

The Art of Competition. Superordinary Changes in the Cultural Landscape of Cluj-Napoca

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Introduction. Public Architecture Competitions in Romania after 2000

In Romania, architectural competitions represent a relatively minor part of public architecture, but they hold significant importance. They have the potential to serve as exemplars, introducing new standards in architecture. The tradition of architectural competitions dates back over a century and a half and has been influenced primarily by the French model. Around the establishment of the Order of Romanian Architects,¹ formerly recognized as the Society of Romanian Architects (SAR), architectural competitions were firmly entrenched in Romania. Both governmental bodies and private entities organized competitions to solicit solutions for important investments, some of which were subsequently realized.² However, the context changed drastically after 1952, with competitions devolving into mere design exercises without assurances of materialization. After 1989, architectural competitions scarcely reemerged as a means of procuring design services. Yet, since 2017, there has been a consistent increase in the organization of public open international competitions focused on public architecture and public spaces.

This research focuses on competitions organized by public authorities or partner institutions, which are open to architects, urban planners, and interdisciplinary teams. To ensure fairness and transparency, the process is typically governed by specific legislation and the regulations of the Romanian Order of Architects (OAR). Juries often consist of architects, urban planners, interdisciplinary experts, and occasionally representatives of beneficiaries or the community.

The Order of Romanian Architects has led this effort, overseeing, after 2000, the organization of 40 competitions for public buildings and spaces,³ notably 17 in Cluj-Napoca,⁴ 10 in the capital Bucharest, and 4 in Braşov. This trajectory underscores a genuine enthusiasm for the advancement of this mode of soliciting projects of public interest, particularly noticeable in the growing frequency of competitions in Cluj. (Fig. 1)

The topics covered by these competitions range from the rehabilitation of cultural heritage and institutional buildings (such as hospitals, schools, museums, and administrative buildings) to the design of public spaces and green areas. While many focus on regenerating central urban spaces, others enhance the connectivity of peripheral areas with the city center. In recent years, there has been a significant shift in the focus of architectural competitions, with a growing emphasis on blue-green network initiatives and large-scale urban design projects, such as the Colentina Lakes competition in Bucharest organized in 2024, which covers a green area of 104.89 hectares.

1 SAR (Societatea Arhitecţilor Români) was founded in 1891.

2 Ana Maria Zahariade, "Concursul de arhitectură atunci şi acum," *Arhitectura 1906*, no. 5-6 (2019): 44.

3 Plus 8 more competitions for national pavilions or graphic design.

4 In total there are 18, but the competition for Piaţa Unirii was organized solely by the Town Hall of Cluj-Napoca.

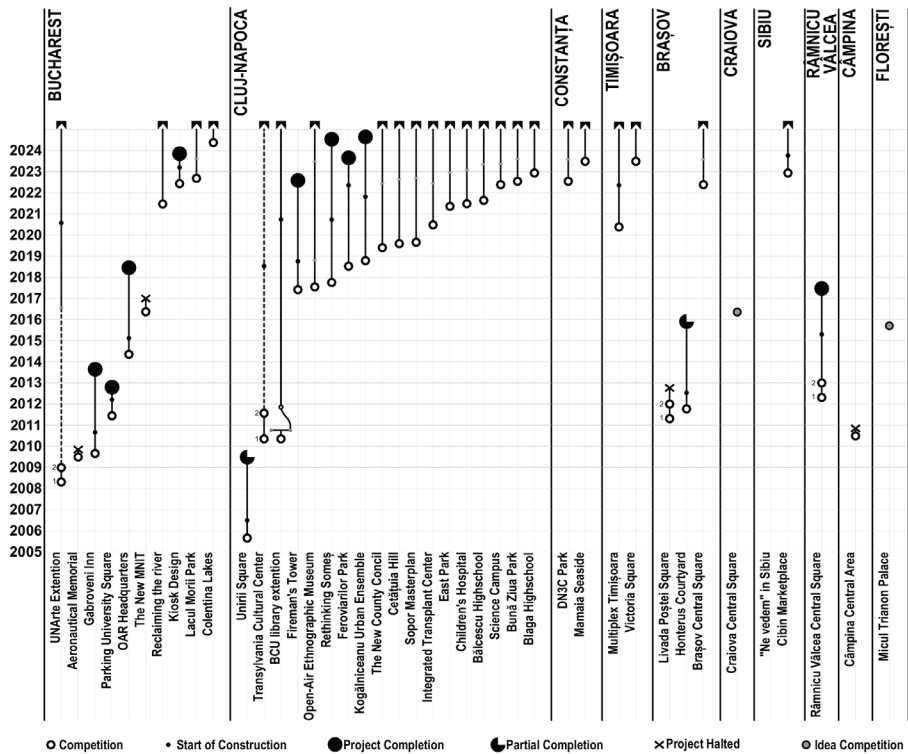


Fig. 1: Graphic illustrating the trajectory of public open competitions organized in Romania from 2005 to 2024, covering the phases from competition to implementation

While some winning projects are fully realized, others remain in the conceptual phase or are still in progress. Nonetheless, even as ideas, these projects significantly shape discussions and visions for future urban development, often establishing precedents or influencing policy directions.

Between 2017 and 2024, Cluj maintained a consistent pace of meaningful public open competitions, while other cities concentrated on less relevant urban themes, leading to fewer completed projects and several that were abandoned after the competition phase. Unlike other cities, where competitions were sporadic or centered on a limited range of themes, Cluj has embraced a steady rhythm and addressed diverse urban areas and a wide variety of topics. However, in 2024 no competition has been organized in Cluj, while major competitions have taken place in Bucharest, Constanța, Timișoara, and Brașov. This pause may indicate, for Cluj, the local concern for the implementation of previous projects before starting new ones, but also a growing recognition of competition as a valuable urban development tool in other cities. Despite this slowdown, the competitions in Cluj represent a relevant case study through their number, the substantial urban area they covered (Fig. 2), the variety of architectural and urban planning programs, and the higher implementation rate compared to other locations in Romania.

The notion of “cultural landscape” is central to understanding how and why these projects have contributed to a possible new direction. A cultural landscape encompasses more than just physical spaces; it reflects the social, historical, and cultural dynamics of a place; distinct from the analytical construct of the natural environment, the notion carries deeply ingrained cultural significance and a self-legitimizing function (as evidenced by its association with cultural

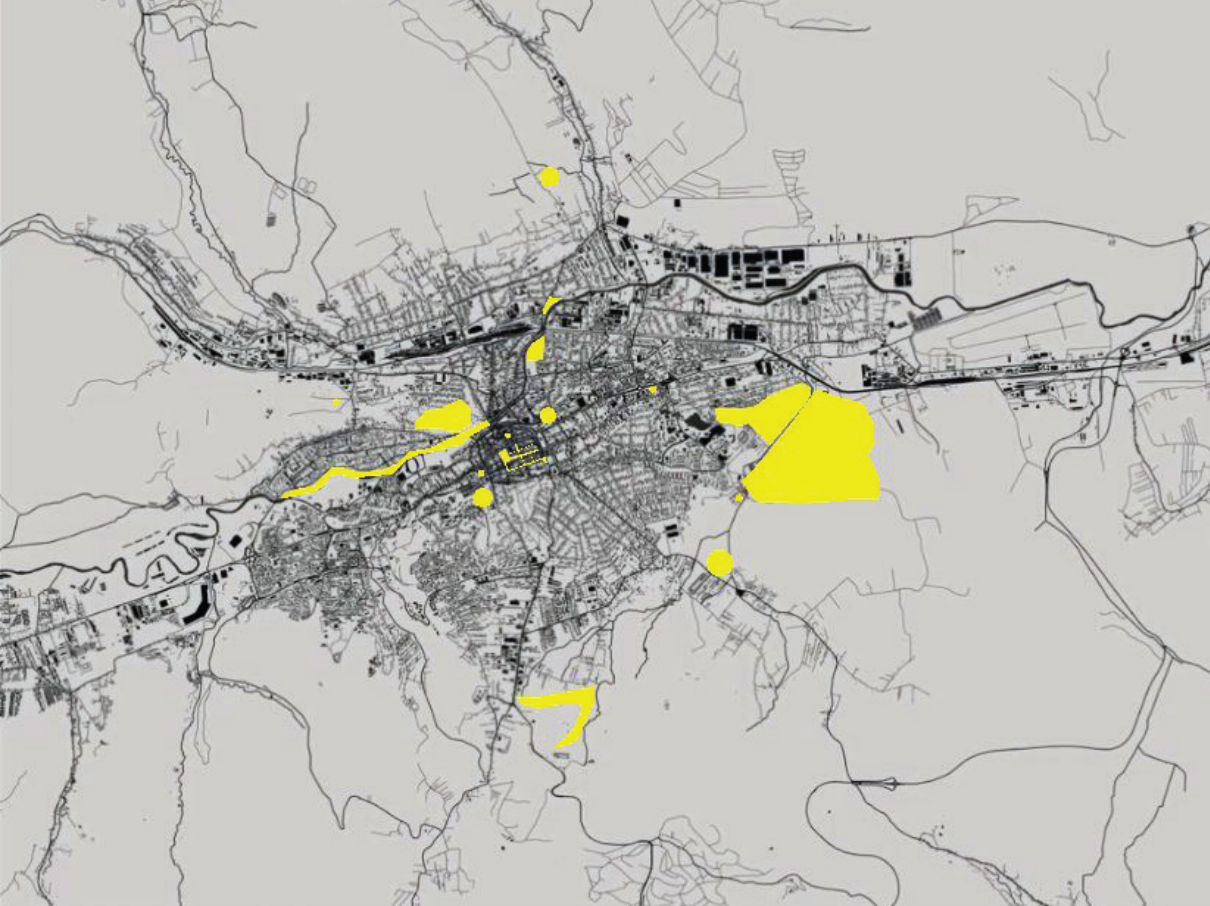


Fig. 2: Mapping the areas of Cluj-Napoca covered by competitions between 2005-2024

heritage landscapes).⁵ As written in a Jury Report of one of these competitions, landscape is the result of a socio-ecological relationship that is always in evolution.⁶ The various competitions held in Cluj have actively shaped this landscape by introducing new public spaces, re-thinking heritage sites, and creating connections between different urban areas. Thus, they do more than modify the built environment—they transform the collective experience of the city, embedding new social practices and interactions within public spaces. What is transformed is not only the visible landscape of the areas in the city directly remodeled in implementation but the intangible web of meanings, practices, and interactions related to the community's evolving values as well. It is the contention of this article that the way in which the city of Cluj is changing – both visibly and invisibly – follows a distinguishable pattern. This is recognizable through spaces and architectural elements that, while seeming unremarkable at first glance, hold deeper cultural or social significance, and also through projects subtly integrated into the urban fabric, fostering everyday interactions and contributing to an aesthetic that values subtlety and contextual relevance. Since these transformations are brought about by the sequence of winning entries regarded as a whole, we might say that the series of international competitions in Cluj is a means of “curating” Cluj's emerging cultural landscape.

5 Ulf Ickerodt, “The term ‘cultural landscape’,” *Landscape ideologies. Archaeolingua Series Minor* (Budapest, 2006), 53-79.

6 Miriam Garcia Garcia et al., *Jury report Cetățuia Hill*, https://oar.archi/wpcontent/uploads/2021/04/raport_juriu_cetatuia_en_pdf_1561988940.pdf, accessed March 1, 2024, citing from the European Landscape Convention (signed by Romania in 2000 and ratified by Law no. 451/2002).

Objectives and Methodology. A Possible New Direction for the Architecture in Cluj

This research examines the internal and external factors influencing these competitions, aiming to map how a new landscape emerges in the winning proposals and how these projects collectively contribute to Cluj's broader cultural transformation. By analyzing the creative approaches of design teams alongside socio-economic and political forces, the research seeks to establish a framework for understanding how architectural competitions act as mechanisms for shaping a cultural landscape.

The first component of the methodology involves a contextual analysis that examines the role of civil society and the political landscape in shaping architectural competitions. This analysis focuses on how these factors influence both the competition process and project outcomes. Municipal policies that affect the commissioning and implementation of competitions are also scrutinized. Furthermore, the role of civil society in Cluj's urban transformation is explored through a review of relevant literature, press articles, and available data on public participation in urban planning and architectural competitions.

The second component of the methodology concentrates on a detailed analysis of briefs, jury reports, and winning projects from these competitions. The goal is to outline the direction of change within Cluj's cultural landscape. This involves a comprehensive review of the winning proposals, emphasizing specific design elements that reflect the proposed new landscape. In particular, the concept of "superordinary" serves as a framework for understanding how these spaces transcend the ordinary and contribute to a culturally enriched urban identity.

The Context of Competitions in Cluj

Political context

Cluj-Napoca has encountered both significant challenges and opportunities in establishing itself as one of Romania's most dynamic urban centers, blending rapid growth, cultural vibrancy, and shifting demographics. As Romania's second-largest city, it has experienced extensive urban expansion and economic development while fostering a distinctive cultural scene and attracting a substantial student population.⁷ Although the core population has slightly declined – recent figures show a reduction in the number of residents within the city limits – the surrounding metropolitan area continues to flourish.

In terms of urban space, Cluj-Napoca has undergone a profound transformation since the post-socialist era. During the 1990s, the local political discourse was heavily imbued with nationalism, shaping public spaces with monuments and symbols that turned city squares into platforms for the expression of propaganda. Even green spaces were co-opted for political statements, such as painting benches in the national flag colors of red, yellow, and blue.⁸ It took nearly two decades to shift away from this ideological orientation, paving the way for a vibrant and engaged community that now actively participates in shaping the city's urban landscape.

Since 2004, Cluj-Napoca has enjoyed a period of political stability and continuity, which has strongly influenced its urban development and the organization of architectural competitions. The new local administration played a pivotal role in reshaping both the city and its outskirts. Five new neighborhoods emerged, accompanied by a restructured labor market responding to

7 317,953 inhabitants, with a density of 1,771 people/km² and with a surplus of 80,000 students coming to learn each year at its university according to Romanian Institute of Statistics, *Populația rezidentă după grupă de vârstă, pe județul Cluj și municipii, orașe, comune, la 1 decembrie 2021*, 2021.

8 Dana Vais, "Spațiul urban în post-socialism: Cluj," *Cluj-Napoca în proiecte, 50 de ani 1960-2010* (Cluj-Napoca, 2012), 410.

waves of population growth.⁹ The local government adopted a consistent approach to urban planning, supporting the advancement of numerous projects aimed at enhancing infrastructure and public spaces. This political stability has enabled the implementation of long-term strategies, positioning architectural competitions as a cornerstone of the city's growth and development.

The promulgation of Law 98/2016 on public procurement further bolstered these efforts by allowing contracting authorities to acquire both projects and design services through competitions judged by a jury based on professional criteria. This legislative improvement, aligned with European Union public procurement directives and the recommendations of the International Union of Architects, has encouraged open competitions as a tool for achieving high-quality design outcomes and materialize some of the city's most significant investments.

Despite the higher number of competitions as compared to other Romanian cities, the overall figure remains modest in comparison to other parts of Europe. While five projects have been completed, and one is currently under implementation, many others have yet to advance, and their progress is slower than anticipated.

In their transition from concept to realization, these urban projects often undergo transformations determined / required by practical constraints and stakeholder input, which in turn shape the urban landscape. A comparison of two notable projects — Unirii Square (2017) and Kogălniceanu Street (2023) — illustrates this dynamic process, reflecting evolving attitudes toward urban space over several years. While the initial vision for Unirii Square emphasized a pedestrian-friendly design, practical constraints and stakeholder needs resulted in significant compromises, including changes to traffic flow in the final design. In contrast, the Kogălniceanu Street project deviated from its initial brief, culminating in a political decision toward the end of construction to convert it into a pedestrian zone. This decision marked a growing shift toward more sustainable and people-centered urban design.

Architectural competitions have undoubtedly played a crucial role in shaping the city's development. However, the implementation of winning designs frequently encounters challenges such as budget limitations, political decisions, and evolving public expectations, which can significantly alter the original vision. While many residents and stakeholders view these urban interventions as steps toward a more modern and sustainable city, criticisms persist. Some sectors of the public feel that the changes do not always align with local community needs. Concerns have been raised about the lack of clear policies to address housing demand and regulate the housing market, as well as inadequate adaptation of traffic infrastructure to support the growing population and expanding urban areas.

Civil society role

The social mentality in Cluj has undergone significant changes, as evidenced by social studies focusing on spaces like the Someș River.¹⁰ These studies highlight the importance of green spaces and natural features in urban environments, reflecting a growing awareness and appreciation for the role of nature in enhancing the quality of life in cities.

Over the last decade, there has been a noticeable rise in societal awareness and active involvement in the city's development. A series of small actions have brought the city closer to its residents, and protests—primarily concerning green spaces—have spurred public competitions, supported by political will. One key positive outcome of this activism has been raising awareness about areas that had long been neglected. Competitions such as *Rethinking Someș*, *East Park*, and *Feroviarilor Park* were directly influenced by the debates and actions initiated by

9 Norbert Petrovici, Anca Simionca, „Productive Informality and Economic Ties in Emerging Economies: The Case of Cluj Business Networks,” *PERPETUAL MOTION? Transformation and Transition in Central and Eastern Europe & Russia* (2011), 136.

10 Attila Gabora, Gyongyi Pasztor, Andrada Tobias, *Studiu sociologic în cadrul proiectului Amenajare coridor de mobilitate urbană durabilă de-a lungul râului Someșul Mic* (Cluj-Napoca, 2023).

civil society activists and architects. Many of these actions began as opposition to certain types of developments, often driven by capitalist motives, and evolved into advocacy for alternative approaches through public competitions.

In 2013, as a response to massive private investments, Cluj's civil society set up informal groups that later established the NGO *SOS East Park* to contest the privatization of East Park. They organized debates to explore ways to influence public institutions and ensure that the park and its lakes remain public assets. Their campaign to block car traffic and create a public space succeeded, resulting in the design of a green area near the mall.¹¹ The following year, architects and students launched the study *The Other Cluj*,¹² aiming to reconnect the city's fragmented parts, including East Park. While these interventions did not deeply engage the community, they raised significant awareness about the park's importance.

This growing awareness was tested in 2018 when the city administration proposed an Aqua Park project in the area,¹³ sparking a heated debate. Ultimately the civil society, architects, and urbanists rejected the project, leading to its relocation and the organization of a competition for East Park in 2021. The competition brief emphasized preserving the park's natural habitat while revitalizing it socially and functionally through innovative landscape designs.

Another case of civic activism resulting in a competition was the Feroviarilor Park. The park had experienced significant degradation since 1990, prompting consideration for leasing it to a local investor. However, in 2017, sustained pressure from the community and NGOs led the City Hall to assume administration of the land. Once the park entered municipal control, an engaged and proactive community initiated extensive consultations on its future, culminating in a design competition aimed at revitalizing the park.

"The reintroduction of the Feroviarilor Park into the city's public green spaces is considered a significant victory for the entire community and a huge opportunity to rehabilitate this important green area both ecologically and aesthetically."¹⁴

A shift in the social landscape led to a new mindset where people engaged in the development of their city, recognizing that green space was essential to enhancing the quality of life. A bottom-up approach that involved urban activism managed to raise awareness and fostered a new sensibility toward the blue-green network. Various stakeholders – including local communities, activists, and non-governmental organizations – have contributed to the design and decision-making processes regarding urban spaces, promoting participatory urbanism in Cluj.

However, this growing civic engagement has also introduced complexities in realizing the projects. Public involvement often intensifies at the stage when projects are already being executed, as residents begin to fully grasp the implications of the proposed designs. At this point, individuals and groups may express dissatisfaction, question the expertise of professionals, and even attempt to discredit the original vision of specialists. In some cases, heated debates arise, reflecting a lack of understanding or miscommunication about the project's goals and constraints. While public critique can offer valuable insights and lead to necessary adjustments, it may also create obstacles, delay implementation, or result in compromises that dilute the original intent of the design. These late-stage interventions underscore the need for more transparent communication and meaningful engagement earlier in the design process, ensuring that community concerns are addressed before projects reach the implementation phase.¹⁵

11 Silviu Medeşan, *Forma urmează situației, oraşul contemporan anticipat de situaționiști* (Bucharest: Ozalid, 2020).

12 Ibid.

13 Remus Florescu, "Cum va arăta aqua park-ul de 12 hectare din Cluj. Investiția de circa 200 de milioane de lei, contestată de un ONG," *Adevărul*, February 28, 2019, <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/cluj-napoca/foto-cum-va-arata-aqua-park-ul-de-12-hectare-din-1927492.html>.

14 José Mayoral Moratilla et al., *Jury report Feroviarilor Park*, https://oar.archi/wpcontent/uploads/2021/03/raport_juriu_feroviarilor_ro_pdf_1527602650.pdf, accessed March 1, 2024.

15 In the context of green space projects, a common expectation misconception among the public is that the

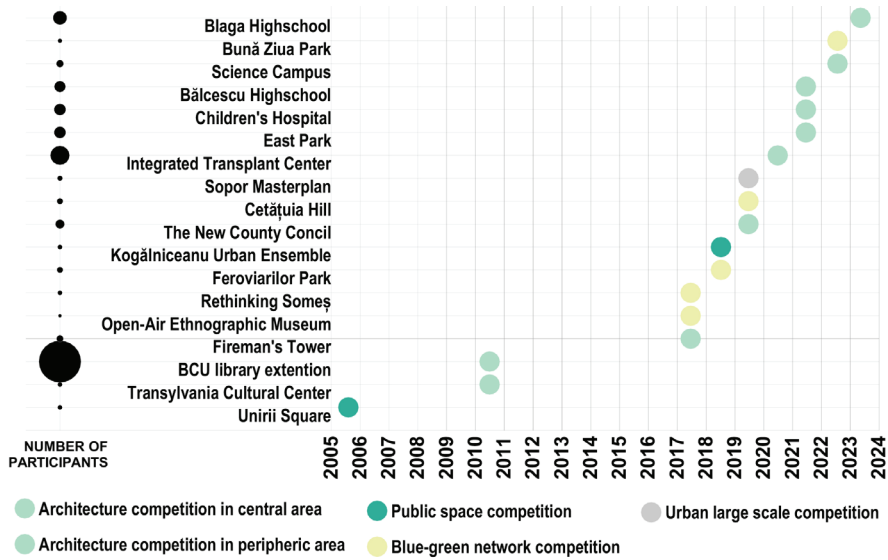


Fig. 3: Graphic illustrating the total surface areas of all competition projects from Cluj-Napoca from 2005 to 2023, categorized by type

Long-term visions: the competition as a strategic tool

Between 2005 and 2023, the organization of architectural and urban design competitions in Cluj-Napoca evolved through distinct phases, each reflecting the city's changing approach to urban development. The first stage, spanning from 2005 to 2010, was characterized by a trial-and-error methodology, marked by both successes and failures in organizing competitions. During this period, the city tested different approaches to integrate design competitions into its urban planning processes. While there were notable achievements, these early competitions often revealed shortcomings in terms of organization and development of competitions, project implementation, coordination, and public engagement.

A significant shift occurred after 2017, when the frequency of competitions in Cluj-Napoca increased (Fig. 3), and they became more regular, thus forming an integral part of the city's urban planning strategy. They encompassed various project types: public buildings such as administrative offices, hospitals, cultural institutions, and schools; complex public spaces, and green areas; and urban strategies. (Fig. 4) They were occasionally located in central areas of the city, with high visibility, strategically important zones where the pressure to succeed was considerable due to the complexity and constraints of the existent urban fabric and infrastructure. Other competition sites were situated in areas with less rigid urban regulations or unclear development guidelines, offering greater freedom for design experimentation while raising serious concerns in terms of long-term urban cohesion. The competitions were not just about designing solutions for the present context but were envisioned as tools for guiding the city's future development trajectory. Consequently, these competitions played a key role in shaping the long-term urban vision of the city, setting precedents for future architectural and urban interventions. This responsibility was particularly evident in areas such as the city's peripheries, where new developments and infrastructure projects had the potential to redefine the character and functionality of neighborhoods for years to come.

implementation process concludes as soon as the construction or planting phase is completed. However, the true success of these projects depends on the long-term growth and maturation of the vegetation. This misunderstanding often leads to premature criticism of the implemented project, without considering the final vision that will emerge as the greenery matures.

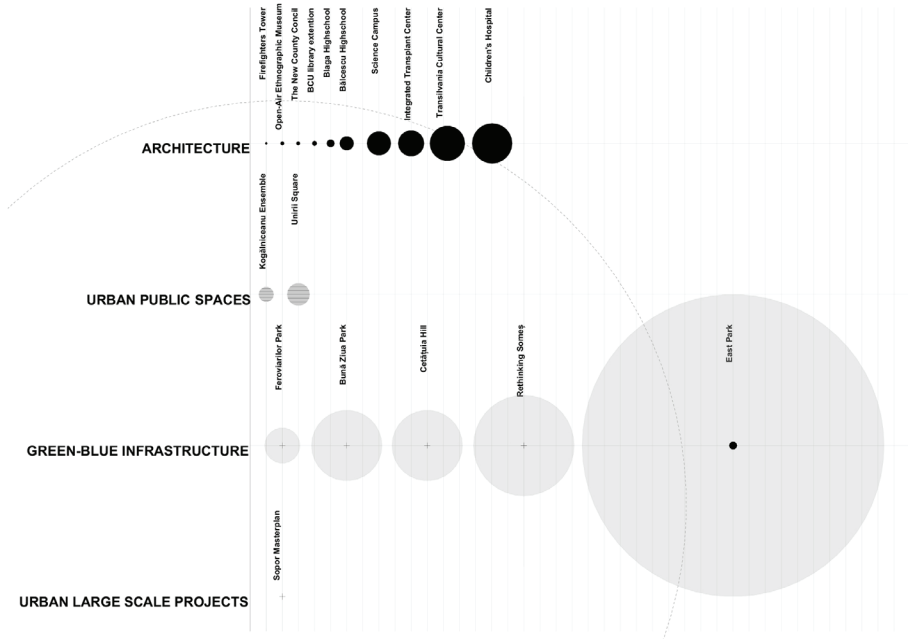


Fig. 4: Graphic illustrating the timeline of competitions in Cluj-Napoca from 2005 to 2023, categorized by type

In addition to these central and peripheral urban projects, blue-green network initiatives and large-scale urban design competitions increasingly focused on enhancing the city's ecological connectivity through the integration of green spaces, water systems, and pedestrian networks. These initiatives align with broader environmental and social sustainability goals. Thus, these competitions contributed significantly to shaping the city's architectural landscape, fostering a design culture that sought to balance immediate urban needs with long-term vision and sustainability.

A "Superordinary" Landscape

In the realm of architecture, the concept of the superordinary emerges as a compelling avenue for re-examining contemporary architectural culture and its underlying theoretical foundations. Unlike the extraordinary, which often centers around aesthetic discourse, the superordinary delves into the realm of unnoticed or matter-of-fact presences in architecture and urban environments. While architects typically strive for designs that are perceived as extraordinary, the superordinary prompts the reconsideration of the ordinary elements that shape our built environment. This idea challenges the prevailing belief that only exceptional or distinctive features deserve attention in the design discourse, suggesting that value is to be found in acknowledging and engaging with the routine and mundane aspects of architectural practice. By shifting the focus from aesthetic conventions to critical dialogues between culture and design, the concept of the superordinary opens new avenues for exploration and understanding within the field of architecture.¹⁶

The superordinary approach pays closer attention to everyday details, to the subtle relationships between people and the built environment, and to the potential for transformation and improvement of the city through seemingly modest yet profoundly meaningful interventions. The concept of the new "superordinary landscape" centers on seamlessly blending functionality with aesthetic value, creating spaces that enhance rather than dominate the cityscape. These

16 Antonio Petrov, "Superordinary: On the Problematique of the Ordinary," *Mass Context*, no. 23 (2014): 106-23.

landscapes are designed to foster social interaction, accommodating a diverse range of users and encouraging shared ownership of public spaces. Through subtle yet impactful design elements, such as gentle shifts in topography, intuitive wayfinding, and adaptable features, these projects prioritize flexibility and quiet functionality. Rooted in local identity, they allow the rhythms of daily life and the cultural context to shape the design, ensuring the spaces resonate with the community and integrate organically into the fabric of the city.

The result of this new landscape reflects an intricate relationship between the competition brief, the jury's criteria, and the selected winning proposal. Each component shapes and reinforces the other, establishing a cohesive vision that balances functionality with aesthetic subtlety. The brief sets the tone, the jury interprets it and, finally, the winning proposal embodies these values, translating the jury's expectations and the brief's goals into a refined design that complements the cityscape without overpowering it. Through this interconnected process, the superordinary landscape emerges—a design philosophy where utility, community engagement, and respect for place harmoniously coexist.

Competition brief

The competition briefs play a critical role in shaping the direction of architectural and urban design competitions. Initially, these briefs were relatively straightforward, primarily focused on listing functional requirements with little elaboration or vision. However, from 2017 onward, they have become more complex in their efforts to convey an architectural message. In some cases, there has been a notable divergence between the intentions stated in the briefs and the considerations of the jury. In two instances where the competition brief explicitly requested avant-garde or iconic designs, the jury ultimately rejected this direction, favoring more understated approaches instead. This highlights the interpretive latitude exercised by juries and suggests an evolving preference within the field for understated, contextually integrated solutions, even when the brief indicates a bolder architectural ambition.

For instance, the 2017 competition for Cluj's Firefighters' Tower aimed to revitalize the monument by reintegrating it into the tourist circuit and transforming it into a cultural venue. The brief encouraged innovative designs that would reflect the collective energy of Cluj's citizens, blending contemporary architecture with respect for the site's historical value. It was one of the first briefs that stated strongly:

"The tower is intended to be built as a visionary structure, aligning the city's aspirations towards the future. (...) The entire new segment should symbolize architectural avant-garde while remaining grounded to be feasible for implementation."¹⁷

However, the jury's rationale for selecting the winning design diverged from the brief's avant-garde emphasis, instead appreciating the proposal's subtlety and modern interpretation of the tower's silhouette.¹⁸ This restrained approach reflects an overall trend among submissions towards minimalism, with most entries favoring discreet, understated designs rather than bold architectural statements. (Fig. 5)

The competition for the Science Campus represented a milestone in the city's pursuit of becoming a regional hub for technology, research and development, creative industries, culture, and art. This time, the brief specifically invited competitors to present new interpretations of "iconic architecture" that transcend branding images and directly enhance the quality of life for all city residents. Despite this, the outcome is notably rational and straightforward. Even with broad international participation, including esteemed architectural firms, the jury favored a balanced

¹⁷ Dan Clinci, Florin V. Lazăr, *Competition brief Firemen's Tower*, <https://oar.archi/concursuri/oar/turnul-pompierilor-cluj-napoca/>, accessed March 1, 2024.

¹⁸ Ligia Subțirica et al., *Jury report Solutions Competition: The Tower of the Three Ages - Revitalization of the Firemen's Tower in Cluj-Napoca*, https://oar.archi/wpcontent/uploads/2021/03/2_proces_verbal_jurizare_concurs_pdf_1486396489.pdf, accessed March 1, 2024.



Fig. 5: Image from the winning project for Firefighters' Tower competition, author Vlad Sebastian Rusu Birou individual arhitectură (left), image from the winning project for Science Campus competition, author S.C. KXL Studio S.R.L. (right)

proposal over a bolder alternative. The winning project showcases a highly rational design, featuring a strategic layout, seamless transitions, and integration with existing structures. Rooted in classical principles, it offers a neutral, discreet, and understated architectural approach that challenges traditional expectations of iconicity, inviting viewers to reconsider whether subtlety and integration could also represent a form of lasting significance.

Jury and selection process

Overall, recent competitions in Cluj reflect a common vision among juries, emphasizing modesty, rationality, and sustainability over extravagance. This approach aligns with the concept of superordinary, which seeks to re-evaluate and elevate the ordinary through thoughtful and restrained design interventions. By prioritizing context, functionality, and community needs, these projects contribute to creating meaningful and sustainable urban environments that resonate with both residents and visitors.

The jury typically consists of architects, urban planners, and landscape experts, with additional specialists included only in exceptional cases. An analysis of the jury reports reveals a consistent emphasis on simplicity as a central criterion for evaluating competition entries. The term "simple" repeatedly appears in many reports, suggesting a preference for clearly designed, functional, and discreetly elegant solutions, aligning with an architectural ethos that values restraint and coherence.

To gain a clearer understanding, three examples serve as representative cases. The winning proposal for the New Integrated Transplant Center features a relatively neutral architectural expression, allowing it to seamlessly coexist with the traditional urban fabric, promoting accessible and transparent architecture, and demonstrating restraint and moderation at the same time.¹⁹ The same notes in the jury discourse are relevant to the project for the Bălcescu High School, stating that the project should be characterized by modest, consistent, and restrained rationality, adhering to a certain spirit of the place, a solution that excels through suitability, not extravagance. The balance of proportions and the simplicity of the architectural form of the winning proposal are praised along with the dialog between old and new.²⁰ (Fig. 6)

19 Oana Gavrilu et al., *Jury report 2020 Comprehensive Transplant Centre, Cluj-Napoca* <https://oar.archi/concursuri/oar/centrul-integrat-de-transplant-cluj-napoca/>, accessed March 1, 2024.

20 Horia Marinescu et al., *Jury report Bălcescu Highschool*, <https://oar.archi/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/BALCESCU-RAPORT-JURIU-ROMANA.pdf>, accessed March 1, 2024.



Fig. 6: Image from the winning project for the New Integrated Transplant Centre competition, Pinearq S.L.P., S.C. Dico & Tigănaş birou de proiectare S.R.L (above), image from the winning project for Bălcescu High School competition, author S.C. SQM Arhitectură S.R.L., S.C. Filip S Concept S.R.L. and S.C. Hab Pro Creativ S.R.L. (below)

In the case of the Blaga Highschool, the jury made an even clearer statement:

„[I]n the given context, we consider that a balanced solution, one that respects but also positively responds to what already exists, is more important than a grand gesture. We encourage timeless architecture, easy to maintain and efficient, with the ability to adapt over time.”²¹

The winning proposals

By examining the principles guiding the winning proposals, we gain insight into the creative processes shaping the city's new landscape. Although these projects address different contexts and functions, many of the winning solutions share similar values. The design philosophies embedded in each winning project, although having distinct conceptual approaches, contribute to a cohesive yet unique urban character. Some of the public spaces and green area projects are very explicit in this superordinary approach.

²¹ Rasmus Kruse Jensen. et al., *Jury report Science Campus*, <https://oar.archi/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/SCIENCE-CENTER-RAPORT-JURIU-ROMANA.pdf>, accessed March 1, 2024.

In 2018, an important project for the city center was the result of the competition for Kogălniceanu Street, intended to complete, after 13 years, the central area, including Unirii Square and Eroilor Street. In the local urban landscape, Kogălniceanu Street stands out as a key site for understanding the city's architectural heritage. With its blend of architectural styles, it reflects the city's rich cultural and ethnic diversity—it symbolizes Cluj's multicultural essence. The aim of the competition was to craft a contemporary architectural and urban solution, subtle and reverent towards the existing heritage, as to transform the central street network into a high-quality, secure, comfortable, and flexible public space.²² The winning project tackles all significant targets of the competition with minimal interventions. Its approach diverges from the high-impact urban interventions commonly used (and expected) by aiming to harmonize with the site's character rather than transforming it. The jury praised this “minimal intervention” approach, highlighting the way the project addressed the area's significant issues – infrastructure upgrades, pedestrian accessibility, and landscape integration – through restrained, thoughtful design choices. The author emphasized this in an interview:

“What does our proposal bring new? The fact that we bring nothing. That's the idea. To come and not be seen. Why? Because the intrinsic values of the street and this urban environment are already inscribed, they are there, we don't need to add new values. We are gently trying to adapt to the spatial character, the atmosphere, and the historical features of a segment in such a way that we guide the use first and then the character—introducing new paving, addressing the technical issues that the area demands, handling the basic landscaping elements, and, from a dendrological perspective, either restoring or, on the contrary, highlighting certain aspects.”²³

The proposal represents a refined vision for a public space that is not only physically unobtrusive but also intellectually and culturally sensitive, fostering a renewed appreciation of the urban landscape as it is. By setting this precedent, the project contributes a significant example of how urban competitions can encourage approaches that honor and reveal the historical and cultural depth of a place.

In 2019, Cluj Municipality hosted a competition aimed at revitalizing the urban ensemble of “Cetățuia Hill” (Fortress Hill), a highly significant, iconic place in the city center. The goal was to transform the entire area into a premier public space that would be fully utilized by both citizens and visitors, all while preserving the natural landscape of the southern slope and the inherent rocky and forested ambience of the headland.²⁴ The winning project, despite carrying the motto “Icon unveiled,” was more subtle. The redesign strategy aimed to reveal all facets of the hill in their full complexity and interconnectedness. This project's holistic approach addresses the issue from the ground up: by working with nature rather than against it.²⁵ The project establishes a framework that facilitates the development of realistic usage scenarios with minimal intervention and infrastructure. The selection of plants is tailored to the site, utilizing species that are appropriate for this environment, requiring low maintenance, and highlighting key focal points of the ensemble. The design of the pathways incorporates natural materials, with minimal balustrades installed only in hazardous areas.²⁶ (Fig. 7)

22 Maria Cristina Găvozdea, *Competition brief Design Competition Urban Development Kogălniceanu*, <https://oar.archi/concursuri/oar/amenajare-urbana-kogalniceanu-cluj-napoca/>, accessed March 1, 2024.

23 Luminița Silea, “Ce spune arhitectul câștigător și ce i-a recomandat juriul să aibă în vedere când va proiecta noua față a celei mai frumoase zone din centrul Clujului,” *Actual de Cluj*, September 18, 2018, <https://actualdecluj.ro/ce-spune-arhitectul-castigator-si-ce-i-a-recomandat-juriul-sa-aiba-in-vedere-cand-va-proiecta-noua-fata-a-celei-mai-frumoase-zone-din-centrul-clujului/>

24 Dan Clinci, Mihai Racu, *Competition brief Cetățuia Hill*, <https://oar.archi/concursuri/oar/amenajarea-ansamblului-urban-cetatuia-cluj-napoca/>, accessed March 1, 2024.

25 Atelier Mass, Ana Horhat, Metapolis Architects BVBA, *Winning project text for Cetățuia Hill*, <https://oar.archi/concursuri/oar/amenajarea-ansamblului-urban-cetatuia-cluj-napoca/galerie-proiecte/59-ch2020-metapolis-architects-bvba-atelier-mass-ana-horhat/>, accessed March 1, 2024.

26 Miriam Garcia Garcia et al., *Jury report Cetățuia Hill*, https://oar.archi/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/raport_juriu_cetatuia_en_pdf_1561988940.pdf, accessed March 1, 2024.



Fig. 7: Image from the winning project for Cetățuia Hill competition, author Metapolis architects BVBA, Atelier Mass, Ana Horhat (above), image from the winning project for East Park competition, author Metapolis architects, Studio Ana Horhat, Atelier Mass (below)



Similar principles are applied in the winning project of East Park competition. The project is designed with minimal means – topography, water, vegetation, and pathways – yet it yields an impressive richness and diversity of atmospheres, remaining open to evolution over time and accommodation to future needs. The project proposes a non-invasive model to help regenerate the landscape, creating a seamless transition from a protected wetland area to a serene park featuring extensive open spaces. The time component plays an important role in the proposal, by mapping the evolution of various habitats over time. The project anticipates the next phase, allowing nature to reclaim the site further by enhancing biodiversity or creating new areas for water system expansion. The built program is not dispersed throughout the entire park but is concentrated in the southern corner, where all constructions have been concentrated into a single building, thus reserving most of the open space for spontaneous events and temporary use—individual or collective.

Conclusion

In recent years, architectural competitions in Cluj-Napoca have brought forward projects with similar characteristics. This collective decision-making process has contributed to a unified vision of the city, characterized by minimal and discreet interventions. These projects were integrated into their respective contexts, expressing timeless values and fostering a sense of continuity with the urban landscape. Winning proposals reflect a balance between historical preservation, contemporary needs, and sustainable principles, contributing to the ongoing evolution of the city's cultural landscape.

The concept of the superordinary emerges not as an idealized framework but as a pragmatic approach to integrating modesty and rationality. It reflects both the successes and limitations of these architectural competitions, acting as a lens through which to examine the evolving dynamics of urbanism in the city. These limitations are partly influenced by the size and character of the city, which affect the scope and complexity of projects that can realistically be undertaken. Juries may have intentionally favored simpler designs, to ensure their feasibility within the context of a city striving to overcome the perception of being a “small and marginal city in Europe,” as noted by Vais.²⁷

Superordinary projects offer a balance of practical functionality and a refined visual presence that resonates with everyday users. Rather than being designed to visually dominate the cityscape, these spaces are crafted to function seamlessly with their surroundings.

This allows users to discover the beauty of the space through personal experiences and interactions. In Cluj-Napoca, this approach is evident in projects like pedestrian-friendly streetscapes and public parks that integrate natural materials, understated designs, and soft landscaping, thus creating useful and calming spaces.

At the heart of superordinary design lies the idea of accessibility and inclusivity. These projects are designed to accommodate diverse groups of people, fostering social interaction and creating a sense of shared ownership over public space. By assigning priority to spaces such as communal seating, open plazas, and pedestrian pathways, superordinary projects encourage a more vibrant public life. Consequently, in these competitions, the spaces have not been strictly specialized as transit routes or areas for relaxation but also as venues for events, art installations, and informal gatherings that cater to a wide range of ages and backgrounds.

Superordinary spaces often incorporate design elements that are subtle yet profoundly impactful. Thoughtfully selected lighting, greenery, and textures create an atmosphere that caters to both visual and tactile senses, enhancing the user experience in ways that feel natural and intuitive. These spaces do not depend on grand gestures or imposing structures to convey a message.

²⁷ Dana Vais, *Ficțiunile arhitecturii* (Bucharest: Paideia, 2006), 151.

Instead, they employ gentle shifts in landscape, intentional wayfinding, and modular features that can be adapted for various uses. This approach ensures that the space remains relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of the community.

Finally, the concept of the superordinary emerges as a compelling framework for re-examining contemporary architectural and urban culture. It challenges the idea that only extraordinary features warrant attention in design discourse, advocating for urban design that reflects the specific cultural and social identity of its environment. In Cluj-Napoca, projects that embody the superordinary concept often rely on local materials, natural landscapes, and culturally significant local forms. This connection to place not only makes the spaces functional but also deeply personal to the people who inhabit them. By allowing the local context and daily rhythms of the city to shape the design, these projects create spaces that are consistently engaging, contributing to a richer cultural landscape.

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