

The Productive Role of Margins. Architectural Discourse in the Late 1960s Romania

Dana Vais

Professor, PhD, Technical University of Cluj
danavais@arch.utcluj.ro

KEYWORDS: margins; Romania; 1960s; Alifanti; Porumbescu; communist architecture

Introduction

This paper has two aims. Firstly, it investigates the notion of margins and its relevance to architectural discourse. Secondly, it casts a new perspective on the architecture of the late 1960s Romania, by using the notion of *margins*. 'Margins' could be considered as both the instrument and the object of analysis. The notion is versatile; some of its several understandings along the last half century will be shortly reviewed in the first part of the paper.

The main claim of the paper is that the notion of *margin* can provide new insights into the Romanian architectural discourse of the late 1960s. 'Discourse' is understood as including both the textual reflections on architecture and the rhetorical dimensions of architecture itself. The context we address here – which will be introduced in the second part of the paper – is that of an architectural discursive field strongly contaminated by the political discourse. However, what is truly of interest is not the political intrusion as such – which is quite obvious – but rather the space of ambiguity, the space of movement that the political power generated, or simply left aside, for architectural debates to occur. This lateral 'space' of free movement is one sense in which the notion of margins is relevant in this context. In fact, the architectural discourse during the late 1960s Romania developed quite freely within these margins of the discourse of the political power. This would not last long. From the early 1970s on, these margins of movement would tighten up and, eventually, the genuine architectural debates would be completely engulfed by the discourse of the political power.

In times of ideological rhetoric, the real meaning of a discourse could be read only in its margins. There was a certain distance between discourses and reality; one must read them carefully. But if the discourse of architects was politically controlled, this does not mean that it was also irrelevant – quite the contrary. Anthropologist Katherine Verdery remarks that "struggles in the realm of discourse" gained even "special significance" in communist societies¹ and that "discourse ha[d] a disproportionately *productive role*."² In Romania particularly, Verdery holds, a stronger "party control made the discursive field more unified than most."³

The late 1960s are particularly interesting because this was the moment when architects' discourse made an important turn: from an obsession with *scientifcity* to a programmatic regionalist culture based on cultural *specificity*.⁴ It was one of the first signs of post-modernity in Romanian architecture and it came along with a growing interest in margins – mainly in the sense of overt opposition to modernist architectural mainstream. It was both a genuinely professional shift, sincerely and freely

1 Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 305.

2 Ibid., 91 (my italics).

3 Ibid., 11.

4 I developed this issue in Dana Vais, „'Social Efficiency' and 'Humanistic Specificity': A Double Discourse in Romanian Architecture in the 1960s,” in the conference volume *East West Central 01. Re-humanizing Architecture: New Forms of Community, 1950-1970* (May 16-17, 2014, ETH Zürich), forthcoming at Birkhäuser.

pursued by architects, and a politically sanctioned one. This discursive ambiguity in the late 1960s Romania is the main issue to be addressed in the second part of the paper.

The third and the fourth parts will focus on the two most important architects in this context: Nicolae Porumbescu and Mircea Alifanti. They both made the shift from a discourse of scientificity to one of specificity around the mid 1960s. They both made their best architecture by ambiguously using a quasi-independent position inside a totally controlled architectural system – although in different ways, as we shall see. In the fifth part, the paper will comparatively analyze them. Eventually, these two different instances give an insight into how creative architectural discourses could be developed in the margins of the communist power discourse and how the marginal distance from the political power could render a critical potential to discourses that were *not* ones of opposition.

Margins

The notion of *margins* took several theoretical meanings during the last half-century. The first and most enduring one was that of *marginality*: the condition of those who are *not* in positions of power. This is how the notion is often understood even today. This post-modern perspective brought margins to the centre of theoretical debate. It also put theoretical discourses in a central position – as ‘cultural theory’. However, marginality had an inherent negativity: it designated the space of powerlessness and resentment, the cultural or social state of those abandoned outside the centre of power or mainstream. The disjunctive notion of the margin as the space of radical opposition left other softer possibilities of the concept unexplored.

A positive interpretation was brought about already in the early 1970s, by poststructuralist theory – namely Jacques Derrida’s notion of the margin as an “inexhaustible reserve.”⁵ The margin became an *edge*, a space of close difference and complicity, more subtle and complex than the space of radical difference and resistance. The marginal and his/her revanchist obstinacy became simply uninteresting. A little later during the 1970s, Gilles Deleuze explicitly denounced the marginals, while pleading for a more benign exploration of margins as a means to self-empowerment: the act of “becoming minor.”⁶ Deleuze has also succeeded in overcoming the linguistic obsession of postmodernism, leaving behind the idealism of cultural interpretations and – according to Manuel DeLanda recently – opening the way to a properly “material” expression in cultural productions;⁷ apparently, this was a step back for the importance of “discourse.”

In a world obsessed with technology, theoretical discourses seemed to be expressly marginalized. One of the definitions of theory was always that of *marginalia* – the writing on the margin of something else to which it is secondary (especially in architecture, where theoretical discourses are usually deemed to lie in the margin of the main act of building). However, in the “after theory” world, “a world dominated by science and commerce” – as Terry Eagleton remarked – the very fact that theory was pushed to the margins also implied a distancing perspective, which made it, paradoxically, more powerfully critical by its very increased irrelevance.⁸ This seems again a case of empowering margins, even if still understood as marginality in the old revanchist sense. But Eagleton’s remark also highlights something of a constant in the evolution of the meaning of the notion: there is an inherent critical potential in the margins, simply because of their distancing from power.

The recent turn to a materialistic approach in the architectural discourse,⁹ which came along with the digital technological revolution, has brought back the scientific perspective – which once

5 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* [1972], trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), xxiii.

6 Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), 55-56, 167-68.

7 Manuel DeLanda, *Deleuze. History and Science* (New York: Atropos Press, 2010), 32-35.

8 Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 83.

9 Neil Leach, „New Materialism,” *Urban Flux*, 1 (2009): 26-29, accessed June 30, 2016. <http://neilleach.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/new-materialism.pdf>.

characterized the 1960s as well. But this also has somehow restored the importance of theoretical discourses, because in science, theory is *not* marginal, quite the contrary. Today, technology allows theoretical ideas to be more productive. In the scientific thought, margins become the space of trial, but also of admissible error, of continual approximation and multiple close adjustments – in other words, margins are the very space of scientific experiment. Science closely follows nature itself, which does not act by “going back to the drawing board”¹⁰ each time it makes a change, but progresses by small advancing mutations tested at the margins.

By analogy with natural sciences, architectural discourses today use the margin in this sense of margin of quest and uncertainty – the inexhaustible reserve of small creative advancements. It is a weaker sense of the margin than that of marginality. But in one specific way, it is far more effective: it does not require the wasting effort of radical opposition in order to produce something new. Nevertheless, if lately the margin of uncertainty seems to prevail over the margin as marginality, one has not discarded the other. In fact, they seem to get along very well together.

In what follows, we apply this multifaceted notion of margins to the specific case of the late 1960s Romanian architecture. We show that its discourse purposefully made use of the notion of margins – be it as marginality, or as the margins of quest and uncertainty. We shall reconsider this particular case of communist architecture from the perspective of this particular notion in order to give new insights into both.

Architectural discourse in the 1960s Romania

The 1960s were a time of openness and relative freedom in communist Romania. Nevertheless, the architectural discourse remained within the margins of the official political ideology of ‘scientific materialism’ and borrowed its themes. Romanian architects might have felt constrained to make references to ‘party directives’ in their written articles – which they frequently did. But the belief in the scientificity of their architecture seemed quite sincere. “Each project has to be a scientific study”¹¹ and “a theory of architecture has to be first of all a scientific theory,”¹² they wrote. This led to the conclusion that “there can be only one true theory”, which discovers truths and objective laws, defining the objective “necessity” that shapes the architectural project.¹³

Theory was an important issue and it was explicitly addressed at the time, albeit in order to stress its insufficiency. Architects complained about a prevailing practitioner perspective, decrying the fact that “theoretical preoccupations often remain at the periphery of other architectural activities.”¹⁴ Scientificity was what should have brought theory back to the centre of architecture. Scientificity remained a credo even after the quasi-opposite notion of *specificity* became mainstream, in the late 1960s.

The term ‘specificity’ has gradually gained importance through the 1960s. The new typified large housing estates, which began to be developed extensively in the early 1960s, were considered too monotonous and undifferentiated. A programmatic search for specificity naturally emerged as an answer to these problems of architectural identity.

The rise of the specificity discourse benefitted – paradoxically – from the policy of the regime to homogenize the industrial and urban development across the country, because this also brought about professional decentralization. Before 1957, more than 90% of all the country’s design capacity was concentrated in Bucharest.¹⁵ In order to bring the design facilities closer to where urbanization

10 Richard Dawkins, *The Greatest Show on Earth. The evidence for Evolution* (New York / London: Free Press, 2009), 331-33.

11 Mircea Lupu, „Cercetarea în arhitectură,” *Arhitectura* 2 (1968): 12.

12 Gheorghe Săsărman, „Cîteva deziderate ale gîndirii teoretice,” *Arhitectura* 2 (1968): 9.

13 Ibid.

14 Stan Bortnowski, „Privire asupra activității teoretice în arhitectură,” *Arhitectura* 2 (1968): 7.

15 Grigore Ionescu, *Arhitectura în România, perioada anilor 1944-1969* (Bucharest: Ed. Academiei RSR, 1969), 61-64 (he relates this data to the year 1952); Alexandru Panaiteanu, *De la Casa Scînteii la Casa*

took place, 16 regional institutes were created in 1957.¹⁶ Another administrative reform in 1968 raised the number of territorial units to 39 counties, each with its own design institute. This would also multiply the opportunities for architecture, as the newly designated county capitals needed representative edifices. Unlike the mass-produced housing, these were one-of-a-kind buildings, programmatically charged with representation – and therefore with the mission of being ‘specific’. They had to be representative not only for the state (which they inherently were), but also for the local region where the state was delegating a new secondary centrality.

In these secondary cities, far from the oppressive decision centre, architects could enjoy a greater creative liberty, which explains why most of the new political-administrative and culture centres built outside Bucharest during the late 1960s displayed a remarkable architectural quality.¹⁷ As institutions prevailed over the individual architect – it was the design institute, in fact, that ‘authored’ the projects – a marginal new design institute was more likely to provide architects with a more permissive environment. Many architects would accept leaving Bucharest on this occasion and relocate into these new regional (and later county) capital cities.

Specificity became the main architectural narrative by the late 1960s. But it was not because of the new importance that the local and the regional gained, face to the unifying effects of the nationally imposed political control, as one might expect; it was rather the other way round. The late 1960s was the moment when the “regional” discourse, born at the margins, would become a “national” discourse. After that, the initially genuine architectural debate would be little by little engulfed in the increasingly nationalistic political discourse.

The ‘specificity’ discourse in architecture escalated, as the communist power encouraged and supported all the various intellectual discourses that served its nationalistic interests. At its best, it produced works like the ones we shall mention below (some of which don’t explicitly refer to the term itself, but embody its idea); at its worst, it would develop folkloric decorations on badly built prefabricated housing facades. By the late 1970s, theorist Mircea Lupu’s influential book on the rebirth of ‘national schools’ was already able to display a convincing number of theatres, administrative buildings, ‘houses of culture’, etc. illustrating the trend. Lupu pleaded for the “specific affirmation of Romanian architecture” and claimed the “prime importance” of architecture in the self-assertion of “the national being.”¹⁸ The “flood of writings on the Nation and its essence,” which Verdery remarked in all major spheres of intellectual production in Romania from the late 1960s on,¹⁹ had a solid counterpart in architecture as well.

Nicolae Porumbescu: strong use of the margins

Architect Nicolae Porumbescu (1919-1999) moved from Bucharest to the provincial town of Suceava in 1965, as the newly assigned technical director of the local regional design institute.²⁰ He made this radical career decision after a “period of frustrations”:²¹ in Bucharest one had “to

Poporului. Patru decenii de arhitectură în București (Bucharest: Simetria, 2012), 34.

16 Gustav Gusti, „Două decenii de sistematizare complexă și construcție socialistă a teritoriului,” *Arhitectura RPR 4* (1964): 30.

17 Panaïtescu, *De la Casa Scânteii*, 152.

18 Mircea Lupu, *Școli naționale în arhitectură* (București: Editura Tehnică, 1977), 129. In the early 1980s, the two main communist architectural historians, Grigore Ionescu and Gheorghe Curinschi, in their comprehensive histories on Romanian architecture, would both recognize the definitive key-word value of ‘specificity’ and place it in the very titles of the chapters that addressed the contemporary period; see Grigore Ionescu, *Arhitectura pe teritoriul României de-a lungul veacurilor* (București: Editura Academiei RSR, 1982), 569; Gheorghe Curinschi Vorona, *Istoria arhitecturii în România* (București: Editura Tehnică, 1982), 309.

19 Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism*, 121-122.

20 Virgiliu Onofrei and Tudor Grădinaru, *Nicolae Porumbescu. O viață în arhitectură* (Iași: Editura Societății Academice Mateiu Botez, 2003), 23.

21 Ibid., 22.

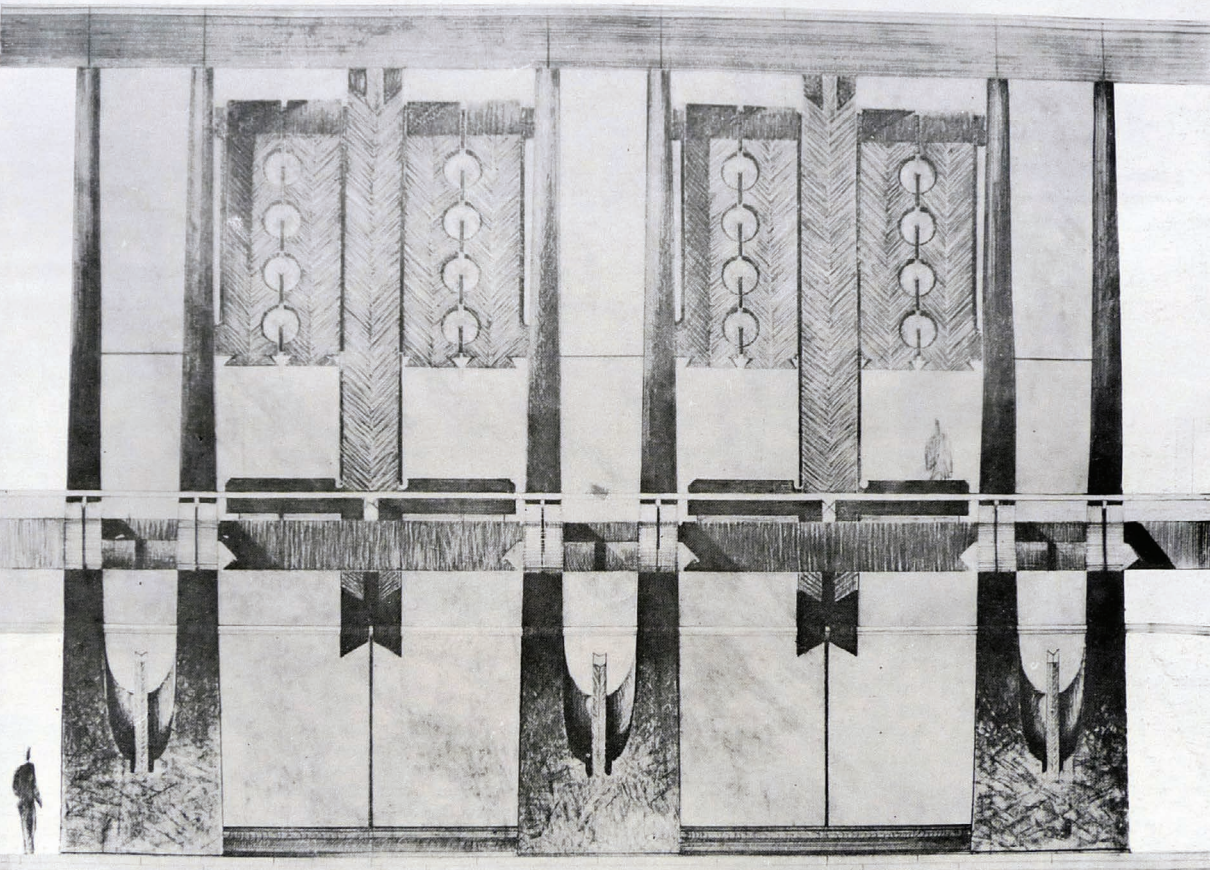


Fig. 1 ,2. (above and opposite page) Nicolae Porumbescu, The House of Culture, Baia Mare, 1967-1969

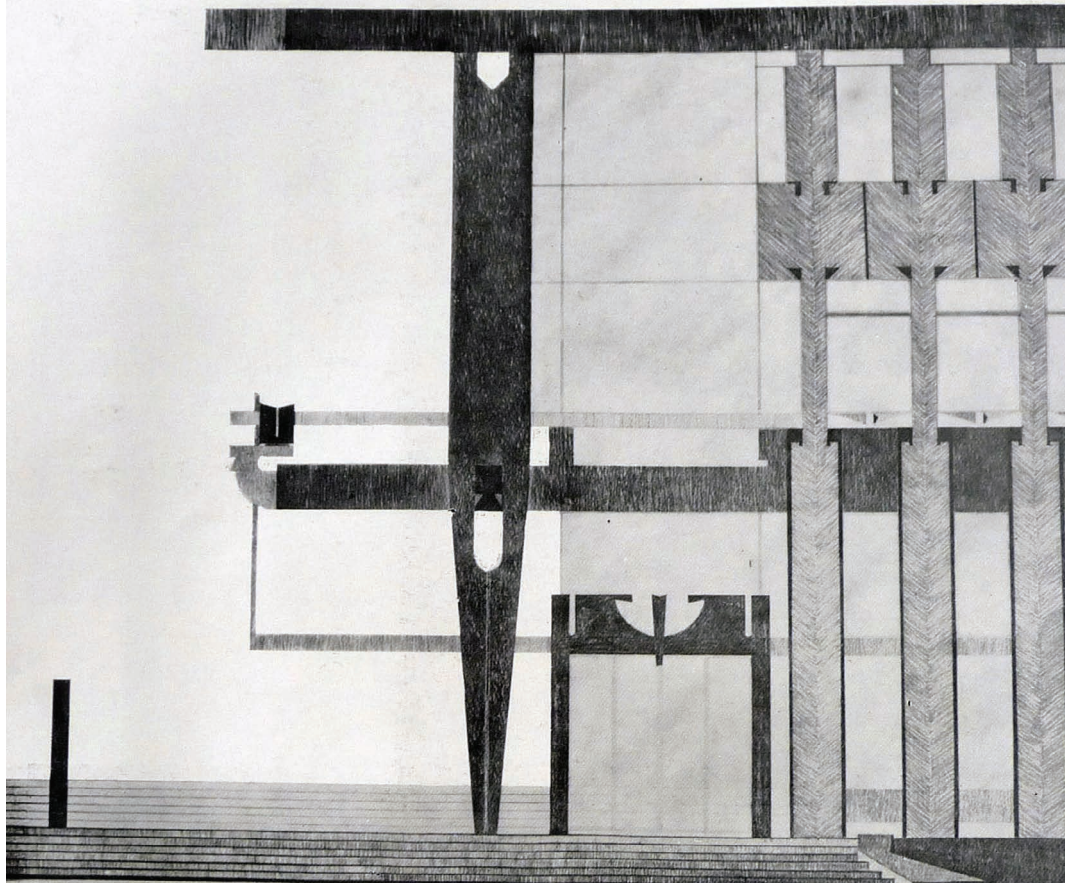
fight for works, to fight for author titles,” he complained by mid 1960s.²² He relocated to “the farthest design institute from the capital,”²³ on a far edge of the country’s map. He refused to see this geographical marginality as a downgrading; in a large and diverse country like Romania – he argued – one cannot speak of “centre and province.”²⁴ He distanced himself from the centre of political control, but he also reached a leading position in the professional system, which he could not have reached otherwise. He used geographical marginality in order to actually gain centrality and power.

This move boosted not only his career, but his creativity as well. While still in Bucharest, Porumbescu had followed the styles of the day in his works – for instance, the socialist-realist type-projects of film-theatres in Bucharest (1953-1954) and Hunedoara (1956-1957), or the modernistic concrete shell structure of the State Circus in Bucharest (1960-1961). Unlike these rather imitative designs, Porumbescu’s first three major works authored with the Suceava Design Institute – the Unions’ Houses of Culture in Suceava (1966-1969) and Baia Mare (1967-1969) (Fig. 1 and 2) and the Political-administrative Centre of Botoşani County in Botoşani (1968-1970) – were original in their expression and opened a new way for Romanian architecture. Moreover, the style he developed was acknowledged as his own personal style, reinstating the idea of the architect as a creative individual – an idea that had been marginalized in the collectivized

22 Nicolae Porumbescu, cited in: “A doua Conferință pe țară a Uniunii Arhitecților din RPR. Discuții,” *Arhitectura RPR* 3 (1965): 37.

23 Nicolae Porumbescu and Maria Porumbescu-Vaida, “La o aniversare” (1983 speech), in Onofrei and Grădinaru, *Nicolae Porumbescu*, 212.

24 Liviu Suhar, “Umbrele unui autoportret” (2012), in *Nicolae Porumbescu. Omul și arhitectul*, ed. Mircea Grigorovschi and Andreea Aiacoaboia (Iași: Dana Art, 2014), 78.



professional practice of the first communist decades. He even created a local ‘school’, not only in the educational sense (he was the founding father of the Architecture School in Iași), but also in the architectural sense, of an idiosyncratic style defined by a leading personality, with stylistic followers who acknowledged him as their master. (Fig. 1, 2)

This was by no means a revolt against the central political regime. Porumbescu’s discourse was always keen to comply with the politically correct lines and made plenty of imports from the political discourse. In return, he enjoyed appreciation from the power representatives and always “opened doors easily.”²⁵ When he introduced his theorization on ‘specificity’, he presented it as “our personal regimentation” in an architectural debate where it was the political discourse that gave “superior guidance and general theoretical stipulations.”²⁶

Although Porumbescu claimed to be against the verbalization of architecture, it was he who gave the most comprehensive theoretical elaboration to the notion of architectural ‘specificity’. The understanding of specificity – he wrote – starts from “lyricism” and the “lyrical position,” as opposed to the “absolute rationalism, objectivism and depersonalization” of modernist architecture.²⁷ Inspired from the interwar Romanian philosophy, his notion was based on an essentialist definition of national identity. Just like philosopher Lucian Blaga, whom he cited and from whose terms he borrowed, Porumbescu looked for “our specific stylistic matrix” – the national “matrix” and the “authentic,” “primary root” of Romanian culture – which was to be found in the “essence, the creative kernel of peasant art.”²⁸ It was a mythicized peasant culture that inspired his style.

²⁵ Onofrei and Grădinaru, *Nicolae Porumbescu*, 29.

²⁶ Nicolae Porumbescu, Maria Vaida-Porumbescu, „Specificul în arhitectură,” *Arhitectura* 2 (1967): 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

Yet the absolute admiration that Porumbescu avowed for the local rural tradition was completely at odds with what was actually happening in the communist Romanian village. For in reality, the peasant culture was being all but exterminated: the collectivization of agriculture had been already accomplished in the early 1960s and the systematization of villages was about to begin in the late 1960s. The mythicization of peasant culture went hand in hand with the process of its annihilation. A living peasant culture still survived, however, on the margins – notably in the marginal mountainous regions that Porumbescu was now working for, the two northernmost regions of Romania, Bucovina and Maramureş (where Suceava and respectively Baia Mare are located).

“Bucovina is for us what Florence was for Italy’s Quattrocento,”²⁹ Porumbescu wrote. Folklore is here what historic styles are for the West; others have ancient cultures, we have our peasant architecture, he believed.³⁰ Therefore, a contemporary Romanian architecture with specificity had to take inspiration from this relatively minor peasant culture of these marginal regions. He took on Blaga’s idea that the major culture does not actually repeat the minor culture, but it monumentalizes and enhances it – so this is exactly what architecture should do, Porumbescu thought.³¹ He considered that the best model of an artist who achieved a modern reinterpretation of rural tradition was Constantin Brâncuşi, whose atelier in Paris Porumbescu visited in 1967.³² Brâncuşi reached to the centre of the art world of his time, creating a major art by reinterpreting this very same minor culture of the Romanian peasant. Porumbescu intended to do the same for architecture.

But for this, he found inspiration in the international modern architecture of his time as well. He especially admired the Japanese architecture of the 1950s and 1960s (without ever visiting Japan), considering it “the most interesting contemporary experience in the world”, precisely for the modern reinterpretation in concrete of its wooden tradition.³³ Theorist Mircea Lupu – who would later be very critical of Porumbescu, but in fact adopted all his basic ideas – would name Japanese architecture as the “typical model for the ‘heroic moment’ of the revival of national schools.”³⁴ The ambiguity between the particular *local* inspiration and the more generic notion of a modern *national* expression marks Porumbescu’s discourse on specificity.

This ambiguity is also complicated by the fact that he did not abandon the discourse on materialism and scientificity either. He has always underlined the material practicality of peasant architecture and claimed that “a comprehensive scientific research of Romanian folklore art is necessary,” in order to make the difference between the valuable authentic products and the altered corrupted ones from town peripheries.³⁵

Eventually, for all his talent and theoretical ability of inventing a personal style based on the fertility of the margins and the minor, a style that was moreover in tune with the international architecture of his time, Porumbescu was held responsible for his contribution to the architectural expression of “national-communism.”³⁶ His architecture was criticized, both at the time and after the fall of communism, as an instance of “superficial folklorization” and “pseudo-tradition,”³⁷ a “chopped wood carpentry at colossal scale.”³⁸ Today, he is acknowledged – overstatedly maybe – as “a theoretician of architectural nationalism.”³⁹

29 Porumbescu cited in „A doua Conferință,” 37.

30 Porumbescu and Vaida-Porumbescu, „Specificul,” 14.

31 Ibid., 16.

32 Onofrei and Grădinaru, *Nicolae Porumbescu*, 39; Porumbescu and Vaida-Porumbescu, „Specificul,” 15.

33 Porumbescu and Vaida-Porumbescu, „Specificul,” 17.

34 Lupu, *Școli naționale în arhitectură*, 9.

35 Porumbescu and Vaida-Porumbescu, „Specificul,” 16.

36 Ion Mircea Enescu, *Arhitect sub comunism* (Bucharest: Ed. Paideia, 2007), 344.

37 Dan Bădic, „Nu o folclorizare superficială ci o arhitectură contemporană personalizată,” *Arhitectura* 3 (1967): 9.

38 Enescu, *Arhitect sub comunism*, 344.

39 Mircea Grigorovschi and Andreea Aiacoaboie, „Prolog,” in *Nicolae Porumbescu. Omul și arhitectul*, 6.

Mircea Alifanti: weak use of margins

Compared to Porumbescu, Mircea Alifanti (1914-1999) appears to be somehow secondary. He was “an irrefutable authority in the professional consciousness of his time,”⁴⁰ but at the same time “one of the most inconspicuous professionals of the communist era”⁴¹ – in the words of Ana Maria Zahariade and Radu Ponta. They remark “the marginality of his position of Mandarin, solitary, unhappy, and failure obsessed.”⁴² And yet Alifanti authored the one other major work that can be fairly considered prototypical for the ‘specificity’ trend defined in the late 1960s Romanian architecture: the Political-administrative Centre of the Maramureş County in Baia Mare (1968-1970) (Fig. 3, 4). It was acclaimed at the time as a remarkable achievement and is considered today to be his most important architectural contribution. He himself acknowledged the fact that this was an extraordinary accomplishment and that it made his name as an architect: “My trade ... perhaps I practised it to the full only once,” he wrote.⁴³

In fact, Alifanti had a considerable practice behind him at the moment of this commission. He contributed to several of the most important projects of his time and enjoyed professional prestige in the eyes of his fellow architects.⁴⁴ But he had somehow always remained in a secondary position, in the shadow of somebody else. As Simina Stan writes, he has been the “sub-director”⁴⁵ of most of the works linked to his name. His contribution to them was not marginal though; on the contrary. In his memoirs, architect Ion Mircea Enescu claims that it was of common knowledge that Alifanti was the true author of Casa Scânteii (1950-1955) – the most iconic socialist realist building in Romania – and not Horia Maicu, the architect-in-chief of the project who received the state-prize for it.⁴⁶ Enescu also spoke of Alifanti as “the main co-author of the first works built by the communist group in the Faculty of Architecture,”⁴⁷ such as the Băneasa Airport (1946-1947) for instance.

Alifanti’s personal relationship with the communist power was troubled and ambiguous: engaged in communist activities before the Second World War, and member of the Communist Party immediately after, he was nevertheless excluded from the Party in 1950, rather unfairly, because as a soldier in the Romanian army he had fought against the Russians on the Odessa front.⁴⁸ He never explicitly referred to the political discourse in his articles, as Porumbescu did, but rather to a general idea of successful socialism. What is specific to a socialist country – Alifanti wrote – is “thorough planning,” “enormous funds invested” and the “immediate benefit of the latest conquests of science and technique.”⁴⁹

The propensity for the scientific approach characterized his work in the early 1960s, when he was involved in a comprehensive research of type-projects with ISCAS (*Întreprinderea de Stat pentru Construcții, Arhitectură și Sistematizare* – the State Enterprise for Constructions, Architecture and Systematization). In this context, he made several spatial and functional studies, systematically analysing all the housing parameters, one by one, “using the method of engineering calculation.”⁵⁰

40 Ana Maria Zahariade and Radu Ponta, „Professor Alifanti’s Notebooks,” *sITA - Studies in History and Theory of Architecture* 2 (2014), 168.

41 Ibid., 163.

42 Ibid., 186.

43 Mircea Alifanti, note made on 17th March 1975, notebook LXII, cited by Zahariade and Ponta, „Professor Alifanti’s Notebooks,” 170.

44 Enescu, *Arhitect sub comunism*, 221.

45 Simina Stan, “Mircea Alifanti 1914-1999,” *Arhitectura 1906* website, posted 23 March 2015, accessed June 25, 2016. <http://arhitectura-1906.ro/2015/03/mircea-alifanti-1914-1999/>.

46 Enescu, *Arhitect sub comunism*, 43.

47 Ibid., 221.

48 Alifanti’s file at the Architects Union Archive, 1973 report, cited by Stan, “Mircea Alifanti 1914-1999.”

49 Mircea Alifanti, „Căutări în domeniul elaborării tipurilor de locuințe de masă”, *Arhitectura RPR* 1 (1963): 41.

50 Mircea Alifanti and Matilda Moravetz, „Studii pentru locuința de perspectivă,” *Arhitectura* 5 (1965): 9.

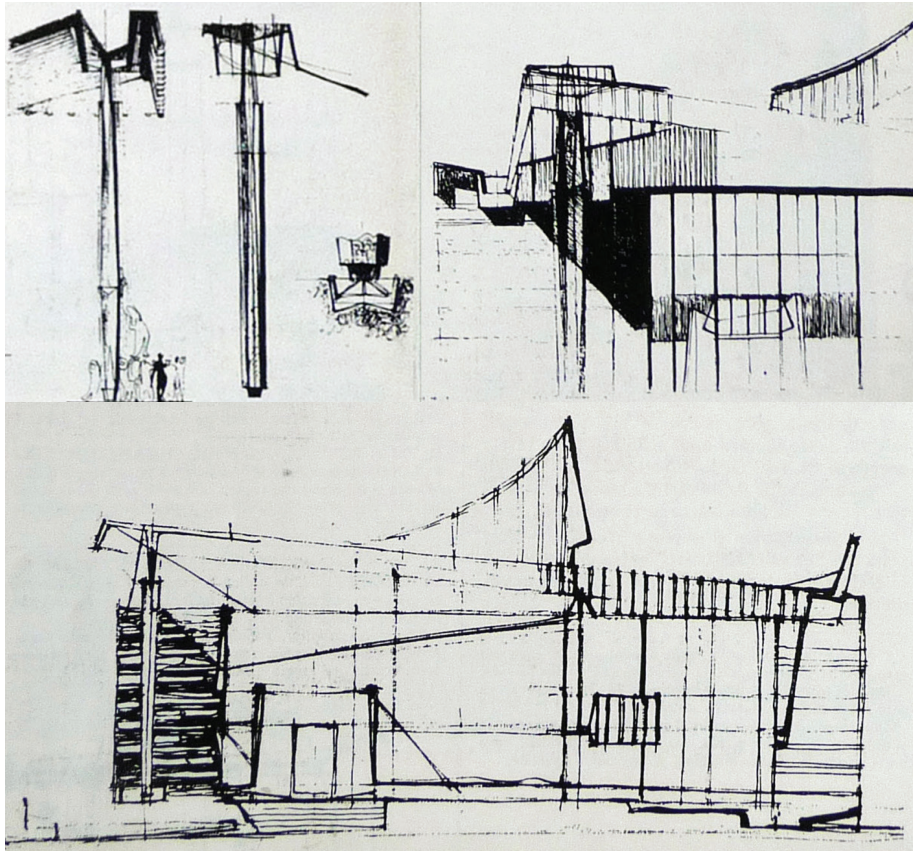


Fig. 3 (above), 4 (opposite). Mircea Alifanti, The Political-administrative Centre of the Maramureș County, Baia Mare, 1968-1970

His studies for the spatial organization in various type floor plans⁵¹ are truly remarkable both in their scientific rigour and spatial quality.

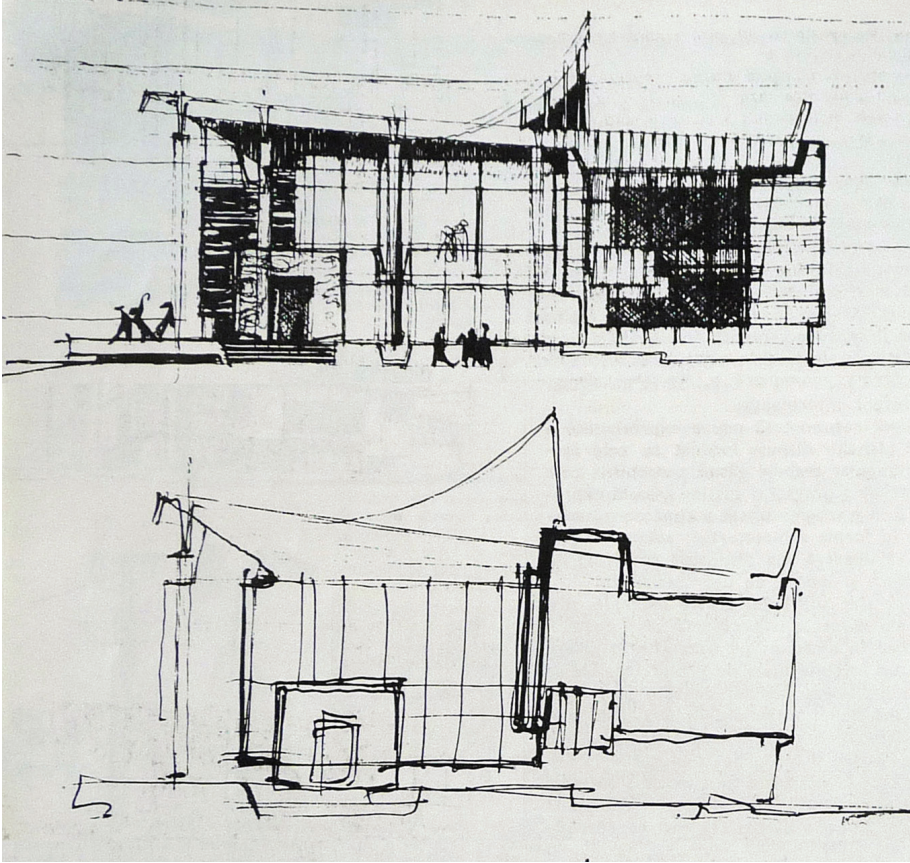
In spite of his valuable performance as practitioner, he eventually refrained to “the ‘side’ profession of teaching”⁵² at ‘Ion Mincu’ Institute of Architecture in Bucharest. There he taught the discipline of architectural constructions and technical detailing, which might explain his special attention to details in of his work in Baia Mare.

The Political-administrative Centre in Baia Mare – a work with which he returned to practice “after a long interruption”⁵³ – is an exploration on the margins of modern architecture not much unlike the one that Porumbescu professed. Alifanti pleaded as well for a systematic study of local wooden peasant architecture and the understanding of the functional side of its details. However, unlike Porumbescu’s total immersion into the marginal rural culture of Northern Romania, Alifanti remained based in Bucharest and conducted his major work from there, admitting that he was making an interpretation from afar. This larger distance allowed him to give more space to critical imagination in his version of the reinterpretation of peasant architecture. Although he did not think of himself as a theorist, he presented his project in the review *Arhitectura* in a way that

51 Alifanti, „Căutări,” 40-47.

52 Alifanti, note made on 17th March 1975, notebook LXII, cited by Zahariade and Ponta, „Professor Alifanti’s Notebooks,” 184.

53 Mircea Alifanti, „Baia Mare, Sediul politico-administrativ al județului Maramureș,” *Arhitectura* 6 (1972): 19.



could be considered – in Zahariade and Ponta’s opinion – the first time that one could find “a real theoretical approach to a project” in that review.⁵⁴

Alifanti claimed to have taken his inspiration from the local wooden architecture, which he studied thoroughly. He tried to “suggest the new” by reinterpreting “the audacities and intransigencies familiar to the people from that side of the country.”⁵⁵ He called this method “*insolitul logic*” (in Romanian)⁵⁶ – which could be approximately understood as ‘the logical uncanny’. The notion is difficult and it may also be translated as “logical peculiarity” or (as Zahariade and Ponta put it) “logical singularity.”⁵⁷ This was in fact a new way of inventing some unfamiliar and unexpected architectural details by taking inspiration from the details of peasant architecture. As Anthony Vidler explained about the notion of “uncanny,” it arises when something “that once seemed homely” is transformed “into something decidedly not so.”⁵⁸ In its original Freudian definition, the uncanny was something familiar but which has been alienated through the process of repression.⁵⁹ This was also the case with the Romanian rural culture – once

54 Zahariade and Ponta, „Professor Alifanti’s Notebooks,” 170.

55 Alifanti, „Baia Mare,” 19.

56 Ibid., 25.

57 Zahariade and Ponta, „Professor Alifanti’s Notebooks,” 181.

58 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), 6.

59 Ibid., 14.

familiar, now more and more marginalized and estranged; it had become defamiliarized and now it was to be reconsidered as something new and eccentric. The uncanny was a Romantic “artistic technique of estrangement”⁶⁰ which re-emerged “as an aesthetic sensibility since the mid-sixties”⁶¹ – Vidler also remarked. It had also been the method of the modern avant-garde, which considered that “a world estranged and distanced from its own nature” (which communist Romania, with its forced rapid urbanization and violence towards the traditional rural culture, definitely was) could only be recalled to itself “by the effects of things deliberately ‘made strange’”.⁶² This was exactly what Alifanti was doing with his idiosyncratic architectural language invented for the Political-administrative Centre in Baia Mare: in a modernist avant-garde way, he deliberately ‘made strange’ the once so ‘homely’ peasant architecture’s details.

Alifanti himself explained this particular kind of architectural logic as the product of unusual associations of forms and materials, which grasped “the contrast, the conflict, the life” and which stood for “the so-called new”. He thoroughly studied the very Corbusier-like “transparency of the interior” of his building, the way volumes were perceived by approaching and moving around them, “a series of moments, with a beginning and an ending”, a sequence of strong images that “bear the ‘anchor’”.⁶³ For all its localist intentions, this is still a very modernistic approach.

In spite of this intriguing notion of the “logical uncanny”, Alifanti did not actually work with a conceptual representation, but rather developed a direct kind of plastic approach. By drawing and redrawing, he progressively shaped and adjusted the ever more peculiar and sophisticated project details. Each element of “great expressiveness”, Alifanti thought, must evolve gradually, from approximation to approximation; “...my vacillations before any decision was made (sometimes this meant a step back, a loss, even something ugly)”⁶⁴ – he wrote in his personal notebooks. The article in *Arhitectura* thoroughly described this long series of small steps by which he edged towards a still uncertain but powerful expression – a kind of research work always in the margin of error, a continuous gradual evolution of the project, which in the end emerged somehow naturally.

Eventually, his forms of architectural expression were not as direct and easily interpretable as local or national in style, like Porumbescu’s architecture was. As Vidler explained, the uncanny actually “destabilizes traditional notions of centre and periphery – the spatial forms of the national”;⁶⁵ it “elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity”.⁶⁶ Alifanti’s “uncanny” was an exploration of the margins too; but it was already another understanding of the margins than the stronger, yet more simplistic, quest for the radical difference in the marginality of a regional minor culture. It was the margin of exploration and experiment, which produced the new from the inexhaustible reserve of uncertainty.

Margins: both aside and inside the system

Porumbescu and Alifanti were both awarded the Architects’ Union Prize in 1970, for the two Houses of Culture in Suceava and Baia Mare, and for the Political-administrative Centre in Baia Mare respectively.⁶⁷ This success confirmed that their works – together – became exemplary for the new trend in Romanian architecture at the time.

The two architects had a lot in common. They were both aware of the productive role of the margins discourse, and they both succeeded in producing good quality architecture based on this discourse – and also making a name from it. They both looked for a space in which they could

60 *ibid.*, 9.

61 *ibid.*, 9.

62 *ibid.*, 8.

63 Alifanti, „Baia Mare”, 25.

64 Alifanti, note made on 16th November 1969 in notebook L, cited by Zahariade and Ponta, „Professor Alifanti’s Notebooks”, 172.

65 Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 10.

66 *ibid.*, 11.

67 „Premiile Uniunii Arhitecților pe anul 1970”, *Arhitectura* 5 (1971): 3.

enjoy more creative freedom, aside from the centre of power, in the margins of the controlled system of architectural production. They both did this in an ambiguous way, none of them actually questioning the system itself and its centre-margins hierarchies. Porumbescu looked for a centre on the margin, Alifanti for margins in the centre.

Porumbescu made a strong use of the margin: he explicitly claimed to look for a marginal location and for inspiration from a minor culture. He moved outside the capital, to a secondary institution. However, the geographic margins allowed him to reach a position of power and centrality in the system – as he became director of a design institute and acceded to relatively important commissions. Very active and visible on the professional stage, he in fact led the shift to ‘specificity’, with several manifest-buildings in his distinctive style and with followers adding up to a local ‘school’.

Alifanti made a weak use of the margin: with only one visible work achieved fully under his name and mostly took refuge in teaching; he remained at “the side” of the professional practice; but he was always linked to the most central institutions of the profession. He taught in the main (and for a long time, the only) school of architecture in Romania, he sat in the board of the Architects’ Union (the single and very centralized body of Romanian architects) and acted as a member of the editorial board of *Arhitectura* (the most important architectural review in Romania). However, in all these central places, he remained elusive. His voice was seldom heard; even if he was a member of the *Arhitectura* board, he rarely published there.

Each in his own way, Porumbescu and Alifanti purposely stayed aside from the centre of power. But this also meant they avoided any rupture from it or straight opposition to it. In fact, they remained both quite well positioned *inside* the system. Their seminal architectural works are both illustrative for the “productive role” of discourses that were developed freely, but still in the (more or less) close margins of the political power’s discourse.

The distance they each took from the communist regime’s official discourse was different. Porumbescu’s discourse on ‘specificity’ was very close. It made use of the same mythical concepts – such as the essential core of the national identity – something that left almost no margins of quest. Porumbescu already knew what he should find in the margins he explored. This kind of discourse was easily absorbed by the nationalistic discourse of the Party. Alifanti, on the other hand, avoided any reference to the word ‘specificity’ altogether and he came up with his own cryptic notion of the uncanny. The margins he explored were the creative edge of trial and error, of gradual uncertain evolution, from approximation to approximation – a method of open quest, rather than a quest with a specific purpose. He took refuge in the marginalia of an idiosyncratic discourse and shrouded his practice in it.

Eventually, Alifanti succeeded in being more evasive than Porumbescu as to the communist regime’s oppressive (or seductive) intrusions in the profession. Alifanti, for instance, was one of the very few important names in Romanian architecture who simply refused to participate in the planning of the civic centre of Bucharest in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁶⁸ Porumbescu, in contrast, did accept; he was the only contributor located outside Bucharest in that so-called competition,⁶⁹ allowing the political power to claim the competition’s national extent, and thus putting his very marginal position at its service.

Alifanti did not repeat the one experience he made in the late 1960s. Porumbescu, in contrast, went on by exploiting the ‘specificity’ discourse until the mid-1980s, although by then it was already clear that this had become definitely entangled with the power’s nationalistic discourse. In consequence, Porumbescu appears today as more complicit with the communist power than the more elusive Alifanti. Nevertheless, Alifanti’s architecture too had eventually served the communist power’s interest in defining the features of national identity in architecture. Margins are indeed the space of both complicity and elusiveness. However, the distinction between complicity and elusiveness is often difficult to draw.

68 Ana Maria Zahariade, *Architecture in the Communist Project. Romania 1944-1989* (Bucharest: Simetria, 2011), 128.

69 Ștefan Lungu, “O chestiune de morală,” *Arhitectura* 1-4 (1996): 6.

Conclusion

The focus on 'margins' as a conceptual lens can be instrumental in re-reading a particular moment in the history of communist architecture in Romania: the late 1960s. But beyond this particular case, there is something of a more general nature concerning communist architecture, which can be exposed by alluding to 'margins'. It is the relative irrelevance – in which the relationship between architects and the communist regime is concerned – of harder terms such as 'collaboration' and 'dissidence'. Or the even more doubtful idea that good architects tried to take refuge in an apolitical art of architecture, which could be saved from an intrusive political regime.

The way architects acted and produced architecture – purposefully involving the 'margins' in more than one sense – was neither supporting nor challenging the communist system of architectural production. But it was a perfectly political way of acting – that is, aiming at a successful, good quality and critical architecture by means of a well-constructed self-aware productive discourse.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "A doua Conferință pe țară a Uniunii Arhitecților din RPR. Discuții" [The Second National Conference of the Union of Romanian Architects]. *Arhitectura RPR* 3 (1965): 22-43.
- "Premiile Uniunii Arhitecților pe anul 1970" [The Prizes of the Union of Romanian Architects for the Year 1970]. *Arhitectura* 5 (1971): 2-5.
- Alifanti, Mircea and Matilda Moravetz. "Studii pentru locuința de perspectivă" [Studies for Housing on the Long Term]. *Arhitectura* 5 (1965): 8-11.
- Alifanti, Mircea. "Baia Mare, Sediul politico-administrativ al județului Maramureș" [Baia Mare. Political and Administrative Center of Maramureș County]. *Arhitectura* 6 (1972): 19-30.
- Alifanti, Mircea. "Căutări în domeniul elaborării tipurilor de locuințe de masă" [Research for Developing New Types of Mass Housing]. *Arhitectura RPR* 1 (1963): 40-47.
- Bădic, Dan. "Nu o folclorizare superficială ci o arhitectură contemporană personalizată" [Not a Superficial Folklorization, but a Contemporary Personalized Architecture]. *Arhitectura* 3 (1967): 9.
- Bortnowski, Stan. "Privire asupra activității teoretice în arhitectură" [On Theoretical Activity in Architecture]. *Arhitectura* 2 (1968): 5-8.
- Curinschi Vorona, Gheorghe. *Istoria arhitecturii în România* [History of Architecture in Romania]. Bucharest: Ed. Tehnică, 1982.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The Greatest Show on Earth. The evidence for Evolution*. New York / London: Free Press, 2009.
- DeLanda, Manuel. *Deleuze. History and Science*. New York: Atropos Press, 2010.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Claire Parnet. *Dialogues*. Paris: Flammarion, 1977.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory*. London: Penguin Books, 2004.
- Enescu, Ion Mircea. *Arhitect sub comunism* [Architect under Communism]. Bucharest: Ed. Paideia, 2007.
- Grigorovschi, Mircea and Andreea Aiacoboaie. *Nicolae Porumbescu. Omul și arhitectul* [Nicolae Porumbescu. The Man and the Architect]. Iași: Dana Art, 2014.
- Gusti, Gustav. "Două decenii de sistematizare complexă și construcție socialistă a teritoriului" [Two Decades of Complex Systematization and Socialist Construction of the Territory]. *Arhitectura RPR* 4 (1964): 26-39.
- Ionescu, Grigore. *Arhitectura în România, perioada anilor 1944-1969* [Architecture in Romania, 1944-1969]. Bucharest: Ed. Academiei RSR, 1969.
- Ionescu, Grigore. *Arhitectura pe teritoriul României de-a lungul veacurilor* [Architecture on Romanian Territory Throughout the Ages]. Bucharest: Ed. Academiei RSR, 1982.
- Leach, Neil. "New Materialism". *Urban Flux*, 1 (2009): 26-29. accessed June 30, 2016. <http://neilleach.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/new-materialism.pdf>.
- Lungu, Ștefan. "O chestiune de morală" [A Question of Ethics]. *Arhitectura* 1-4 (1996): 4-7.
- Lupu, Mircea. "Cercetarea în arhitectură" [Research in Architecture]. *Arhitectura* 2 (1968): 10-12.
- Lupu, Mircea. *Școli naționale în arhitectură* [National Schools in Architecture]. Bucharest: Editura Tehnică, 1977.
- Onofrei, Virgiliu and Tudor Grădinaru. *Nicolae Porumbescu. O viață în arhitectură* [Nicolae Porumbescu. A Life in Architecture]. Iași: Editura Societății Academice Mateiu Botez, 2003.

- Panaiteescu, Alexandru. *De la Casa Scânteii la Casa Poporului. Patru decenii de arhitectură în București* [From Casa Scânteii to Casa Poporului. Four Decades of Architecture in Bucharest]. Bucharest: Simetria, 2012.
- Porumbescu, Nicolae and Maria Vaida-Porumbescu. "Specificul în arhitectură" [Specificity in Architecture]. *Arhitectura* 2 (1967): 12-17.
- Porumbescu, Nicolae. "Interviu cu Ileana Murgescu" [Interview with Ileana Murgescu]. *Arhitectura* 2-3 (1981): 60-62.
- Săsărman, Gheorghe. "Cîteva deziderate ale gîndirii teoretice" [A Few Aspirations of Theoretical Thinking]. *Arhitectura* 2 (1968): 9.
- Stan, Simina. "Mircea Alifanti 1914-1999". *Arhitectura 1906* website, posted 23 March 2015, accessed June 25, 2016. <http://arhitectura-1906.ro/2015/03/mircea-alifanti-1914-1999/>.
- Verdery, Katherine. *National Ideology Under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992.
- Zahariade, Ana Maria and Radu Ponta. "Professor Alifanti's Notebooks". *sITA – Studies in History and Theory of Architecture* 2 (2014): 163-187.
- Zahariade, Ana Maria. *Architecture in the Communist Project. Romania 1944-1989*. Bucharest: Simetria, 2011.

IMAGE SOURCES

Fig. 1-2. Nicolae Porumbescu, The House of Culture, Baia Mare, 1967-1969 (source: *Arhitectura* 1 (1970), 55, 56)

Fig. 3-4. Mircea Alifanti, The Political-administrative Centre of the Maramureș County, Baia Mare, 1968-1970 (source: *Arhitectura* 6 (1972), 25-28)