

Oana Cristina Țiganea,
*The Rise and Fall of Romanian “Steel Fortresses”
 and the Case of Hunedoara, 1949-1999. Built and
 Environmental Legacies of Socialist Industrialisation*

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Based on a doctorate conducted at the Politecnico di Milano and a decade of research, Oana Țiganea's book addresses the most famed socialist heavy-industry site in Romania: Hunedoara. Written from a heritage perspective, it aims at providing an exhaustive historical research on the tangible legacy of steel industry in Hunedoara at all scales, from the physical transformations at geographic level to building details, together with an insight into the intangible heritage of the specific culture and the social reality this industry has created.

The book combines the most in-depth historical analysis with the widest perspective. While the focus is set on socialist Hunedoara, this case is also widely contextualized, both temporally and spatially – addressed over a longer time frame and on a wider territory. Its evolution is followed from the beginnings of metallurgic industry on this site, before the modern Romanian state even existed, to its rise as the very epitome of heavy industrialization in socialist Romania, and eventually to its post-socialist fall into the partial ruination we see today. By also investigating the two other major steel sites of Reșița and Galați and highlighting the networking feature of steel production under socialism, the book eventually gives the most comprehensive picture of the evolution of the steel industry on Romanian territory.

The book is the first substantial historical research on a category of industrial architecture in socialist Romania published so far. Although in recent years the architectural and urban heritage of the socialist period has increasingly gained attention from historians, industrial sites remain the least researched area of socialist architecture. As Irina Tulbure-Moldovan remarks in one of the forewords of the book, socialist industrial sites are also less understood as cultural heritage worth preserving.¹ It is then no coincidence that they also suffered the most widespread destruction in the post-socialist years.

One of the main merits of this book is that it shows the direct relationship between, on the one hand, the lack of research and historical knowledge, therefore the ignorance about socialist industrial heritage value, and, on the other hand, the systematic destruction of socialist industrial legacy in post-socialist Romania. Unlike socialist housing, for instance, which enjoyed a full post-socialist afterlife, receiving attention from both scholarly research and rehabilitation practice (and still accommodating the largest part of urban population in Romania today), most of the socialist industrial sites have been denied any value and razed to the benefit of real estate developers, or simply left to fall into ruins. Hunedoara, as this book shows, is the epitome of this reality too.

The connection between industry and housing is actually very relevant. Industrialization was the main driver for urbanization and territorial transformation in socialist Romania. Major industrial

¹ Irina Tulbure-Moldovan, “Changing Perspectives in Assessing the Socialist Heritage”, in Oana-Cristina Țiganea, *The Rise and Fall of Romanian “Steel Fortresses” and the Case of Hunedoara, 1949-1999* (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli Editore, 2023), 13-19.





investments demanded new workforce and thus major housing developments, which led to creating new urban environments, or radically transforming them. In addressing this reality, Oana Țiganea's book can be associated with another excellent monograph – also based on a PhD thesis and about a decade of archival research – by Mara Mărginean.² These two books confirm and complete each other and, together, make Hunedoara probably the best researched site of socialist architecture in Romania (besides Bucharest and the Black Sea resorts). While both books try to give a comprehensive picture of socialist Hunedoara on the whole, and both highlight the inseparability between industrial and urban development, Mara Mărginean's book addresses more comprehensively the issue of habitation – the town planning, the social aspects and the everyday life in the new urban environment of Hunedoara. Oana Țiganea's book details more thoroughly the evolution of the industrial area and its particular significance in the context of heavy industry development on a larger territory, presenting Hunedoara as the most typical steel mono-industrial town—the very early notion of a “worker's town,” later called “industrial town”³ – where town planning and the evolution of housing were just the epiphenomenon of industrial expansion. Something that both books highlight, in relation to both industry and housing, are the discrepancies between the many different layers of the socialist planning system, between centralized command and local reality: the fact that projects were made by planning and design institutions in Bucharest, most often without true knowledge of the actual site.

It is the heritage question, both material and immaterial, that is developed most explicitly in Oana Țiganea's book. Even if the value of the legacy of socialist industrial architecture is neglected today, addressing socialist industrial sites as heritage could come more naturally than understanding socialist housing as heritage. As Oana Țiganea explains, industrial buildings are easier understood as architecture, compared to mass housing, which is usually addressed only in quantitative terms, as numbers. Moreover, industrial architecture was censored less than any other kind of architecture during the socialist period. Good quality industrial architecture could thus emerge, was acknowledged and it mattered at the time, so much the more it was used as a major propaganda tool.

Maybe the most important methodological point made by Oana Țiganea is that, in order to understand the true historic value of this kind of heritage, we need to go beyond the narrow approach of a local history. This helps the historian see through the propaganda discourse of a specific moment in time and overcome the scarcity of archival documents today. A wider look observes how the socialist steel industry was developed in continuity with already existing iron and steel production infrastructures, and that these have always functioned in larger territorial networks. This continuity was totally absent from the official discourse at the time, but, as the author remarks, even omissions may become relevant for the historian today. The book shows that although the Soviet model tried to erase the memory of the pre-socialist industry in Hunedoara and its territorial “matrix,” it pragmatically recuperated most of its infrastructure.

Larger perspectives are important to address, as they reveal the various levels of territorial entanglements and continuities. The steelworks site itself is already a complex mixture of many technological sub-components: a “steel integrated production site.” Also, the works in Hunedoara dominated and shaped an entire territory around, exploiting it as its productive hinterland. On a national scale, the network of steel production comprised “the national steel constellation”⁴ of Reșița, Hunedoara and Galați – the so-called “Steel Fortresses.” But even the territorial scale was surpassed, as raw materials in Romania were insufficient for such a large-scale production, and some had to be imported from overseas (which is why the last steel center was developed on the Danube, in Galați). Hunedoara remained the most important site in this territorial network, although it has evolved somehow in the shadow of the older and for a long time more advanced Reșița, and although Galați was maybe more advanced. This supremacy is symbolically proven by

2 Mara Mărginean, *Ferestre spre furnalul roșu: urbanism și cotidian în Hunedoara și Călan* [Windows Towards the Red Furnace: Urbanism and Everyday Life in Hunedoara and Călan] (Iași: Polirom, 2015).

3 Țiganea, *The Rise and Fall*, 133, 140.

4 *Ibid.*, 168.

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the fact that it was Hunedoara's nickname of "Steel Fortress" (coming from the medieval Corvin Castle) that was projected on all three cities.

A large territorial approach also emerges from the heritage perspective developed today. This is another major point that the book makes: that Hunedoara should be seen as "part of an inter-connected European legacy," as Mark Watson remarks in a foreword to the book.⁵ The trans-national outlook in writing a comprehensive history of the steel industry is necessary, as transfers of knowledge and technology were essential in this sector, and they were assured by wide international cooperation. The book reveals all kinds of foreign exchanges – visits, documentation materials, technology – to and from many parts of the world (not only socialist), in the development of the Romanian steel industry.

Another major contribution is to show that beside the industrial site addressed in its spatial dimensions (architectural, urban, territorial, environmental), another heritage value should be recognized as well: the living memory of the specific urban culture and society that this industry has created. Hunedoara had already developed "a particular type of industrial culture and identity", even before "the socialist Cult-of-Steel propaganda,"⁶ which further shaped the self-perception of an urban society deeply rooted into a culture of its own. For its people, the post-socialist fall of Hunedoara was a "tragedy," a "disaster"; it meant the loss of their entire world. The book empathetically presents their struggles for saving the memory of Hunedoara's lost steel glory. It shows how the archives that possessed its proofs suffered the same destructive drive as its buildings, until the community initiatives managed to save a few of them. But there are also darker memories that are fully acknowledged only today, such as the terrible environmental pollution: the snow was never white in Hunedoara at the time the steelworks stood in glory.

Hunedoara steelworks reached the peak of production around 1979.⁷ From there on, the town went through the typical post-industrial transformation. Today, its former glory has turned to scrap, "industrial ruins taking center stage."⁸ The image of ruins became the stereotype of socialist industrial legacy in general, in Romania. There is still no public awareness of the heritage value in the material presence of socialist industrial architecture – a living memory value for many people today and cultural historical value for generations to come. Changing this, Oana Țiganea remarks, would require a "shift" in the perception of socialist built heritage, a "mentality change."⁹ Her book attempts to do just that: change the way the legacy of socialist industrial architecture is perceived. It is only through knowledge construction that patrimonial value can be acknowledged. Unfortunately, for the ruins in Hunedoara, this knowledge has come too late.

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS:

Previos pages: Image in the book (Fig. 166) View from the brownfield towards the remaining industrial buildings positioned along the Cerna Riverbanks in the background of the town of Hunedoara.
@Paolo Mazzo, 2013.

Following page: Book cover (Fig. 000) with mural painting in the main hall of Hunedoara's railway station, the work of Paul Miracovici (1906–1971). The railway station was built between 1951 and 1953 according to a design by the architects T. D. Elian and D. V. Marinescu. Source: Paolo Mazzo, 2013.

5 Mark Watson, "Context and History: Iron and Steel in East-Central Europe, with a look forward," in Țiganea, *The Rise and Fall*, 7-11.

6 Țiganea, *The Rise and Fall*, 54.

7 Ibid., 166.

8 Ibid., 245.

9 Ibid., 274, 292.