

From Factory to Design Framework: An Instrument Across Scales for the Reinvention of the Rulmentul Platform

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The following article explores the conditions and premises that formed the bases of the construction of the design brief for the International Design Competition centered on the Rulmentul industrial platform in Braşov.¹ The commentary (as well as the design brief) argues in favor of a strategic urban regeneration process that not only places the industrial past at its core, but also connects the different scales and moments of development of the industrial platform with the city it used to complement.²

For this, the long-term regeneration strategy that represented the comprehensive scope of the competition at the urban level was balanced by a task that could be swiftly implemented — the invention of a public facility that would immediately reveal the beauty of this industrial site to the wider public. (Fig. 1) To correlate these two different objectives representing opposite scales and durations of implementation (expanded and concentrated, long and short-term), the brief also called for the design of an infrastructural object with an intermediate scale — an industrial landscape *cum* public space that ensured consistent and intensive public access by residents regarded (and invested with the potential to act) as significant agents of change.

In this sense, we hope to draw out several insights of this process that may participate in a wider discussion on urban planning and architectural instruments able to tackle industrial heritage.

The Industrial Development of Braşov. The Emergence of I.A.R. and Rulmentul

Located in the geographical center of the country, Braşov is one of Romania's largest and vibrant contemporary cities, as well as a city with a rich history, testifying to centuries of cultural exchanges. While Braşov's more distant past is still visible in its fortified medieval core, more recent periods have also left their respective marks on the city's development. During the 20th century and especially under socialist planning the city underwent rapid industrialization, as it was strategically developed to serve both regional and national economic goals, thus becoming one of Romania's most important centers of heavy industry.³ Large-scale factories were established on its periphery, most notably to the north of the city where the joint Tractorul-Rulmentul districts emerged as one of the largest urban industrial enterprises in the country.

1 The competition was publicly launched on June 3rd, 2024, with the results of the jury procedure being publicly announced on October 15th, 2024.

2 The authors of the article are at the same time responsible for the competition brief.

3 Most of the historical data regarding Rulmentul Industrial Site come from the historical study of its development carried out by the National Institute of Heritage: Ştefan Bălici, Irina Iamandescu, coord., *Substantiation study for the identification of the cultural resource and the (re)conversion potential of the Rulmentul industrial platform in the city of Braşov, from the perspective of the historical evolution of the area and its significance for the technical and industrial heritage of the city, with a view to establishing the intervention recommendations proposed in the rehabilitation process* (National Institute of Heritage, Bucharest, 2021), 19-20.



Fig. 1. One of the larger production halls of Rulmentul showcasing the characteristic industrial beauty

Over the last twenty years, the more central area of this former industrial platform (Tractorul) was redeveloped through a process dubbed “urban regeneration.”⁴ The remaining part of this large industrial site yet to be transformed is the former Rulmentul industrial platform.

Called Rulmentul, owing to its production of bearings destined for the entire industrial market of communist Romania, the industrial history of the site goes back in time even further, in the interwar period. Formerly an airfield for the Romanian Aeronautical Industry, the site underwent several stages of industrial development throughout the 20th century.⁵ Nowadays considered to be in its sixth stage of development — one that started with the decrease of production, continued through sharp economic decline and ultimately bankruptcy — the Rulmentul industrial platform ceased activity in 2007. After this date, with the dissolution of the company, a part of its grounds ended up in private ownership, while two-thirds of the original 52ha are still owned by either the state or the city council. Following a deal between the latter two, Rulmentul became the focus of an international design competition endeavoring to imagine its future, rather than being content with its glorious industrial past.

The competition sought to capitalize on the area’s rich industrial past, to take advantage of a visionary public authority that is also an important stakeholder, and to make good use of a wave of public understanding based on the still-vivid presence of the former industrial platform in the memories of many citizens. These few conditions — political backing, public ownership, and popular support — defined the rare opportunity of the case as well as the bright prospects of the competition.

Organized by the Romanian Order of Architects, the competition was officially entitled “Urban Regeneration of Rulmentul Braşov Industrial Site.” The varied and substantial international entries it elicited were evaluated by a diverse and highly qualified jury composed of leading

4 While some of the visible interwar buildings were in fact adapted to new uses, most of the former industrial spaces were in fact torn down and built anew as either shopping or residential areas.

5 Noteworthy among these are the first stage (1935-1941), when the first extant buildings were erected for the 1st Bombardment Flotilla Airbase and the fourth (1970-1977), when the larger part of the existing structures, landscaping, road and rail infrastructure were built.



Fig. 2. Winning proposal of the Rulmentul industrial platform competition, project no. 121 – JB Arhitectura, ADN Birou de Arhitectură, Beros Abdul Arhitecți Asociați, development plan and required axonometric representations of key areas

professionals in architecture, landscape architecture, and urban planning, alongside representatives of the contracting authority.⁶ The competition drew 32 design teams,⁷ a robust participation, reflecting both the national relevance and the international resonance of the site's transformation. The awarding structure recognized three prizes and three mentions. The first prize consisted of the commission for the subsequent design phases, underscoring the competition's role as a professional procurement tool, according to Romanian law. The second and third prizes were acknowledged as high-quality alternative visions that stimulate innovation in urban regeneration practices.⁸ (Fig. 2)

6 Full members included Iris Dupper and Dominika Tihanyi (landscape architects), Oana Țiganea and Christoph Jantos (architects), Marcello Modica (urbanist), Rudolf Gräf (architect/urban planner), and Dragoș Oprea, representing the contracting authority. Alternate members were Ilinca Păun Constantinescu (architect) and Raluca Baco (authority representative).

7 Of the 32 teams, 26 originated from Romania including teams from Brașov, Bucharest, Cluj, Sibiu, Timișoara, and Constanța, while 6 were international associations representing Germany, France, Denmark, and Croatia.

8 Project no. 121 – 1st Prize (JB Arhitectura, ADN Birou de Arhitectură, Beros Abdul Arhitecți Asociați), Project no. 116 – 2nd Prize (Norma Arhitectură și Urbanism SRL, Boca Ștefania Liliana Bia, Recreativ Arhitectura Peisageră SRL), Project no. 110 – 3rd Prize (SC Planwerk Arhitectură și Urbanism SRL). In

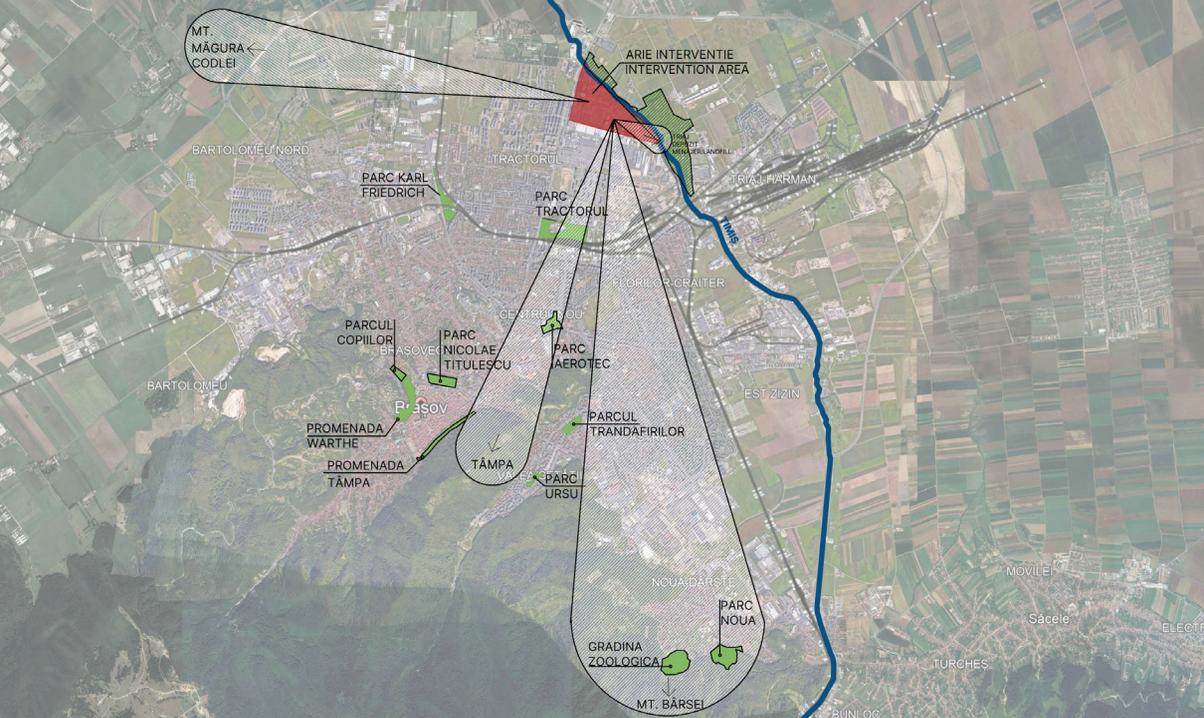


Fig. 3. Satellite image showing the position of the Rulmentul industrial platform within the city of Braşov, as well as its scale; the diagram emphasizes relations to the main natural features in the surrounding area and the main parks of the city

A Framework Across Scales

Alongside the intrinsic quality of the industrial site, a second, external condition played an important role in the structuring of the competition brief. Given Rulmentul's particular location within the city and the wider Braşov region, the brief was framed around this dual vocation of the site — both metropolitan and local: metropolitan, by virtue of its adjacency to the ring road, with the potential to accommodate functions of regional significance such as business centers, conference venues, and exhibition spaces; local, in relation to the site's immediate neighborhood in the northern area of the city, an area that has undergone intensive, mono-functional development. Home to approximately 30,000 residents, this district remains underserved in terms of public amenities such as parks, schools, kindergartens, and sports facilities. (Fig. 3)

Alongside these spatial conditions, a temporal condition also had to be considered: rather than relying on the prospect of an overnight miracle, any transformation of the Rulmentul platform should anticipate a long term, gradual evolution. The sheer scale of the challenge precluded the envisioning of a meaningful transformation within a short time horizon.

These considerations have therefore structured the approach to the brief across three interrelated levels — the strategic, the urban, and the architectural — collectively ensuring responsible heritage development, inclusive public access, and long-term vitality of the Rulmentul site. (Fig. 4)

The first objective of the competition required the formulation of a comprehensive urban regeneration vision for the entire Rulmentul industrial site, conceived as a strategic framework for long-term metropolitan development. Proposals had to ensure the site integrity through coherent, staged planning rather than fragmented private interventions. Competitors were asked to valorize the site's industrial heritage, while establishing strong physical and functional

addition, the jury awarded three mentions highlighting additional proposals of notable quality and conceptual strength to Project no. 100 (Atelier MASS + New Environments + Studio de Peisaj Ana Horhat + BLU. works), Project no. 119 (Studio 82 SRL), and Project no. 130 (Atelier Olimpia Onci SRL).



Fig. 4. Connections with nearby environment elements and potential for further development; the competition was concentrated on three areas, with corresponding objects and different scales—the masterplan vision for the development of the entire industrial site (a), the design of a green public space (b), and Hangar 6 Complex rehabilitation (c); the diagram also highlights the potential to grow by extending to Industrial landfill Timiș-Triaj (d1), Household landfill Timiș-Triaj (d2) and along the Timiș river (d3)

connections with surrounding neighborhoods, transport networks, and ecological assets. Their vision should be able to operate across different scales, addressing unmet community needs while accommodating city-wide functions. Above all, this vision should balance economic viability with sustainable, integrative urban development.

Tackling the urban scale of the platform, the second objective aimed to design “a (new) cultural product that sits at the intersection between nature, industrial ruin and the contemporary city.”⁹ The type of space to be designed was deliberately imprecise, allowing for the description of its qualities to acquire active roles in shaping how it would be designed, how it would be used

9 Emil Burbea-Milescu, Laura Covaci and Radu Tudor Ponta, “Urban Regeneration of Rulmentul Brașov Industrial Site,” *Design Competition Annex 1 – Competition Brief*, 34, inspired by Peter Latz’ contention (on Duisburg Nord) that “It is the fantastic landscape that will follow the industrial age that we have to address in a new and careful way.” For context see Udo Weilacher, *Syntax of Landscape: The Landscape Architecture of Peter Latz and Partners* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008), 114.

and how it would be considered. It was to be large, accessible and open, with minimal new construction and limited programming, encouraging spontaneous, informal, and creative forms of use. It would be versatile and diverse, sustaining curiosity and engagement.

Lastly, at the scale of a detailed architectural intervention, the transformation of the Hangar 6 / C15 complex (including its successive extensions) into a cultural center dedicated to social and cultural activities was supported by three key arguments aligned with the design brief. From an urban perspective (a), the Hangar 6 complex sat at the terminus of the original compositional axis of the most valued stage of development in the history of Rulmentul. Its integration into public use from the earliest stage of regeneration promised to activate interest deep within the industrial platform, while also opening possibilities of continuity with the surrounding green spaces.

From an architectural perspective (b), Hangar 6 is a representative interwar structure whose successive expansions document the industrial transformations of the site in a multitude of stages; careful rehabilitation should have turned it into a benchmark of Romanian industrial heritage conversion. Finally, from a functional perspective (c), the cultural center addressed urgent neighborhood needs for educational, recreational, and cultural facilities, offering versatile and adaptable spaces to encourage sustained and intensive public use.

Conflicting Logics of Urban Transformation

Even before any arrangement for the competition was set in motion, two incongruous documents anticipated the challenges ahead. The first was an evaluation of the potential of the area from the perspective of the real estate market of Braşov. It generated conclusions that were mainly informed by a commercial perspective, considering development only through the lens of the profitability of real estate development.¹⁰

The second was a study of Rulmentul's cultural value, aimed at assessing the site's industrial heritage as one of the most important resources for the redevelopment of the entire area.¹¹ This "historical study" identified significant cultural resources associated with many of the buildings, landscape features, infrastructure, and networks on the site and explicitly recommended development strategies tailored to these nuances. Moreover, it called for interventions grounded in the premise of preserving and adapting a substantial part of the existing fabric.

In order to tackle this incongruity and address the latent clash, several actions announced a competition driven by the idea of adaptive reuse of industrial heritage (rather than "urban regeneration," in name only). These actions were purposefully carried out even before the actual launching of the competition and were targeted both towards the professional community, as well as to the residents of the city of Braşov. The main aspects of this preparatory work involved the extensive documentation of the area, a lengthy process of strategic and technical negotiations, numerous instances of public consultations with local political and economic actors, with the local NGOs, as well as with local professionals in the field of architecture and urban planning — all ultimately leading to drafting the competition design brief.

To effectively communicate the stakes of the competition, important efforts were undertaken to gradually familiarize the wider public with the notion of industrial heritage and its adaptive reuse, ensuring that the topic was well explained and thoughtfully discussed. These actions served not only to inform but also to encourage a deeper understanding and engage-

10 Dean Cira, coord. "Livrabilul 3.1. Strategia de management a activelor. Braşov" [Deliverable 3.1. Management strategy of assets. Braşov] (World Bank, 2019). Prepared by a larger international team, this study was conducted under the Agreement on Technical Assistance Services for the Braşov Urban Development Program, signed between the Municipality of Braşov and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development on April 12, 2018.

11 Bâlici, Iamandescu, *Substantiation study*.



Fig. 5. Plants taking over the industrial ruin

ment within the community; they were also targeted for participants that had either worked or had close family members that had worked on the Rulmentul platform in its heyday.¹²

In these discussions, particular attention was given to advocating for the recognition of Rulmentul's unique appeal stemming from the intricate interplay between the natural elements that have reclaimed parts of the industrial ruin, and the built environment itself. This blending of nature and industry was consistently highlighted as a defining characteristic, warranting special consideration throughout discussions and public presentations. (Fig. 5)

The Deadlock

After the official results of the competition were announced, despite the international interest that the competition elicited, the diverse and highly qualified jury, despite the efforts of the 32 design teams that participated, and the qualities of the winning proposal, the effects of the entire process were grounded to a halt. As the conclusive steps of the competition coincided with the electoral turnover of mayors following elections, a parallel political agenda emerged. Translated into a political discourse laced with the occasional populist undertone, the main issues of the adaptive reuse of Rulmentul were altered. The appreciation of industrial heritage became a "way to slow down progress." The idea of reusing the existing built fabric was buried and banned from official discourses; nothing was mentioned anymore of the technical and economic lifespan of several of its larger, important structures. The competition itself was deemed a "waste of public resources" and a "way of diverting attention from the economic potential of the site."

The newly elected political body favors a rapid redevelopment of the area in the face of a public remains largely indifferent and refrains from exercising any real political agency. While the fate

¹² As such these actions were targeted at retrieving the identity and activating the special importance that Rulmentul may hold for the community who's past was inextricably tied to its history. This brings forth a heritage issue that goes beyond economic (structural and/or aesthetic) motivations that would lead to the reuse of various structures and leads instead to the obligation to carefully assess the values of the place on a local level. For more on the values at stake, see Neil Cossons, "Why preserve the industrial heritage?" in *Industrial Heritage Re-tooled. The TICCIH guide to Industrial Heritage Conservation*, ed. James Douet (London: Routledge, 2012), 20.

of the “proper” development of the industrial platform is played out in the arena of political debate, at Rulmentul the buildings are steadily dismantled according to the reuse or resale value of iron, copper, and timber, combined with the practical feasibility and speed of extraction. This results in the systematic and ongoing destruction of the industrial platform’s built heritage. And while this human-induced degradation of the physical body of the industrial platform speaks volumes of the fragile balance that holds these steel and concrete structures together, it is only the outward expression of the gradual disappearance of the memory of Rulmentul as one of the most important working *engines* of the city: as the closure of the former production units recedes into the past, so fade the emotional links of Rulmentul’s former employees to the site.

Nearly one year after the conclusion of the international competition, the future of Rulmentul remains undecided, as evidence of its past — physical remnants, as well as eyewitnesses — are slowly fading away. In the absence of a dramatic turnover, an endeavor that had set out to be a textbook example of adaptive reuse of industrial heritage would remain a conceptual exercise, without moving from design intent to effective implementation. In the meantime, one may hope that the entire exercise would provide a design framework for better understanding or even tackling related situations.

In this sense, from a methodological perspective, the approach of the design brief sought to balance the site’s historical determination with its contemporary vocation, by carefully matching spatial conditions and temporal constraints with the different scales where the former industrial platform can claim a present-day programmatic relevance. By arguing for a simultaneous intervention at strategic, urban, and architectural levels, the design brief established a framework that guided long-term transformation while enabling recurrent, meaningful activation. The emphasis on phased development, flexible use, and the valorization of existing structures underscores a design methodology that prioritizes adaptability, continuity, and public relevance over fixed outcomes. As such, the brief calls for architectural design that can operate as an open-ended process — one that mediates between metropolitan ambitions and local needs, heritage preservation and contemporary use, immediate activation and long-term urban regeneration.

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