

Challenging the Solidity of Romanian Communist Civic Centers

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The civic centers built in the last decades of Communism in Romania were designed to be representative and symbolic for the regime and were constructed with the idea of a rigid and controlled use in view. They concentrate the most important public buildings of the city, defining the (new) central public space, generally named "civic center." If during communism, the central public spaces associated with civic centers were conceived in view of their representative-political role, after communism, change was only natural to occur: the social vocation of such public spaces is (re)discovered in line with the diversity and spontaneity of the social activities they foster.

After the political, social, and economic changes of 1989 — from communism to democracy and capitalism — a new phase of urban development began, whereby the established civic centers were reconsidered in the new context and remodeled through a variety of urban interventions. Throughout the article we will discuss and expose the changes produced in this last phase, focusing on the most important segment/component of the public space — the central public square — in relation with the urban framework of existing Romanian civic centers.

Romanian Communist Civic Center

The idea of the civic center has been discussed in the Romanian academic and professional environment since the interwar period, as shown by Alexandru Răuță in a recent study on this subject.¹ The concept of Romanian civic centers was inspired by the modern urban planning in the United States; in Romanian urbanism, it was not reduced to a simple formal-volumetric and functional import, but was intended to be to a strong extent, representative and symbolic, for urban modernization. After World War 2, as Communism was also a vector of modernization, the adoption of the concept and its meaning remained quasi-similar, although the political ideology had changed; to the need for post-war reconstruction, a strong political and propagandistic motivation was added; as such, the idea of civic center reemerges alongside more practical considerations regarding how city centers and, in particular, civic centers should be set up.² Regarding the genealogy and evolution of the communist civic centers, Răuță shows that the professional discourse on the post war reconstruction of city centers follows four distinct evolutionary phases.³ In the first three phases the concept of the civic center was consecutively taken up from interwar ideas, conceptually rejected and readjusted, analyzed and discussed in professional debates, profile publications and through architecture competition, but without determining a spatial urbanistic and architectural model. An important role

1 Răuță, Alexandru, *Negocierea centrului civic* [Negotiating the Civic Center] (Bucharest: Ed. Universitară Ion Mincu, 2013), 36-94.

2 Later, these are categorized as "unique city center (...) that brings together the most important facilities for the city or for a larger territory" and was one of the ways to rebuild city centers in Romania - Alexandru Sandu, in Cezar Lăzărescu, *Urbanismul în România* [Urban Planning in Romania] (Bucharest: Ed. Tehnică, 1977), 105.

3 Răuță, *Negocierea centrului civic*, 134-200.

was played by professor Radu Laurian, who explored and summarized the problem of city centers and implicitly the central public square associated with it.⁴ The situation lasted until 1965. The fourth phase, and the most important in terms of scale, began in 1965, with the gradual changing of the upper echelons of the communist regime and the adoption of a new Constitution. The reference year, however, is 1968, the year of the administrative reorganization of the Romanian territory. Hand in hand with this administrative reform came the upgrading of certain cities to the status of county seats and their centers' subsequent remodeling as distinct architectural and urban program. (Fig. 1) Under the political pressure, a model for the entire country was outlined. This model was designed to observe the political guidelines, while also relying on the previous theories on the subject, as well as on several local ensembles, regarded as representative examples. As the political factor became more manifest, civic centers became the image of a new era: a symbol for Ceausescu's national communism.

Among the architects and theorists to tackle the subject, architect Cosma Jurov analyzed the spatial-volumetric and functional compositions of civic centers (some of them already built or under construction), as well as the economic and social aspects of the buildings and public spaces within.⁵ Starting from the idea that the civic center must be the representative space of the city,⁶ Jurov identifies four functional components, which should define the central public square: 1) the "political-administrative function" expressed by the county council which can sometimes merge with the city hall in the same building; 2) the "cultural function" revealed by the House of Culture, multipurpose hall, library, theater or cinema; 3) the "commercial function, cafés, restaurants and general services," represented by the building of the department store or occupying the ground floor of residential buildings; 4) the function of "hotel services," as testified by the hotel building.

In practice, not all established civic centers contained the four functional categories initially theorized. Generally, most frequent were the political and the socio-cultural components, but sometimes only one of these two could be introduced in the rigid structure of the new civic center, in order to subordinate the central public square, which was often completed by collective residential buildings, commercial buildings, a hotel or other lower-ranking services, depending on the local configuration.

Even if the theoretical discourse described a functional and representative model, with a certain versatility and attractiveness of space, in reality, the political pressures generated an architectural and urban "standard-program," which was then superimposed on the local urban fabric as an artificial graft, generally at the crossing of or adjacent to the major boulevards, and inevitably close or tangential to the older centers of the city. The closeness to the historical city center was solved either by reconfiguring the entire central area, as in the case of Vaslui, or by inserting the new public square into the old city center, as in the case of Târgu Mureș. Conversely, the cases of Satu Mare or Brăila testify to the erection of some civic centers either adjacent, or at a certain distance from the historical center. Two lines of intervention were followed to build the new civic centers:

- 1) fully constituted new civic centers, with urban public spaces and new buildings, completely new urban structures inserted in the fabric of the city (often restructured as well) – in cities like Deva, Pitești, Tulcea or Vaslui. Other cities such as Reșița, Miercurea Ciuc or Satu Mare will be built later, based on the already established model.
- 2) civic centers established by supplementing existing configurations, with remodeling or completion of the central area, specific to cities that had a well-defined urban public space, preserved by spatial configuration and the existence of a highly valued built fabric — in cities like Brăila or Târgu Mureș. (Fig. 1)

4 Radu Laurian, *Urbanismul* [Urban Planning] (Bucharest: Ed. Tehnică, 1965), 128-199.

5 Cosma Jurov, *Centre civice* [Civic Centers] (Bucharest: Ed. Tehnică, 1979).

6 The civic center is defined as "a part of the central area, where most of the social, cultural, administrative, and commercial institutions of the city are concentrated" – engl. translation from Jurov, *Centre civice*, 14.

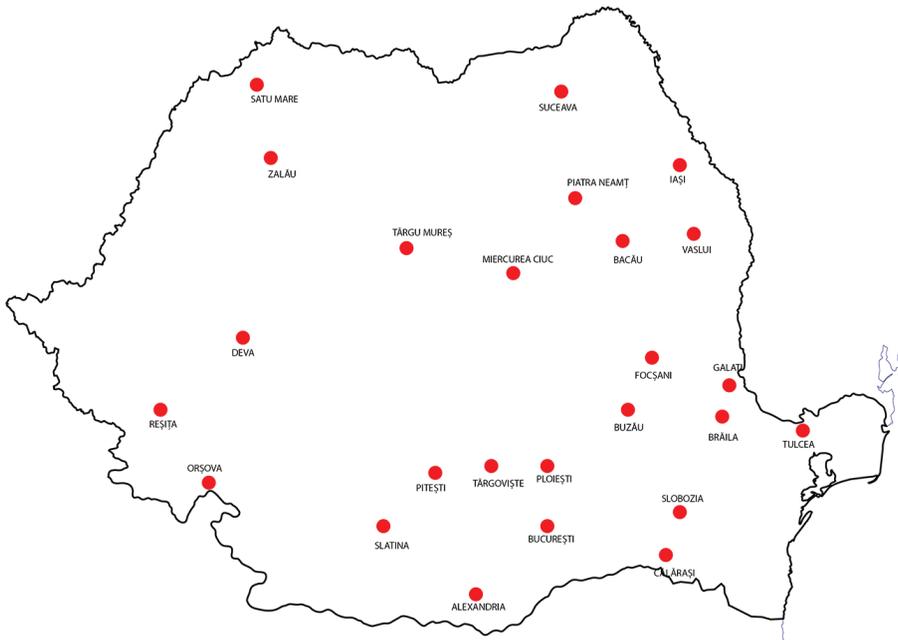


Fig. 1: The most important Romanian cities where Civic Centers were constructed during communist era.

Fig. 2: Civic center of Vaslui, according to the 1970 project. Left up: Plan of the civic center; Left down: civic center model – aerial view; Right up: county council image; Right down: cultural house image





Fig. 3: "Cântarea României" festival in Vaslui central square.

It is considered that the architecture of the new civic centers was inspired by the architecture of classical Italian squares, with the existence of a functional and volumetric dominant represented by the county council building, the house of culture or the theatre. A vertical accent — a high volume attached to the county council building or by the hotel tower — stands for the image of the campanile in Italian squares. The dominant building subordinates the public space of the square, which is complemented by the main city boulevard. Functionally, the square was the site of mass acclamations and the boulevard served for parades. Symbolic elements of architectural plasticity were to be inserted into the architecture of the new buildings to express the national specificity.⁷ Statues of national heroes were often placed in the square as well. In terms of spatial and functional complexity, the cases of Vaslui (Fig. 2), Reșița, Pitești or Satu Mare may be considered the reference examples of the period.

The system of public spaces was hierarchically ordered by the importance of the political and cultural functions, where the central public square was the privileged, representative space, while other public spaces such as secondary squares or pedestrian paths were designed to have a predominantly commercial and transitory character. Common social activities were thus reserved a secondary role, in secondary places. In this way, the public square lost its social character and became almost exclusively the scene of political or cultural demonstrations related to politics, with a strong national emphasis.⁸ (Fig. 3)

As the events hosted in these central squares had a heavily politicized content, the preferred spatial conformation meant large, open spaces, for large gatherings of people while keeping them under surveillance. Spontaneous events or manifestations of small social groups were not encouraged. However, there were exceptions to this spatial conformation, as testified by cities like Bacău, Slatina, Orșova or Deva, where these spaces served as representative urban squares with an important green area.

7 One of the significant examples is the civic center of Satu Mare, designed by architect Nicolae Porumbescu in collaboration with architect Ludovic Gyure, built between 1974 and 1984 and officially inaugurated by Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1986.

8 An example for large-scale cultural mass-events use, was the "Cântarea României" festival.



Fig. 4: Commercial functions in Civic Centers. Right: Pitești, 2016; Left: Slatina, 2022.

Fig. 5: Restaurants at Cultural House in Vaslui (left - 2018) and Slatina (right - 2022).



Post-communist Transformations

The construction of civic centers ended with the fall of communism. A new stage began after 1989, marked by the reconsideration of civic centers in their new social role and their remodeling through different urban interventions.

In order to better outline the transformations of the central square of the civic centers, we propose a two folded approach: the first refers to the physical space, the built framework; the other takes into consideration the socio-behavioral framework, the urban life, and discusses the dynamics of the changes produced.

The built framework

Due to the rigorous planning of the spatial and functional structure of the civic centers, it is assumed that changes in this crystallized structure would be difficult to achieve. However, one instance proves the contrary: in Focșani, several pavilions with a commercial-touristic role were erected adjacent to the central public square, doubling the already existing commercial role.

If no radical or lasting interventions/changes in the compositional principles of these public squares have been noticed, their detailed image has been altered, sometimes due to soft, ephemeral interventions. As such, the clarity and stiff rigor of their constitutive elements have dissolved to some extent, following spontaneous or even programmatically designed interventions at a small and punctual level. In this sense, changes were introduced at the level of decorations, through additions to the extant facades, new colors or various finishing materials.

The commercial buildings were the first and most frequently changed: the facades of the shopping centers were clad with new materials, new colors, and new architectural expressions, as these buildings were rebranded. (Fig. 4) New elements have also appeared on the facades of surrounding residential buildings. Because they did not follow a common rule for

the entire façade, these changes have fragmented the buildings' general image. Also, against the background of socio-political changes and the transition to a free market economy, a multicolor layer of commercials appeared, often in disagreement with the initial, sober architectural style of the central square. These outdoor advertising signs play an important role in the new image of the public space, during the day, as well as during night time.

Overall, being irreverent to the original character of the buildings these interventions presently break the original stylistic unity of the central square. By contrast, chromatics and textures of the facades have remained largely unchanged in buildings administered by local, regional, and central authorities or even in the case of the houses of culture.

But the transformations presented above are only the visual result of deeper structural changes, social, economic and political, reflected in a different functionality. The transition to the market economy resulted in the intensification of some functions while others decreased. The private trade brought about the most important changes in terms of urban image and of activities generated in the public space. Cafes and restaurants are publicized through specific objects — commercials, tables and chairs, etc. that became in time public attractions; they embellished and customized areas of the public space.

Meanwhile, the space of political and cultural functions shrunk in favor of functional alternatives, more or less related to the initial destination. For instance, in many cultural buildings intended for various performances of the past period, spaces were rented to other activities, like dance schools or private workshops. Many commercial activities (mostly restaurants and cafés) occupied the ground floors of these buildings. The houses of culture in cities like Vaslui, Slatina or Satu Mare may serve as examples of these transformations. (Fig. 5) Lesser functional transformations can be noticed in the case of political and administrative buildings (county council or city hall) that have often received other administrative services, usually from the sphere of decentralized public administration as well.

This functional dynamism reflects the need to adjust buildings to the current social requirements and practices; it transformed the way in which buildings are used, as well as their image/appearance. Even in the case of the houses of culture, this functional enhancement produced a fragmented image and, consequently, diminished the building's initial representative character. However, in spite of some arguable effects (as in the case of houses of culture whose functions were reduced), these transformations testify to the increased efficiency of use.

The main square

While changes of the buildings that define the central squares are few and limited to interior functions and architectural details, the space of the square itself has been the subject of more profound transformations.

Elements of street furniture, both functional and symbolic, such as benches, trash cans, lighting poles, fountains or different street art objects have been the subject of many types of changes. In a first stage, the change consisted in replacing the street furniture, without altering the urban space. Due to insufficient funding, the new pieces only partially replaced the old ones (benches, for example). Consequently, the squares displayed pieces of furniture different in style, materials, coloring, and degrees of wear, bringing a less controlled character. Generally, until the end of the 2000s, these types of small-scale improvements and interventions were the only ones to challenge the stylistic unity of the public space associated with civic centers. Since 2010s, the easier access to European funds supported the elaboration of integrated projects for public space renovation, including also changes in spatial configuration, thus allowing for the changes to take on a greater scale.⁹ (Fig. 6)

9 The ratio of mineral to green space has been rethought, the pavement has been changed, the urban furniture has also been replaced with newly designed pieces; public benches not only allowing views of main points of attraction (i.e. the central, symbolic statue), but also grouped to encourage social interaction. Suggestive examples of these changes happened in cities like Miercurea Ciuc, Brăila or Slatina.



Fig. 6: Left: "Esplanada" in Slatina, before 1989 (up) and 2022 (down). Right: Independenței Square in Brăila, before 1989 (up) and 2018 (down).

The large and empty arenas of civic centers, designed for mass-acclamations, are today remodeled according to design briefs that follow contemporary urban concepts such as the "environmentally friendly city" or "city for people." These are interpreted by opening the public space to the community, creating various social events, discouraging the car use and also by providing the public space with facilities responding to the "smart city" approach. The public space was and is redesigned, divided and reinterpreted by parts, as social activities are sharing the public space in different ways. But, however well adapted to local performances, shows and events, the detachment from the emblems of former political influence in the square is always incomplete; however fragmented and more democratic this space became, it always sits a stage before the main building of the square (generally, city hall or house of culture). The position of this stage is different in each case, as is its importance in the perception of the whole. Sometimes the stage is axially placed, as in the case of Vaslui, filtering the perception of the county council — an intermediary sequence between the public space and former most important building of square. In other cases, the stage is located to the side, as in Pitești, but still related to the main administrative or cultural building. The permanent presence of the stage in the square is a testimony of the social role of public space, but in a way which better illustrates the views of each city administration; somehow, an area of the square is always preserved for a type of mass-activity or another. Here, the public administration still schedules (and organizes) events to celebrate local culture. Design wise, it remains a corner characterized by flatness and minerality.

The new remodeling interventions for the central squares result in the increased quality of the public space and its adjusting to a human scale precisely through this fragmentation. As such they are usually appreciated by the local residents, a fact also confirmed through observations regarding the intensity of use in these spaces. Although initially perceived as foreign interventions, today the perception of civic centers is growing positive, as the public squares are beginning to be reconsidered for their urban social value.



Fig. 7: People in Independenței Square, Brăila, 2016.

Urban life

In a subtle reciprocity relationship, changes at the functional and physical framework increased the presence of people.¹⁰ As such, the central squares provided by the civic centers find their public vocation by expressing free, spontaneous or organized activities. The diversity of activities in the public space is the result of many factors related to the design of the space, but also to the array of available perimeter facilities. While the commercial and public services assist in the taming of the central square, the empty public space itself, in the past unoccupied, becomes animated either as a children's playground, or "recovered" by non-specific use of adults; also, this becomes the space of bicycle races, roller skates events and public art exhibitions. Where the space is marked by an urban art object, a statue or a fountain, this landmark also turns out to be one of the best meeting places in the city.¹¹ Those public squares where interventions to the original spatial structure happened by fragmentation, decomposition and recomposition on a smaller, human scale, the resulting public space is animated on its entire surface. An eloquent example is the city of Brăila, where, despite the almost non-existent commercial and service offer, people seem to better appropriate its smaller public spaces, transforming them into real urban rooms for various activities, attesting to the joy of spending free time in a neat, beautiful and safe space. (Fig. 7) All these uses and more, complemented with other spontaneous individual activities, such as artistic representations of street musicians or painters testify to the gradual but thorough shifting of perception of these spaces of the city.

This is reinforced by another category of programmatic uses, referring to activities exclusively dedicated to the public space, such as seasonal fairs, public markets, or other events and celebrations of the city, attracting both local residents and visitors. (Fig. 8) All these events are continuously changing the image of central public squares.

¹⁰ The situation testifies to previously relevant studies such as William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington DC: Conservation Foundation, 1980) and Jan Gehl, *Life Between Buildings* (Washington DC: IslandPress, 2011).

¹¹ Such as in certain cities like Focșani or Vaslui.



Fig. 8: Flower fair in central square, Vaslui, May 2022.

Conclusions

As an architectural program assumed by the communist regime, Romanian civic centers were designed with a rigid spatial and functional structure, able to meet the political demands of the dictatorship, to shape a new type of society and to control social life. Built to last, they are urban systems difficult to modify in terms of the buildings they comprise or in terms of the structure of the public space. The relatively young age of most buildings¹² also makes them still viable from the point of view of their physical condition and, arguably, of their expression. While hosting different types of public programs (political-administrative in the first place), these buildings have shaped public spaces and, in particular, the central public square, the most representative as meeting place to celebrate the regime. After 1989, when the political vocation of these civic centers drastically diminished, their configuration and use was subjected, almost organically, to successive transformations.

Although they continue to be defined by the same buildings that engendered their original shape, their respective public open space became the “theatre” of adjustments to the new social requirements or aspirations, which literally changed their character, thus revealing the transient nature of an urban program built with pretensions of long stability.

This transience is visible in their present use, but also in the transformations of the built environment, although the means were minimal and without far reaching ambitions. The same can be argued for the fleeting nature of all activities present in these public places. However, all urban public squares associated with the civic centers encompass various dynamic processes of accepting, understanding, adapting and appropriating the central public squares, with particularities from case to case. Overviewing them schematically, we can identify two major stages: the years immediately after the fall of communism, until around 2010, marked by small interventions, and the period after 2010 when the development of large-scale projects started, projects of wider-ranging changes of the public space of central squares.

12 Most of them built after 1970.

Beyond their objective chronology, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of these central public squares in another temporal dimension: time associated with human experience, in fact, the perception of these spaces. In this key, the liberties and individual freedoms obtained after the fall of communism, allowed for new human and social experiences that have changed the way in which these spaces are understood and perceived, as society itself changed. Despite their initial rejection as brutal political infliction in the urban body and people's lives, with the passage of time healing the collective memory, these public spaces have come to be accepted and assimilated as normal parts of the city. Nowadays these spaces are reconsidered, welded into the urban fabric in which they were inserted by force and fixed in the collective memory, acquiring the subtle characteristics of places with memory. It is with this background that the contemporary redesign of these spaces triggers social behaviors that animate and activate the public squares.

Today, after more than thirty years of political and socio-cultural changes, we can say that public squares have largely been assimilated by society. Understanding them from a different perspective has meant generating transformations of their physical setting and use. What seemed to be "set in stone" during the years of communism has proven to be but fleeting.

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 Fig. 2: Photos of sketches by arch. Nicolae Munteanu, within the exhibition "Vaslui 1960-1989. Presence of the past," held in Vaslui, August 14 - September 14, 2015.
 Fig. 3: Frame from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcwkjuqVTDs>, retrieved July 17, 2022.
 Fig. 6: Left up: http://www.delcampe.net/en_GB/marketplace/postcards/romania/3132-romania-roumanie-romania-oltenia-olt-slatina-casa-de-cultura-a-sindicatelor-1988-288041649.html, retrieved September 15, 2016. Left down: Sorin Vasile Manea, 2022. Right up: <http://braila-portal.ro/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/primaria-br.jpg>, retrieved September 15, 2016; Right down: Sorin Vasile Manea, 2022.
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