, at some point and in some specific places there was a "national" mark of some other genre in the design of housing, like the Voia family's design in Craiova, using a traditional glazed facade, the easiest way to change the look of a house, which also fulfilled the thermal requirements, essential in those years, and the storage need, because most dwellings lacked store rooms. The apartment buildings they designed in Craiova had a very different expression; the town gained even some sort of real local identity.

T.E.: Could you tell us something about your experience as an urban planner?

Ş.S.: A very interesting experience was the competition for the Civic Centre in Timișoara, during Ceaușescu's regime, which I won with a "super-hard" solution, one inspired by the Roman imperial forum: a rectangle with colonnades inside which everything was happening. It was located in the green area, south of the Citadel, covering all of the central park towards the Bega River, to Michelangelo Bridge. It was a connection between the system of existing squares to which I added another one, a forum which spared the town of further demolitions, which was quite uncommon back then for civic centre projects. My aim was to get the maximum out of what was already there, and for the regime to forget that you could demolish anything around; and so it happened. If Ceaușescu hadn't fallen, the project would have probably been built; luckily the Revolution came. Later, the centre expanded according to the logic of expansion that I had proposed back then. The diploma projects and the important projects that I coordinated in Timișoara were based on the same logic of articulating public spaces.

T.E.: You mentioned the moment of the fall of Ceaușescu's regime; did you feel the Revolution as a professional breaking point?

Ş.S.: It was an extraordinary breaking point... And after that, in 1993, we started the company.

T.E.: In fact, you opened two companies almost at the same time, PRODID and Alttedesign. And if one could already see some of the attention for the architectural object in the Civic Centre's design, for its reinvention and preservation, although at the city scale, this attention seems even more obvious in the projects of the two companies. What connection did you see back then between the city and the singular architectural object?

Ş.S.: There was a natural continuity between them. Work on architectural objects almost always surpassed the terms of the demand, my concern was always with the bigger picture. And as an urban planner, I was never interested in the urbanistic graphics, with hatches and coloured spots, but rather in Christopher Alexander and Kevin Lynch's thinking system, in empiricism and the detachment from the French school.

T.E.: How were the two offices working? The team was partially the same, wasn't it?

Ş.S.: Alttedesign truly concentrated on objects and their connection to architecture. The project which was most on the border between the two was the one for the entrance of the Soros Foundation. You couldn't be sure what it was, architecture or object.

Alttedesign meant Gheorghe Ivănescu Cotuna, Radu Mihăilescu and I. Radu was an intellectual and he had a pure and clean style, Ivănescu was the "hands on cutter" type, with a harsh style, with tricks and slides, sensuous and inspired. With our lack of organization skills to get us some profit, we worked on every project to the bitter end.

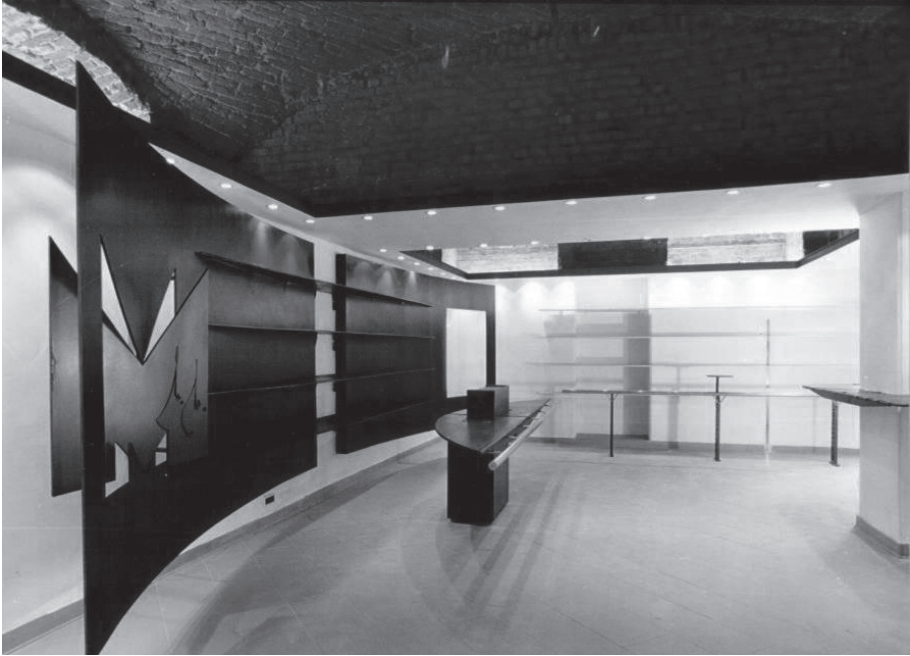


Fig. 3. Marcelini Store, Alttdesign, Timișoara

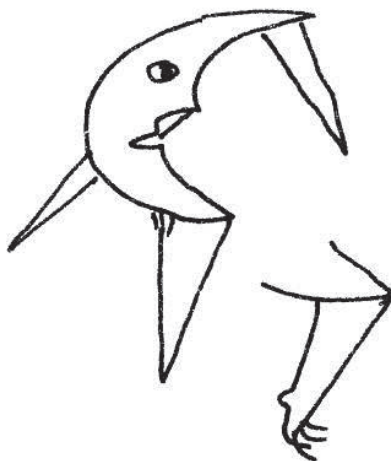
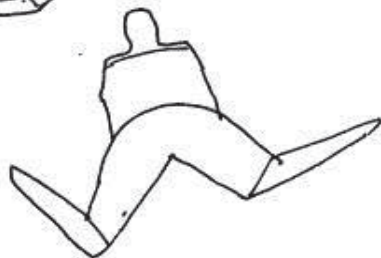
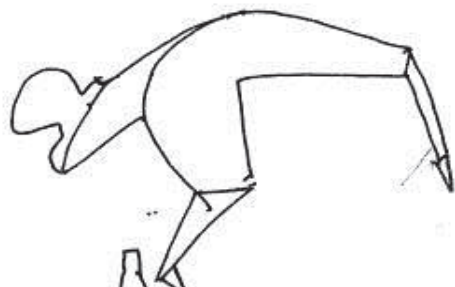
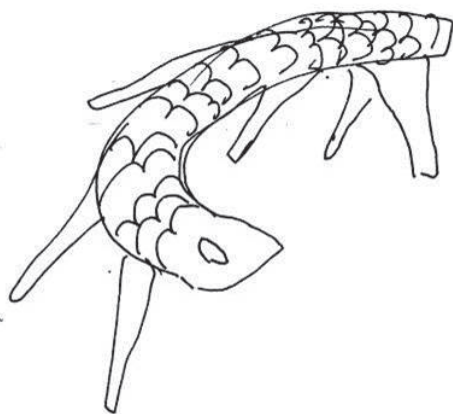
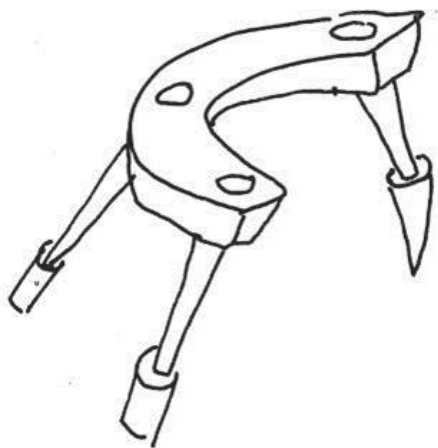
One project that turned out really well and which has disappeared in the meantime was the redesign of the “Three Kings” pub. I took a steam engine from the junk yard in Timișoara, cut it in two and turned it into a wonderful bar. Doina Mihăilescu, Radu’s wife, who is an artist, painted it. We each did something in turn. In those times it was a singular thing which reanimated the declining Fabric neighborhood. I was doing things like that with Alttdesign then, beyond the commissioner’s expectations: for instance, if they asked for an interior design project, we would also paint their ceiling. I remember the first time we used a plate sheet as big as a wall, for the Marcelini store, in which we also cut a laser signature. It was fascinating! You combined architecture, industry, painting with Ivănescu’s graphics...

T.E.: *The avant-gardes were also looking for the same total experience. But I think the enthusiasm you were talking about also came from the rush of improvisation, the pleasure to experiment, feeling the building site as a moment where design continues, in close connection to materiality and project palpability. Did making on-site decisions become a method of work you adopted systematically?*

Ș.S.: You could say so; many things get solved on the site, grinding one’s teeth. At some point I tried to design everything on the building site. But I also tried to work on the spur of the moment, because I felt I had to force myself into making a decision when I had no idea of what to do next. The most important improvisation I did was in the exhibition hall at the Biennale di Architettura di Venezia in 2008 for our project BOLT.

For me, BOLT meant a way of overlapping two things; one was the three-legged chair which was my obsession at the time, and the second was the will of an entire group of friends to support an idea I felt I couldn’t carry out on my own: Mariana Celac, Mirela Duculescu and all the others. The project grew bit by bit. I was lucky we were all together. Improvising in the exhibition hall with Virgil Scripcariu was essential. When we left for Venice we had planned fewer things for the exhibition than what we decided on the spot. Our being there was decisive. And it seems it turned out well. Hans Hollein, who had curated the Biennale, came and spoke very nicely about us; so did the Japanese and Koreans who seemed interested in talking to us about the chairs, the objects and our cube.

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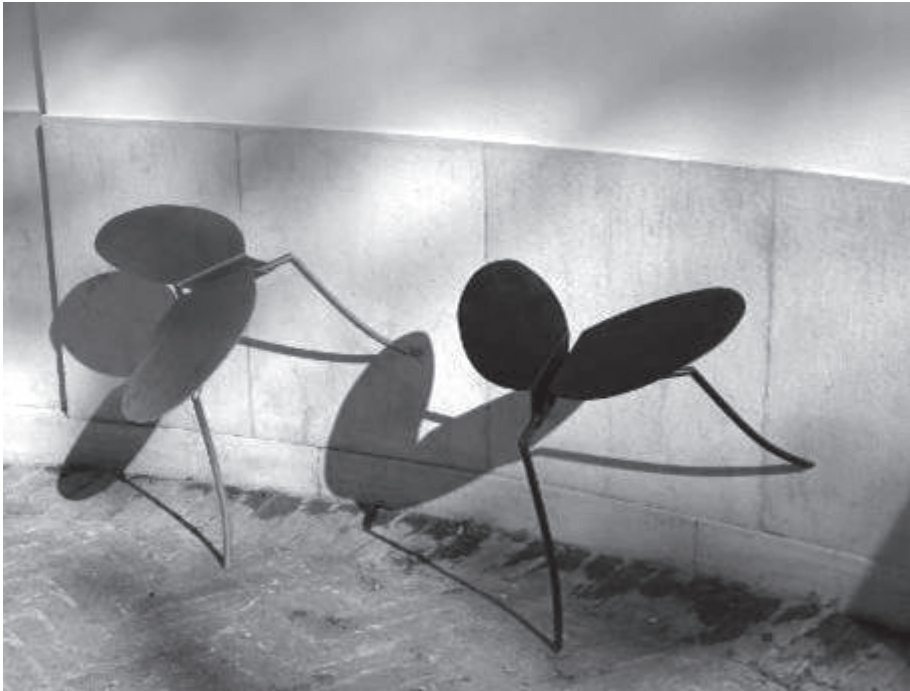


Fig. 4. (previous pages) Designs and sketches for the Venice Architecture Biennale, three-legged chairs, Șerban Sturdza, 2008

Fig. 5. (opposite page) Designs from the Gherla Glass Factory, Șerban Sturdza, 1994-1995

T.E.: So you rely on the freedom to decide while facing the object as it is built, turning the architect into craftsman, in a way. How far did these attempts go?

Ș.S.: I'll tell you a story instead. Around 1994-1995 there was a glass factory in Gherla and I was designing somebody's house, someone who turned out to be the factory manager. As there was a shift of labour force to China, he was losing his glass blowers and his old contracts with the United States – because we were exporting huge quantities of glass that made the factory fly – this manager decided to reconvert the factory's product design studio. He was in a tight spot so he called me and asked me to help him with some ideas. I then arrived at the glass factory and stayed there for a few weeks and, if it hadn't been for the strikes that led the factory to bankruptcy, I would have set a sensational glass design workshop in motion because I had two or three good glass blowers, people who were good at the financial part and maximum freedom: they let me do whatever I wanted.

T.E.: And what did you do there?

Ș.S.: Different kinds of objects: one category was that produced in the glass ovens for flat glass (it was quite simple, you stacked the glass sheets, they melted and then you only needed some education in composition, which the glass blowers didn't have); the second was the combination between metal and glass which they said was impossible but I proved it worked quite well; the third category was that of recovered objects. I made experiments with intersecting pieces through the glass remaining when the glass ovens stopped... When an oven stops you need to break the glass which gathers on the walls and there results huge quantities of beautiful glass they didn't have what to do with. Then I experimented with everything I found. For example, I used metal springs from sofas through which I made three glass blowers blow simultaneously; colossal balloons would bubble and at a certain point I just had to say "stop". It was great fun! The three bowls communicated through tiny channels and I put water in one bowl and let the water flow through them adding different pigments: it was extraordinary! I also made some lens-shaped lamps and filled them with colourful liquids; due to the lens effect, the light became much brighter. We also made a metal frame you could blow glass into and watch how the metal claws penetrated the material and created an extremely fine expression in the contact points.

It was an incredible experience! The idea was to create one-of-a-kind objects. I was experimenting with what a factory and some wit could offer and I considered that moment as a possible bridge between mass industry and unique objects. Those people knew how to make a lot of things, but only in series. I was working with young people who already knew their craft but who weren't yet groomed to the idea of mass production and who wanted to work. My task was only to associate and combine.

T.E.: It could have been a small Bauhaus...

Ș.S.: It was what I hoped for. Everything was improvisation, phantasy, an invitation for experiment with the necessary technology to support us, of course.

T.E.: I take it that the joy of experimenting is a reaction to a way of being of modernity and of the present day architect.

Ș.S.: I was very much influenced and greatly admired the architectural avant-gardes of the early 20th century and their will to design objects in their entirety. I was willing to rethink, reorganize and contribute to something similar. Aside from this, I think I give less and less importance to authorship and I feel I'm taking part in projects to which my collaborators, who aren't only architects, can contribute to just as much as I do. I feel it's important to participate directly in the project, to be absorbed by it. I think our profession could work not only with construction elements, but with many other elements, some material and others immaterial, but equally important and similar to work with. Unthinkable things which are bigger than the building itself can be tuned into agreement.

