Low-Rise High-Density "Semi-Collective" Housing. Thoughts, Ideas, and Proposals Over Four Decades

An Interview with Teodor Octavian Gheorghiu by Ana-Maria Zahariade

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Teodor Octavian Gheorghiu is a highly respected academic who has taught for many years architecture, urban theory and history at the school of architecture in Timișoara.[1] He is also a very prolific urban historian whose books have been awarded many national distinctions — he published countless volumes and articles on interconnected topics in the fields of history and theory of architecture and town planning in Romania and Eastern-Europe, habitat, historical geography, urban and architectural restoration and rehabilitations. The complexity of his writings rests not only on his original research and findings, but also on his design experience in urbanism (many contributions to urban projects) and architecture, especially dwellings, where he was concerned with new housing typologies. This interview refers to this particular experience.

AMZ: *You have been one of the few architects of my generation working on low-rise high-density "semi-collective" housing typology ever since we were students. At that time, in Romania, housing was exclusively based on few standardized types of collective dwellings, which resulted in an annoying typological monotony that, unfortunately, continued after the 1989 liberalization. Although you are very prolific as an urban historian, I also know that you did not "abandon the cause" of housing as, a few years ago, you gave a conference in Timișoara on this matter, which your colleagues considered extremely stimulating. It suggests a continuity in your searches concerning this housing typology. Am I right?*

TOG: You are right in some respects. This concern stems from my own practice as an architect in Romania before and after 1989, and the questions it inevitably raised. I revisited my sketches and thoughts a few years ago, for that presentation at the School of Architecture in Timișoara. I showed stages, models, and housing typologies on which I had reflected and which I had proposed over four decades. Many of these were unconventional, at least in relation to the mainstream practices at that time in Romania, but also to the current developments beyond its borders. My presentation had my colleagues thinking, and I had also been a little surprised to discover a certain continuity of my various approaches to housing, which became apparent while I was gathering the materials. In retrospect, yes, there is a thread linking my proposals for various contexts and at various times, and the housing issue seems to have been very present in my practice, although my professional interests resided elsewhere, mainly in the history of cities.

AMZ: *How would you define this thread?*

TOG: I think the common denominator of my housing proposals is the "semi-collective," a concept less used in Romania, but worthy to be explored. Taken word for word, it could mean "half-collective," or "quasi-collective," or oscillating between the collective and the individual, and it is clear that in the 1970s, when I started investigating this theme, it meant something different than it does today; and, as I look closer to it, I see not only changes in wording, but also changes in its substance.

1 The three-year architecture school in Timișoara functioned between 1970-1983; it was reopened in 1990 and became Architecture and Town Planning Faculty within the Politechnica University in Timișoara.

In the current Romanian legislative and regulatory documents, I have noted that the notion of "semi-collective housing" means a multi-dwelling complex with a division of land between the collective and the individual property and use: "buildings with dwellings for several families (several dwellings), with their own access and a plot used in common."[2] From this point of view, the concept is very similar to that of the "condominium" defined by the Housing Law, 196/2018, in three ways, which essentially mean:

> "a real estate consisting of land with one or more buildings, in which there are at least three individual properties representing dwellings and buildings or spaces for other purposes, as the case may be, and undivided shares of common ownership."[3]

Thus, the urban and legal definitions only cover the systems of property and administration, which are just parts of the "semi-collective housing."

In Romania, "collective housing" itself is an imprecise notion, perceived as such from the 1960s until today. The early post-war urban planning theories avoided its use, replacing it with "housing in multi-story blocks," and giving indicative assessments of the densities of multi-story blocks (400-500 dwellings/ha) in relation to individual houses (100-160 dwellings/ha).[4] In one source, the term "collective housing" is corrected at the outset:

> "improper term used for multi-apartment housing buildings (apartment blocks), as the dwellings (apartments) are not collective, but only grouped in the same building."[5]

Relatively recently, I was reminded of this issue by a PhD thesis that, right from the title, replaced the term "collective housing" with "multifamily housing,"[6] referring to an article and a course of yours, where you define the apartment building as a "high-rise multi-family dwelling" whose collective meaning comes from the type of access; to bring more technical clarity to the term, in order to reach their apartment, the tenants have to use a common space such as stairwells, elevators, hallways, corridors, etc.[7]

AMZ: *In fact, it is not simple to define properly, professionally, the collective housing, especially when certain terms are commonly used in a simplified way in the everyday language. In my course, I started from the classification of dwellings found in Dizionario Enciclopedico di Architettura e Urbanistica directed by Paolo Portoghesi, the most complete classification I have found, where the authors refer to the dwelling (abitazione) and to its possibility to exist autonomously or combined with other similar units. "Collective" thus combines two typological criteria: the number of familial units in the same building and the type of access, especially in terms of qualitative experience. But all these terms acquire specific meanings, depending on their local histories, approaches… so, there is no perfect overlapping. Finally, it is important to understand their implications in terms of the inhabitants' quality of life. Do you think that the lack of clarity of the terms and concepts we use contributes to the decreasing quality of housing that we are witnessing today?*

TOG: This overlong terminological debate may well seem to be exaggerated sometimes, but it highlights the fact that concepts (and their application, obviously) should be attentively understood and not taken in their simplest forms. Or, simplification and simplicity has

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2 Arch. Ioana Atanasescu, project leader, *NP057-02 Standard for the Design of Residential Buildings (revision of NP016-96)* (Bucharest: IPCT S.A., 2002), booklet no. 0, dated 24 Sept. 2002, "Typologies According to the Mode of Habitation."

3 Housing Law, 196/2018, on the establishment, organization and functioning of owners' associations and the administration of condominiums, M.O.P. I 660 (30 July 2018), in force since 28 Sept. 2018, art. 2 lit. (h), art. 3.3.

4 Radu Laurian, *Urbanismul* [*Urbanism*] (Bucharest: Editura Tehnică, 1965), 141.

5 Mircea Cardaş (coord.), *Mic lexicon ilustrat al noţiunilor de sistematizare* [Small Illustrated Lexicon of Systematization Terms] (Bucharest: Editura Tehnică, 1983), 158.

6 Maja Bâldea, *Noi tipare de locuire multifamilială cu densitate ridicată* [New Patterns of High Density Multi-family Housing] (Bucharest: Editura Politehnica, 2016).

7 Ana Maria Zahariade, "Blocuri trecute... blocuri viitoare..." ["Past and Future Apartment Buildings"], *Arhitext* 169 (March 2007): 46-47.

dominated and continues to dominate the residential field for the last century, for reasons of convenience of thought, aiming only at quick financial or economic performance. It is more than obvious that Romania is no exception, with standardization and simplistic prefabrication of housing setting undesirable records here; you have highlighted this reality in a relatively recent essay; you said that, in spite of the undeniable dependence on objective and restrictive conditions, the architectural responses to the same determinations can be much more varied than those that have been practiced in Romania. Up to you, one of the solutions, and perhaps the most available, would be to interrogate "traditional urban forms," which are extremely varied and whose use in practice could have surprising results.[8] This is an idea that helps me connect with my own thoughts on the housing problem from the 1970s and beyond.

AMZ: *How did the housing issue present itself in your view when you first started to work as an architect?*

TOG: At the beginning of the eighth decade of the last century, we must remember that the meaning of the notion of "semi-collective housing" had for us somewhat militant connotations, representing an alternative formula to the collective housing in blocks of flats, an alternative that was much more appropriate from an urban perspective, as well as from the architectural-formal and, above all, from social points of view. The semi-collective contained those organizational and conforming changes that could allow for the transformation of the multi-family housing into a friendlier dwelling, with qualities closer to those of individual housing, obviously beneficial to the quality of family life. Thus, multi-family housing became something else. Obviously, the criticized model was the apartment building-type of housing, which was dominant in the Romanian environment of the time — density was its trump card. In my opinion, the high density of urban environments could have been achieved also through other types of assemblages, which have allowed easily for a number of qualities such as the relative autonomy of the apartments and the diversity of their solutions, the creation of solid communities, the inclusion of complementary functions, the optimal relationship with the social and the natural environment, etc. This is how I regarded the issue at that time, and if my memory serves, I think it started with a combination of circumstances during the last period of our courses at the "Ion Mincu" Institute of Architecture in Bucharest.

AMZ: *Perhaps this moment deserves to be evoked, as it seems to have broken with the norm in the school of architecture.*

TOG: In a school that was guided by the principles of Modernism, and where "housing" was studied only in its two extremes — the collective and the simple, "classical" versions of the single-family house — I had the chance to study in my final years with Professor Mircea Alifanti, who led his studio with an atypical discourse: dubitative, interrogative, complex. This was sometimes disappointing and disorienting for those who were looking for easy answers, but it encouraged critical attitudes towards architectural preconceptions, programs and themes and their results, and stimulated reflections on composition, forms and meanings, on social and cultural aspects of our profession. Another significant moment was the fifth year sociology course given by Professor Gheorghe Kepes who, for me at least, overturned the whole system of "safe" values I had learned until then, especially those relating to the psycho-social aspects of the usual modernist patterns of urban housing ("alienation" being one of the consequences). This encouraged me to search for references on the research outcomes of the main sociological schools of the time and their consequences in the sphere of housing.

Finally, decisive was the 1972-73 diploma, which brought together the two perspectives mentioned above. This diploma was made together with Cristian Nicolae, Florin Colpacci and Mihai Cocheci, coordinated by professors Alifanti, Staadecker and Săvescu. Our subject was an "idea of urban remodelling" in the 4th district of Bucharest, and we approached it differently than the modernist doctrine, with its emphasis on the new and disdain of the traditional context. Under the guidance of our professors, we made a careful study of the site to detect

8 Ana Maria Zahariade, *Simptome de tranziţie* [Symptoms of transition] (Bucharest: Arhitext, 2009), 42.









Fig. 1-4.

elements of urban, architectural, and social value that we preserved to a great extent — this was a highly unusual practice at the time — and then we interpreted in our collective project the very elements that we considered valuable. The major architectural ideas we proposed (especially of the two "centers") explored expressions that were trying to keep up with the evolution of theories and styles, I dare say we even anticipated certain approaches. I was in charge of the parts of low-rise housing (because my colleagues knew that I was concerned with the subject), and my study generated several proposals with characteristics inspired by the dwelling typologies and urban structure in the area or by recent foreign achievements that were ahead of the "late modernist" phase.[9]

During my field work, guided by plans of the area and with a camera in my hand (Fig. 1-4), I paid attention to two aspects: the diversity of high densities achieved with low-rise dwellings along a long quasi-spontaneous development in time and, respectively, the "densification" of the fabric through the *culs-de-sac* created by "developers" who interpreted the old spontaneous developments in modern ways. For our project, I kept all the areas and buildings that we considered most valuable, and I added the insertions of new structures, based on two typologies: (1) the *culs-de-sac* type of urban arrangement, used in the areas where it was specific ; and respectively, (2) the model of the "mound" type housing , which I called "habitat" after the well-known and attractive ensemble designed by Moshe Safdie, used around the new centers and in the areas that could be demolished completely. With the "mound," I set the ambition to reach the densities of the high-rise blocks of flats that marked certain areas or accompanied, in the form of continuous fronts, the new *percées*, thoroughfares intended to support the major traffic. As an aside, I recall another departure from the modernist dogma in our project, namely the proposal of continuous street fronts, following the surprising (for that time) suggestion of professor Săvescu.

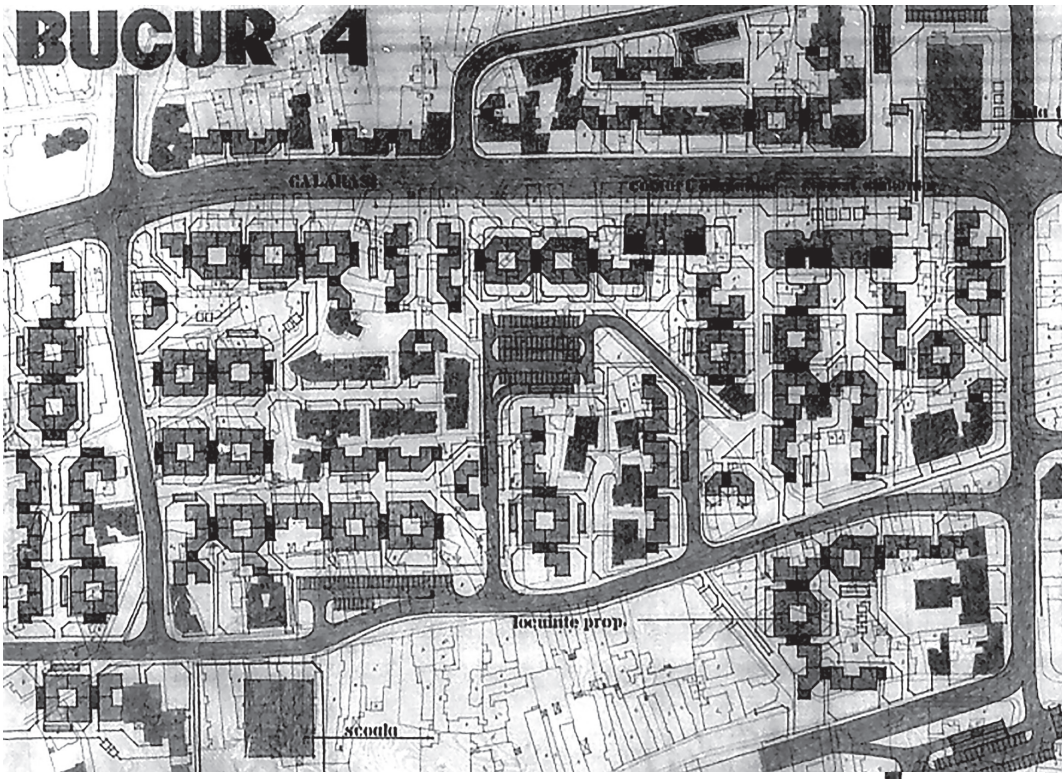
AMZ: *How did the two typologies work with the notion of the "semi-collective housing?"*

TOG: Of the two proposals, the *cul-de-sac* system (Fig. 5, 6) could be considered at the limit as semi-collective housing, by grouping accommodation units (standardized, modular, interchangeable) around a semi-public space (linear, in most cases), in a composition that was easily designed and adapted to the context. I worked with what was already there, protecting the existing architectures and articulating some new ones, considered valuable at the time. I never turned this study into an extensive one, contenting myself with the particular value and atmosphere of those *culs-de-sac* in the area of our diploma project, so I was glad to see the recent research that you conducted nearly exhausting the subject.[10]

The second type, the "mound," occupies compactly three areas in the western half of the complex, using and repeating a cruciform building formula, coupled on two, three or four sides thus forming small enclosures or linear paths. The boundaries of those ensembles could be adapted to the geometry the neighborhoods and conform to them, thus being more adaptable and less rigid than the type-block sections. We considered that this type of housing could replace the block of flats that was decisively imposed in the current practice of the time. Although it was also alien to the site, the "mound" had architectural qualities that were more favorable to the quality of individual and social life, and more akin to the traditional manifestations in the area. At the same time, as more than sixty percent of the site was occupied by low-rise high-density residential buildings (both pre-existing and proposed in our project),

9 Mihai Dan Cocheci, Florin Colpacci, Teodor Octavian Gheorghiu, Cristian Nicolae, "Diploma project. An idea of urban remodelling in an area of district IV in Bucharest," *Arhitectura* 4 (1973): 71-77. Perhaps not by chance, the magazine also published a diploma on "Axa Patria-Cișmigiu" (with similar analysis procedures and proposals) and several articles on the proposed urban rehabilitation of the historic areas of Botoșani, Târgoviște, Brăila, Oradea, Brașov, Sibiu and several studies on the historic areas of Suceava and especially Bucharest. It was obviously a change of direction (temporary, as it turned out) of the school and of some of the practitioners in the field.

10 Ana Maria Zahariade (ed.), *De la înfundătură la intrare. Locuri ale Bucureștiului cotidian* [Cul de sacs. Places of Everyday Bucharest] (Bucharest: "Ion Mincu" University Press, 2016).



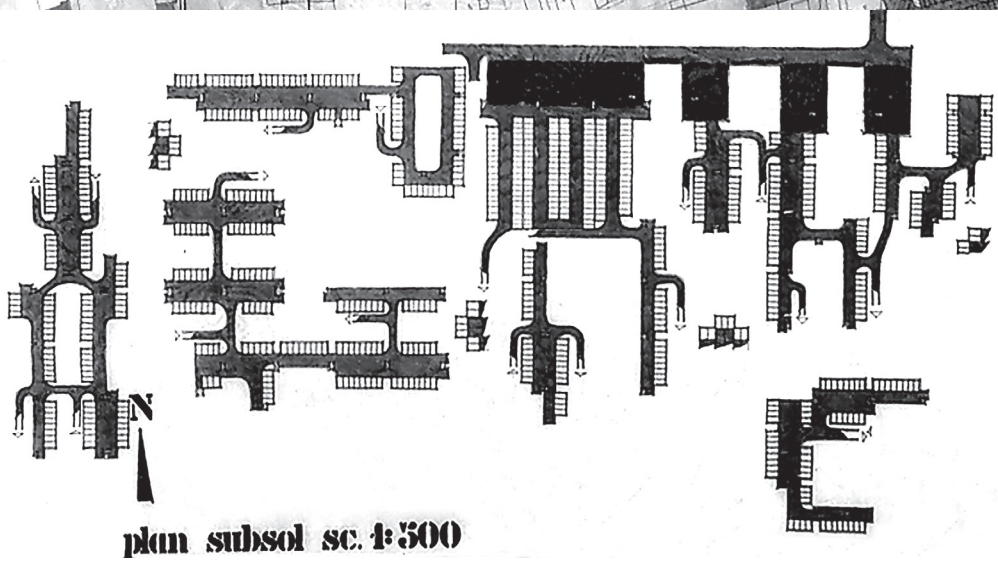
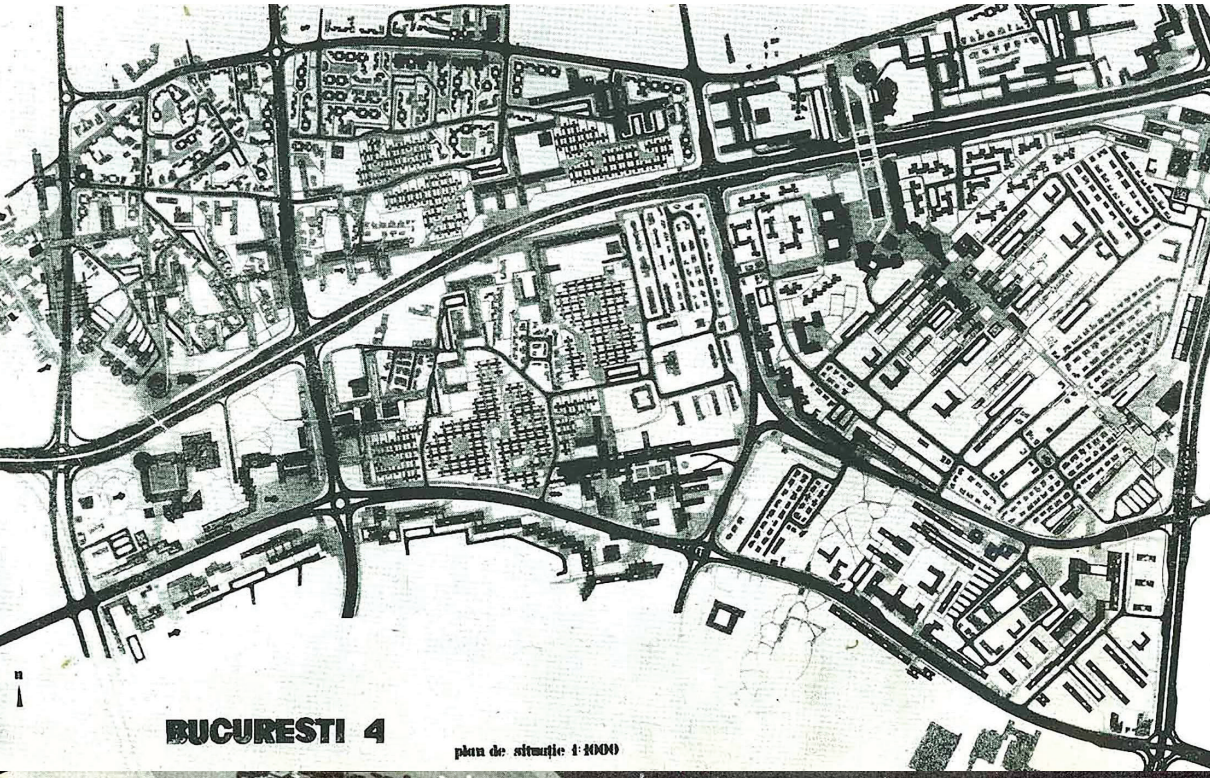
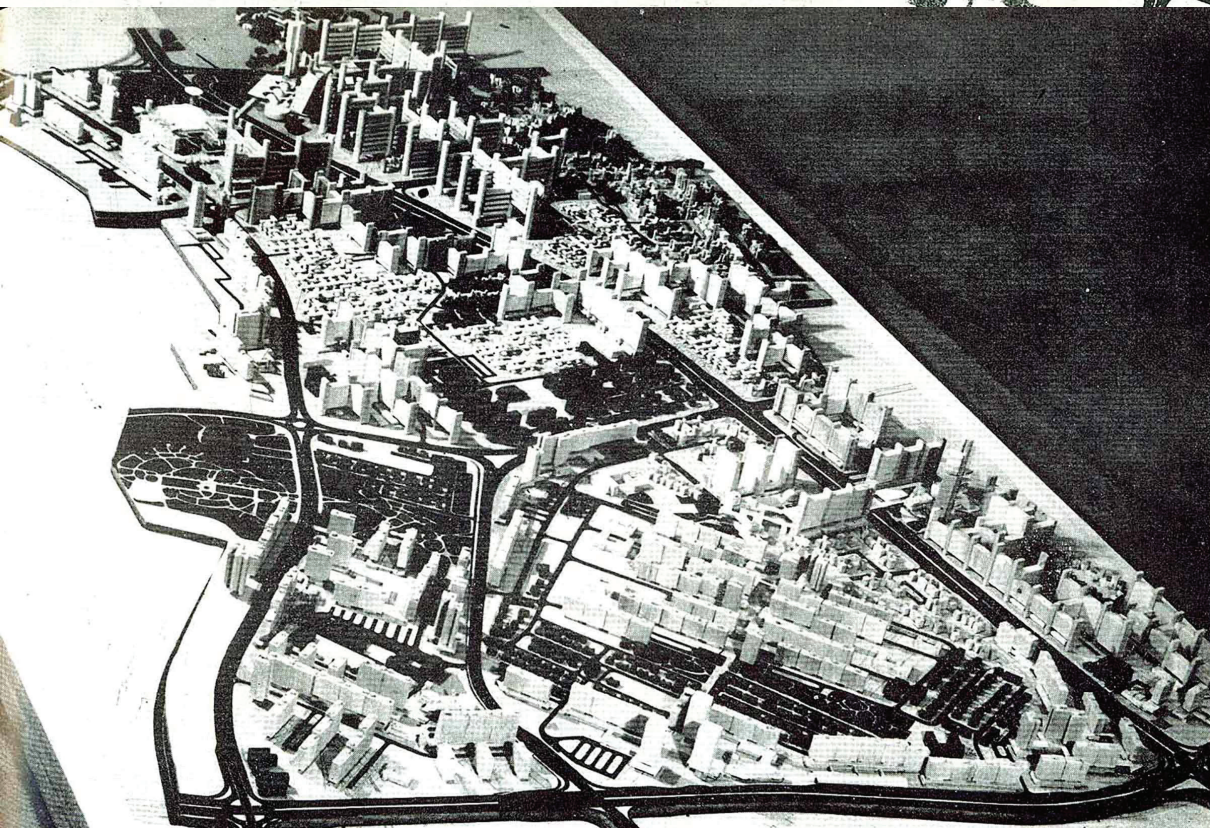


Fig. 5, 6 (above)
Fig. 7, 8 (facing page)



BUCUREȘTI 4

plan de situație 1:4000



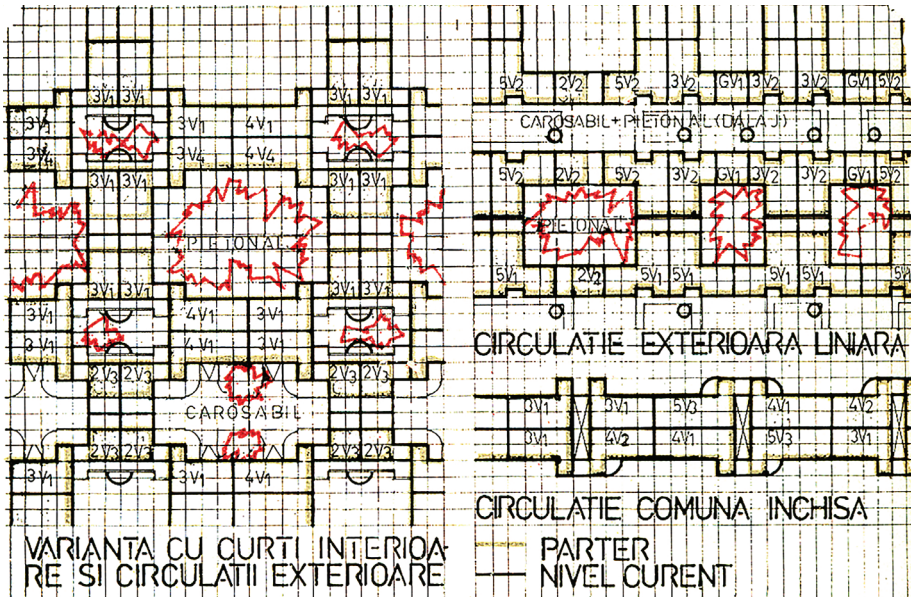


Fig. 9

the resulted density was exceeding 500 inhabitants/ha, which was comparable to the one of the new neighborhoods of high-rise blocks of flats. In addition to this high density, the horizontally and vertically modulated typology would have allowed various adaptations to the site, as well as the use of efficient building technologies, which was another desideratum of that time. The diploma, published in the *Arhitectura* magazine, (Fig. 7, 8) made quite an impression, and continues to be a landmark of that period of Romanian higher architectural education.

AMZ: *Was it easy for you to explore further these issues as you started to practice architecture?*

TOG: In 1973, when I began teaching at the School of Architecture in Timişoara, I worked out a solution for the "Sun Neighborhood" in the South of the city, which brought me face to face with the limits and flaws of the usual residential plans. However hard I tried to couple the available "block sections," I could not manage to obtain coherent enclosures or linear deployments. This basic observation led me to search other formulae; I proposed "semi-collective" housing units with fewer levels to compete with the usual standardized blocks of flats in terms of their diversity, typology, modularity, malleability, etc. and with clearly superior urban, architectural, plastic and psycho-social virtues. In the meantime, I was trying to catch up with other issues connected with housing — studies in aesthetics, sociology, psychology, and medicine — and, maybe under the influence of "postmodernism," I discovered the virtues of the nineteenth century tenements with inner courtyards and passageways. I studied the instances of this type in Timişoara and made some proposals following the principle that I had developed for the diploma project, but simpler and, in my view, perfectly usable in the current practice (Figs. 9-11 and 13). The proposals were published in the *Arhitectura* magazine,[11] and taken up as references by some students in the school of Bucharest. Their projects provoked excitement among the academics, who viewed their designs as too atypical. In my proposals the modules could form flats of two, three, four or five rooms (Fig. 12), which, taken as basic units, were much more malleable than the block sections employed in practice. They allowed various coupling, depending on the parameters of the site, and a variety of urban arrangements — linear, *culs-de-sac*, grouped around courtyards — with relatively separate car and pedestrian accessibility.

11 T. O. Gheorghiu, "Două propuneri privind locuinţa colectivă de mare serie" ["Two Proposals for Mass Collective Housing"], *Arhitectura* 4-5 (1981).

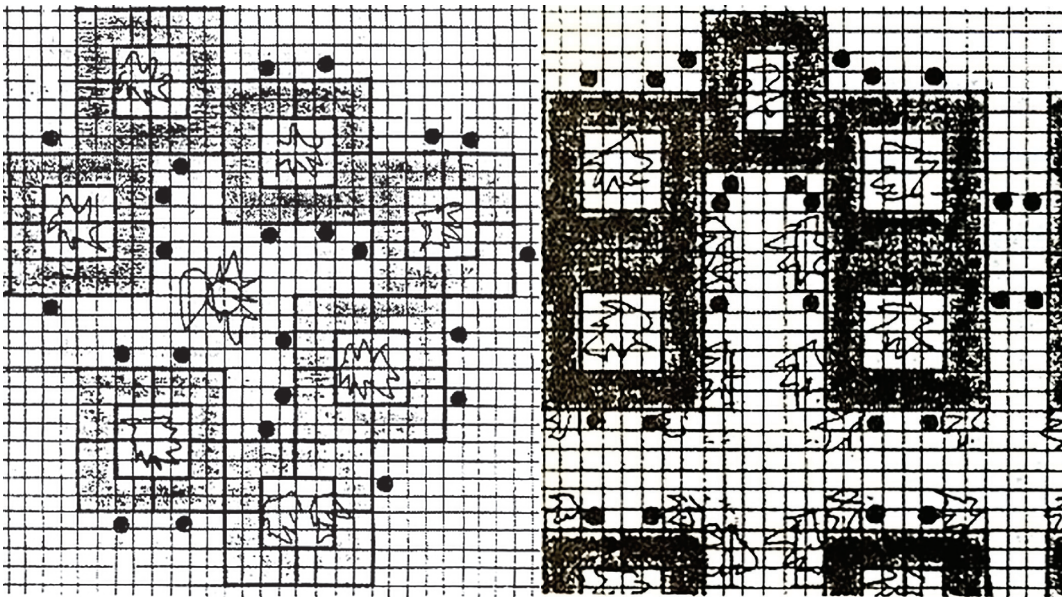


Fig. 10, 11

As for some functional parameters, I considered that sound and heat insulation (deficient in current housing) could be achieved by reversing the spaces: the circulation to the bedrooms placed to the outside, and the bedrooms to the inside, ventilated through two rows of windows. Even the still pending proliferation of the Koch bacilli — a less openly debated problem, but that our head of department, professor Haralambie Cocheci, pointed out to us — was discussed with a virologist and solved by ensuring adequate lighting of the sleeping areas.

AMZ: *What were the practical results of your study?*

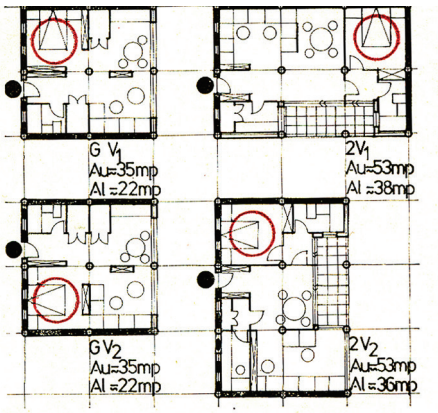
TOG: I resumed some of these housing issues, obviously with no practical results, during my travelling back and forth between Buzău and Bucharest, where I worked after the dissolution of the architecture school in Timișoara. Yet, all these directions of study did equip me with some foundations on which to carry my future work from 1983 to 1985. They helped me to design some systematization details, rather as "replicas" to the already approved projects, for sites under redevelopment in the historical center of my hometown, Buzău, and in the central areas of Râmnicu Sărat. In Bucharest, I developed a series of studies on housing at the Design Institute for Typified Constructions – IPCT.[12]

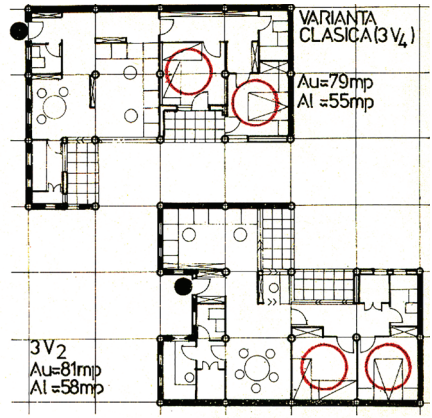
The first practical results of my studies came, although not as I expected, nearly two decades later, when I completed the design for condominium-type solutions for two small residential developments — about forty units in total — built in Arad between 2004 and 2006. I adapted one of the local formulas of rural and urban periphery dwellings to a terraced housing typology, organized around a controlled public space and small private properties.[13] This proposal was preceded by a series of similar studies and a proposals partly carried out in Timisoara.[14]

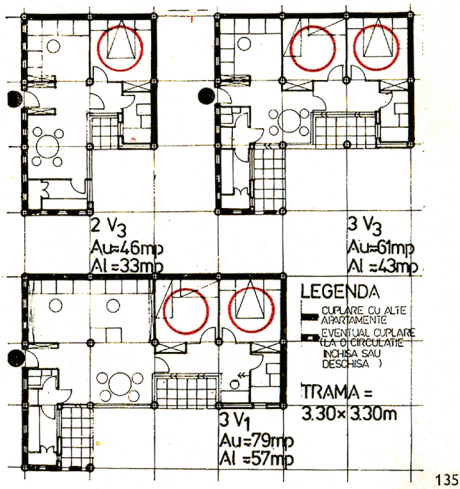
12 The IPCT was the main research and design centre in the field of typification, especially housing in blocks of flats, producing catalogues of type sections applicable throughout the country. It was also doing sociological research, with results that were applied to some "alternative" housing ideas, but these remained just "desk studies."

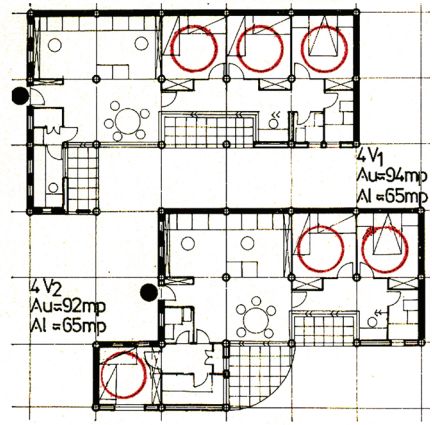
13 T. O. Gheorghiu, "Rezidenţa românească între tradiţie şi banalitate" ["The Romanian Dwelling. Between Tradition and Banality"], *Arhitext design* 3 (2001).

14 T.O. Gheorghiu, Mihai Rusu, "Cartierul Banatul – o operaţiune în suburbia timişoreană" ["The Banatul District – An Intervention in the Periphery of Timișoara"], *Arhitext* 9-10 (1995).









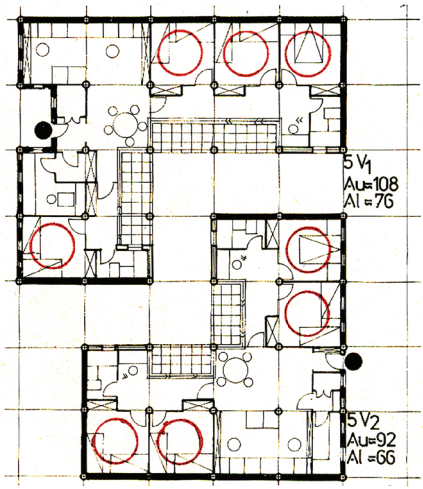
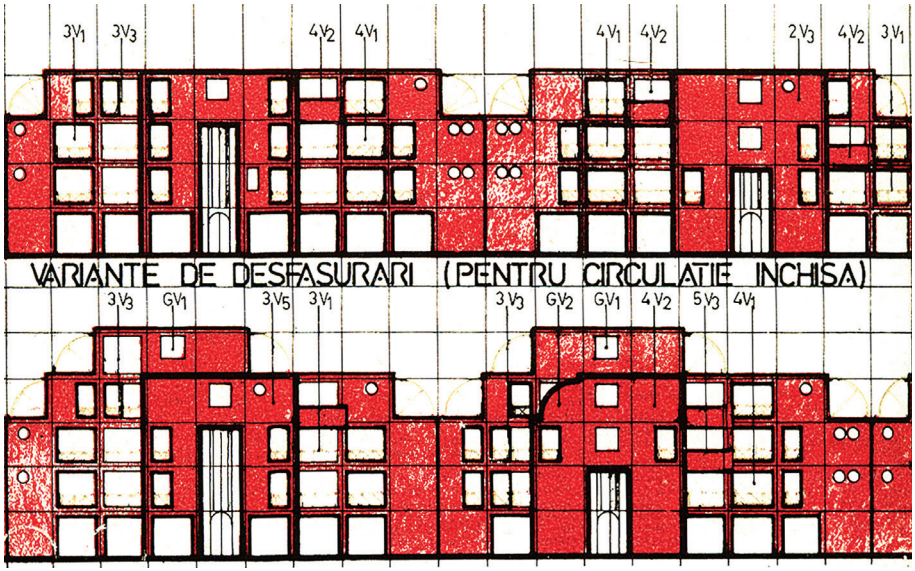


Fig. 12
Fig. 13 (facing page)



In relation to the Arad developments, I must admit that I was impressed by the developer's decision to accept this type of housing, although he started from the usual formula of plotting for isolated so-called "villas." It was a timely decision with which he was actually successful. But my collaboration with him stopped because of his own indecisions and outside interference, leading him towards more common formulae, perhaps more marketable.

AMZ: *Did you also develop your attempt at semi-collective housing after the fall of Communism in Romania? I remember that in 1991, after finishing my doctoral thesis on the same topic — which, by the way, was catalyzed precisely by the students' projects that you mentioned before — I was anticipating that this new dwelling-type would soon be built in Romania. I also remember your reservation; you told me that, in your opinion, the probability to see this type of housing development is very low, against the background of a hardly emerging local market. In retrospect, I am afraid that you were right. Did the professional landscape change compared to the first two decades of your practice?*

TOG: Not very much. For instance, in 2005, I worked on a promising project that was part of the rehabilitation and conversion of an industrial building (Fig. 14-16), in which all the valuable historical components were preserved to be used for community facilities. It was a proposal for low-rise high-density collective housing, using passageways to access the apartments. I must have frightened the investor, because in the project he adopted, apart from the almost total disappearance of the former industrial buildings, the housing was solved by the usual sections of high-rise blocks of flats. The second attempt, in 2008 (Fig. 17-20), was a conversion of another large industrial site in Arad, far from the central area, with high buildings with different uses, where the residential areas were to be shaped in a mixed system of terraced houses, as they were coupled on two or three sides. I was able to detail several modular types of housing in both systems, units that allowed for extensions, multiple adaptations and coupling on all sides. Density-wise, the resulting fabric was comparable to that of a five-story block of flats.

It is obvious that the way in which this type of housing was researched, discussed and built in socialist Romania remained far below the level required by such an issue. The results (on a huge scale and far from successful) are obvious, but we are probably used to them. I don't think that professionals have asked very often the question of typological alternatives, embracing too easily the rapid solution to the increasing housing demand determined by the social mutations of the Communist period, and taking solace in the fact that, after all, pretty much the same typologies were applied in Romania as elsewhere in the world, regardless of political or economic realities.

1 - GRĂDINIȚĂ
2 - HALĂ - COMERȚ - P+3
3 - HALĂ - COMERȚ - P+1
4 - BIROURI - „POARTĂ"
5 - LOCUINȚE CU CURSIVĂ INTERIOARĂ P+3+M
6 - LOCUINȚE CU CURSIVĂ EXTERIOARĂ P+3+M.

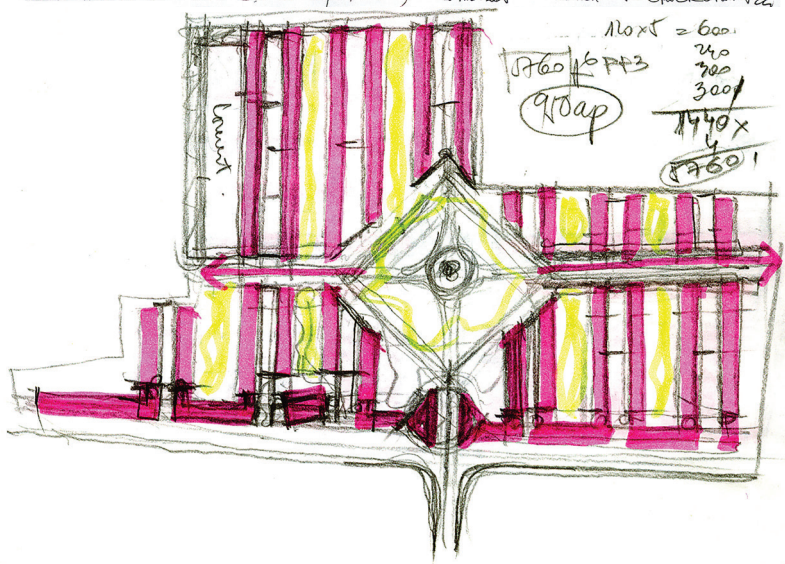


BILANȚ AP.
A - 120 AP
B - 150 AP
C - 140 AP
D - 200 AP
E - 470 AP
F - 300 AP

BILANȚ DOTĂRI
- COMERȚ PARTER - 5000 mp
- HALĂ - COM. P+3 - 4000 mp
- HALĂ - COM. P+1 - 6200 mp
TOTAL 15200 mp
SP. VERDE STRUCT. 9000 mp + CURȚI INT.
- PARCAJE

TOTAL - 1380 AP. STANDARD (1100 AP 2CAM, 4CAM.)

20 APR. 2005 DR. ARH. T. GHEORGHIU



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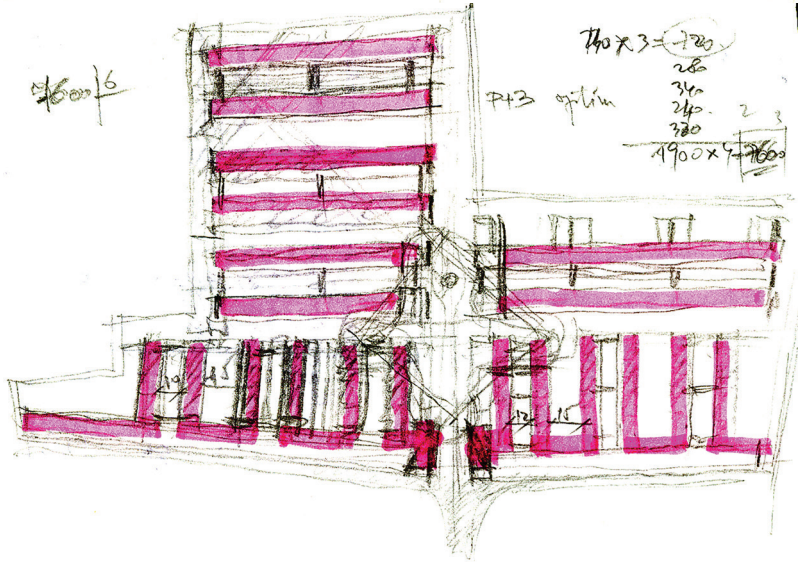

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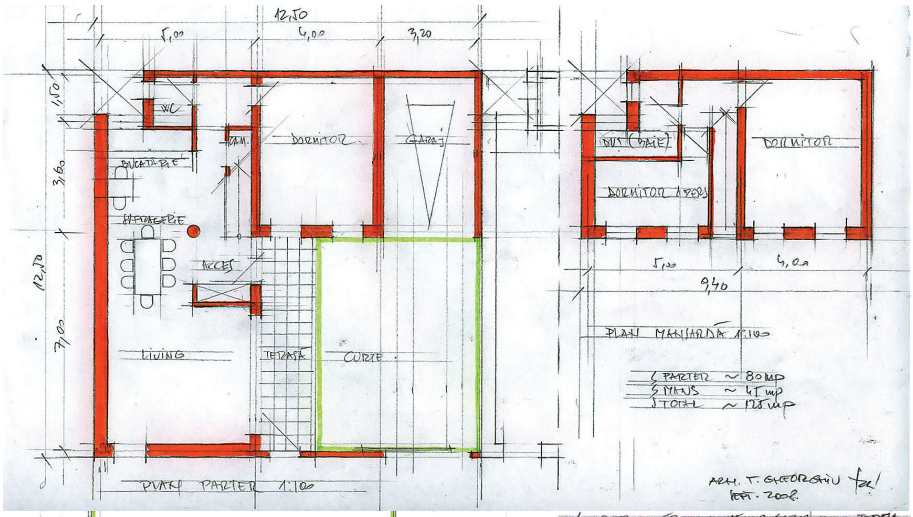
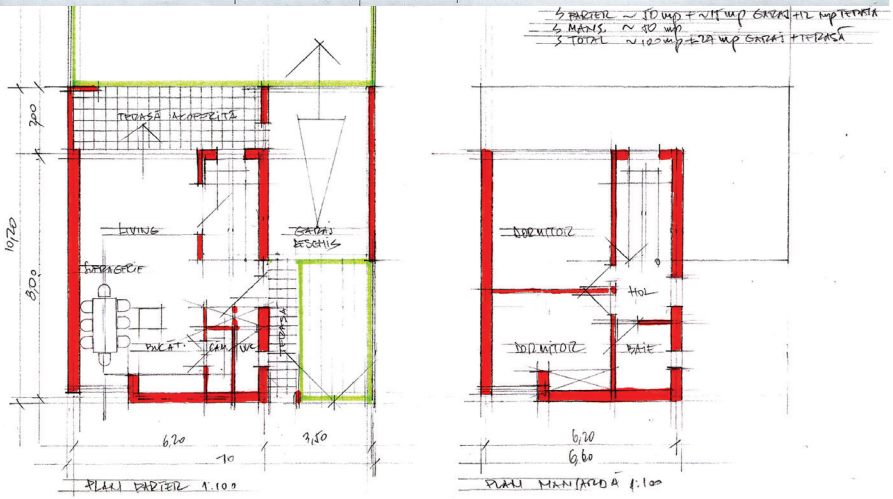
Fig. 14-16 (facing page)
Fig. 17, 18 (above) and 19, 20 (below)





A gloomier image is that of the new housing estates that replaced old centers or traditional urban housing areas, but this process of urban renewal was also being generally embraced around the world, and embraced by most architects in Romania, as well. As far as users are concerned, they are satisfied with the location (much more central than the new housing estates and neighborhoods) and the decent modern comfort (much better than in their previous poorly equipped houses). To be fair, the housing parameters of comfort gradually and regularly improved in terms of amenities and adaptability to family needs. The major exceptions to this improvement were the accessibility and the parking, which were not important issues for the Communist authorities — for professionals neither, for that matter.

At the same time, it is obvious that even after 1989 ideas about housing have not changed. After a couple of decades of individual housing booms that took up huge areas around cities — the pattern is easy to detect — the developments of the past decade have brought back the apartment building. I have no intention to make detailed qualitative assessments, but in the vast majority of cases the typologies are not superior to those built before 1990, neither in terms of overall organization nor in terms of functional solutions. The only improvement concerns the equipment and the finishing materials. Against this dull picture, a few "semi-collective" housing insertions stand out in urban areas with a strong personality, produced by only a few Romanian studios. They are well known nation-wide, but I don't think they have enough impact on the housing market.

AMZ: *What are the impediments for better or, at least, more diverse housing-scape in Romania?*

TOG: I don't know if the architects or planners have tried alternative solutions and ended up adopting the investor-friendly designs, but I wonder if they would have really known what to propose. Considering the lack of serious professional debate on the subject and the limited circulation of the few doctoral products that address it, it seems to me that there are no resources to generate a change of mentality. As for the users' views (admittedly, difficult to know, as long as neither a market research, nor any sociological or social-psychological studies are done), seeing what is being built, sold and rented, it seems to vacillate between the two formulas: single house on a lot and apartment in a block.

AMZ: *These are, indeed, the two extremes in housing research and practice, and the overall picture is not very encouraging. However, as we have seen and as your own practice illustrates, there have been some efforts to craft intermediate, hybrid ways of building our habitats. How would you end our dialogue in an optimistic way?*

TOG: I would cite a professional who produced, to my knowledge, the first post-war Romanian synthesis on collective housing:

> "In order to define urban housing, a relative differentiation of units must first be accepted, a presence of units in a superior system in terms of organization, complexity, hierarchy, etc. The grouping of units in collective housing as well as the high density of units per surface area, etc., are only quantitative determinations of urban housing. Urban housing is characterized by the intensity and variety of the social, economic, functional, historical, compositional and other relationships that link housing to the other components of the residential environment (facilities, amenities, etc.)."[15]

These words not only justify my research into more qualitative aspects while also addressing the demand for the quantitative, but I think they point to the essence of our duty as professionals, not to content ourselves with the easy and easily accepted solutions, but to look for nuances in the spacing between the individual and the collective.

15 Peter Derer, *Locuirea urbană* [Urban dwelling] (Bucharest: Editura Tehnică, 1985), 41.