

From *Casa Scânteii* to *Casa Poporului* and Back Architecture as Icon of a Totalitarian Regime

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The inspiration for the subsequent article has been drawn from a very recently issued book and also from one that was written more than forty years ago. The former is a study in the history of architecture written by Alexandru Panaitescu and entitled *From Casa Scânteii to Casa Poporului, Four Decades of Architecture in Bucharest 1945 – 1989*. The latter is George Orwell's *1984*. Why these two starting points?

The title chosen by Alexandru Panaitescu for his book mentions these two buildings as the first and final moment of the communist regime's architectural project. As revealed by party documents, the political decision for the construction of *Casa Scânteii*, the main publishing center of the new regime, was taken in early 1948², with the architectural project following a few months later. In 1949, the English novelist George Orwell wrote his famous dystopian novel, *1984*, imagining, with an astonishing clairvoyance, a very similar society to that of Romania in the Eighties. The building of the *Ministry of Love* in Orwell's novel brings to mind - not by its appearance, but by its relevance as the supreme building - *Casa Republicii* or, as it came to be known, *Casa Poporului*. The construction of *Casa Republicii* was initiated in June 1984, as a celebration of forty years of communism in Romania. From the point of view of architecture (or, arguably, of shape and language,) the two buildings are similar and usually described as *Socialist Realist*.

Nevertheless, a question raised in one of Augustin Ioan's books surfaces at this point: "Is Romanian architecture symmetrical, having Stalinism as its axis?"³, or, in other words, *are these two constructions landmarks, emphasizing two distinctive climaxes in the evolution of the Romanian architectural history?* If so, traces and echoes should be found in the latter development of Romanian architecture and their emblematic design should have emerged from within the national practice, as a genuine outcome. Yet history shows through documents or in some cases only through memories that both buildings were designed with little regard to the architects' professional opinions⁴.

1 Alexandru Panaitescu, *De la Casa Scânteii la Casa Poporului. Patru decenii de arhitectură în București. 1945-1989* [From *Casa Scânteii to Casa Poporului. Four Decades of Architecture in Bucharest*] (Bucharest: Simetria, 2012).

2 Arh. Horia Maicu, "Despre proiectarea Casei Scânteii" [On the Design of *Casa Scânteii*], in *Arhitectura* 1 (1951), 3.

3 Augustin Ioan, *Modern Architecture and the Totalitarian Project. A Romanian Case Study* (Bucharest: ICR, 2009), 132.

4 The opposing vision of the architects on the design of *Casa Scânteii* was revealed from the beginning by *Arhitectura* through an article, signed by one of the authors of the project, written in the typical manner of the Soviet propaganda (criticism and self-criticism, recognition of Soviet supremacy, etc.). Ana Maria Zahariade points out that at the end of the seventies, even if this was kept quiet, architects began to affirm their disapproval toward the absurd political decisions in architecture and urbanism. Furthermore, she remarks that in the '80s, apart from a very pompous announcement of the inauguration of the construction site for the *House of the Republic*, the *Arhitectura* review had no other articles about the topic. In the author's opinion, this intentional ignorance was a form of "professional resistance", a "low level of subversion." See Ana Maria Zahariade, *Arhitectura în proiectul comunist. România 1944-1989* [Architecture in the Communist Project: Romania 1944-1989] (Bucharest: Simetria, 2011), 85-86.



Fig. 1. "This is what 'Casa Scânteii' will look like", Scânteia, September 23, 1950, 1.

It is not the intention of this article either to clarify the status of these two symbolical structures within the Romanian architectural evolution or to detail the complicated histories that stand in the background of their conception and construction. And while this approach cannot be completely ignored, the article will only use it in order to point out the public image of the two structures as it was outlined in the most important newspapers in order to emphasize their symbolic relevance. The year 1948 can be seen as the first significant moment for the decision of erecting *Casa Scânteii* and 1984 was the year when the foundation stone was laid for *Casa Republicii*. Thus, in the approach that the present article proposes, it is not the importance of the real buildings that is taken into consideration, but the elaboration of a public image to stand for both of these buildings.

The year 1948 also represents one of the most difficult periods in Romanian history, a time fraught with dramatic changes at all social levels. The entire social and cultural horizon altered within a year, not least through the suppression of Christianity: on the 5th of January 1948, the official party newspaper still announced the raising of the national flag in honor of the religious service on Saint John's day⁵, yet a year later, the same daily journal printed a short notice, claiming that "Workers of numerous industrial sites in the country decided to work on the 7th of January"⁶, without any other mention of the religious significance of the day. The same page also featured a letter (most probably a fictitious one) signed by a group of Romanian students from Ivanovo, U.S.S.R. who claimed to offer an amount of money for the construction of *Casa Scânteii*.

The intention of building *Casa Scânteii* turned into an imperative at the end of 1949 and it was made official through the publication of a financial act: the second Yearly Plan for 1950, issued on the 30th of December 1949. In the fifth chapter of the Yearly Plan for 1950, entitled "Raising the living standard", the last paragraph was dedicated to the construction of *Casa Scânteii*: "Of an exceptional importance for the cultural progress of the masses is the construction of *Casa Scânteii*, which will create unexpected possibilities for literature and culture dissemination in our country".⁷ The sixth chapter, dedicated to "raising the living and cultural standards of the working class" of the Yearly Plan for 1949 announced the construction of a cinematographic studio in

5 *Scânteia*, January 5, 1948, 2.

6 *Scânteia*, January 5, 1949, 3.

7 "De o excepțională importanță pentru ridicarea culturală a maselor, este începerea construirii Casei Scânteii care va crea posibilități nemaicunoscute în țara noastră pentru răspândirea cărții și culturii," *Planul de Stat al Republicii Populare Române pe anul 1950*, [The State Plan of the People's Republic of Romania for the year 1950]([Bucharest]: Comisia de Stat a Planificării, [1949]), 35.

Bucharest for the production of Romanian movies and of theaters in six of the industrial cities as well as the (re)construction of the Bucharest National Theatre. In 1950 the initial work on the two edifices proposed for Bucharest was postponed in favor of building *Scânteia House*, the main publishing center and the location of the most efficient propaganda instrument.

As far as we know, the iconic image of *Casa Scânteii* appeared for the first time in the *Scânteia* daily on the 23rd of September 1950, following the publication of the project in the illustrated edition of the Yearly Plan for 1950, issued in July. An identical drawing with the one published in September in *Scânteia* was on the front page of other newspapers in the same period, such as *Constructorul* (on October 2) and one can easily remark the similarity of this drawing with the one that stood for many years on the 100 lei bill, issued to promote the monetary reform of 1952.

In all three cases (*Scânteia*, *Yearly Plan*, *Constructorul*), the printed image of the building accompanied news about other significant events of political life, though not directly related to the construction of *Casa Scânteii*. On the 23rd of September, *Scânteia* was celebrating its 6th year of legal publication. October was the “Month of the Soviet - Romanian friendship” and (along with the monetary reform), 1952 was the year of the Romanian Socialist Constitution (a mirror of the Soviet Constitution) but most of all 1952 was the year when architecture was under the sway of *Socialist Realism*. The usage of a *red calendar*⁸ for celebrating political life was a common feature of the “Sovietizing” mechanism of society and culture, whether this refers to Russia in the 1930s or to Eastern Europe some twenty years later.

Propaganda in the media included, beside specific visual and written materials for popularization, an entire *agitprop* structure that practically created the *avant-garde* and the *arrière-garde* of the ritual procession for the celebration of the *red days*⁹. Articles announcing festivals and celebrations were published so as to precede all major events by days, always comforting the public with a very detailed and explicit idea of what the future would look like.¹⁰ Usually, the titles of the foresighted articles in newspapers had the following construction: “this is what ... will look like” or “this is what a day at the festival will be like”. Mass mobilisation was one of the main features of the *agitprop* of the 1950s and in this respect festivals were opportunities for a society in motion: a festival assumed the involvement of a great number of people for its preparation. As in a mirror-to-mirror game, the newspapers introduced individuals who were working harder in order to be ready to go and participate in the preparations for a festival where people would happily celebrate the accomplishments of the party, fulfilled with the help of those *remarkable* workers always striving to exceed the targets of the economic plan.

In order to increase the excitement about the construction of *Casa Scânteii*, in 1948 *Scânteia* newspaper took to celebrating, through a mass festival entitled *Scânteia's Days*, four years of legal printing. In a timeline, the event might be seen as a preamble for the construction of *Casa Scânteii*. From the beginning of the month until the 19th of September the front page of *Scânteia* dedicated a short illustrated article to the preparations for *Scânteia* festival. It was not the exact

8 For further references see Malte Rolf, “A Hall of Mirrors, Sovietizing Culture under Stalinism,” in *Slavic Review* 3 (2009): 604

9 As Malte Rolf notes in his article, the main *red* dates in the Soviet calendar of the 1930s were the 1st of May and the October Revolution. After 1948, along with the Soviet holidays, other specific holidays were added: Stalin's birthday, the Romanian Communist Party congress day, 1944 Victory day, the month of Soviet – Romanian friendship (that in effect was another way of emphasizing the Soviet celebrations in October) etc.

10 One of the characteristic touches of the communist social imaginary, created with the support of propaganda, was to rely either on a glorious past or on a bright new future. The present day was actually never there: when working, people already went beyond the present, exceeding the plan and working for the coming days; when celebrating, works in progress (or even intentions) were showed off as accomplishments of the new political regime.

information which was meant to astonish the public, but rather the “immeasurable” dimensions of the works¹¹ and the contradictory feelings of the builders in front of their work:

“What is under construction at this height? (...) The workers are putting up a giant framework to sustain the oversized emblem of the Republic.”¹²

Or:

“What? Didn’t you see yet the preparations for ‘*Scânteia’s Days*’? Didn’t you see the enormous framework soaring to the sky, or the six imposing platforms and the multitude of artists who rehearse? (...) Comrade, imagine a colossal building site, so huge that you cannot even survey it, a swarm of people in continuous movement. (...) How many artists will be there? It will be impossible to count them: tens of ensembles and teams.”¹³

And:

“Thousands of workers and technicians are working in festive fever. (...) Feverishly and joyfully: that is how people are working in the National Park, for the preparation of ‘*Scânteia’s Days*’.”¹⁴

Their zeal honored the “central daily of the party, the most beloved newspaper of the whole working class in our country”.¹⁵ The same ritual was reiterated the following year, and in 1949 the preparation for *Scânteia’s Days* was once again one of the main topics in the September articles of *Scânteia*. In 1949, the surface allocated to the festival was extended to 23 platforms placed in different parks in Bucharest and once again workers, artists and architects were joining their efforts *feverishly* to finish the work - in advance if possible – as a tribute to *Scânteia* and its grandiose celebration.

“The carpenters insisted on participating in the *Scânteia* celebration in a very special way. They organized the team challenge and therefore the work will be finished 15 days in advance. On the building site of such an event as *Scânteia’s Days* it would have been impossible not to organize the team challenge.”¹⁶

And:

“There will be great panels everywhere representing scenes from the life of the working people of our country, but there will also be panels with caricatures. Our artists are feverishly working to finish as soon as possible.”¹⁷

On the 16th of April 1949 a bicycle race taking place between Bucharest and Predeal was entitled *Scânteia Race*. The motorcycle race that took place in September 1949, between Bucharest and Oradea, also bore *Scânteia’s* name, yet with a different message: “Let’s build *Casa Scânteii*”. That

11 Yet the celebration confined itself to the perimeter of The National Park – the present Herăstrău Park in Bucharest.

12 “Ce se construiește la această înălțime? (...) Muncitorii montează o scelă uriașă pe care va fi arborată o mare emblemă a R.P.R.”, *Scânteia*, January 8, 1948, 1.

13 “Cum? N-ai văzut până acum pregătirile care se fac pentru «Ziua Scânteii»? N-ai văzut schelele uriașe înălțându-se spre cer, cele 6 scene impunătoare și mulțimea de artiști care repetă? (...) Închipește-ți tovarășe, un șantier mare să nu-l poți cuprinde cu ochii, un furnicar de oameni care nu stă o clipă locului. (...) Câți artiști vin? În orice caz n-o să îi poți număra. Zeci de ansambluri și echipe.” *Scânteia*, September 16, 1948, 1.

14 “Mii de muncitori și tehnicieni lucrează cu înfrigurare sărbătorească. (...) Cu înfrigurare și voieșie: așa se lucrează în Parcul Național, pentru pregătirea «Zilei Scânteii»,” *Scânteia*, September 17, 1948, 1.

15 *Scânteia*, September 17, 1948, 1.

16 “Muncitorii dulgheri au ținut să participe într-un mod deosebit la sărbătorirea «Scânteii». Au organizat întrecerea pe echipe și astfel lucrările vor fi terminate cu 15 zile înainte. – Pe un șantier de pregătire a «Zilei Scânteii» nici că s-ar fi putut să nu organizăm întrecerea.” *Scânteia*, September 10, 1949, 3.

17 “Pretutindeni se vor înălța mari panouri reprezentând scene din viața poporului muncitor din țara noastră, precum și panouri cu caricaturi. Artiștii noștri plastici lucrează cu înfrigurare pentru a le termina cât mai curând.” *Scânteia*, September 6, 1949, 3.

meant that the celebrations had moved a step forward. Reading further in the *Scântea* daily, it seems that *Scântea's* festivals in 1948-1949 were only a great rehearsal for the actual building work. During the following years, until 1952, beside the main journal of the party, all the other newspapers kept the population informed on the work in progress on the site.

Even if the design for *Casa Scântei* had been completed by the end of 1949, it was only in 1951 that a detailed presentation of the project was published in *Arhitectura* magazine¹⁸. The same issue of the journal included a short review of the Five-Year Plan and also the text of the Act.¹⁹ This association (between the legislative text and the architectural project) was without doubt a deliberate decision, overemphasizing the importance of the financial plan and, consequently, of the political authority. The fundamental role assigned to architecture, as an instrument of the newly established regime, became clear in 1952, which was the climax of Romanian *Sovietization*.²⁰ "The decisive year"²¹ cumulated a series of events regarding architecture that culminated in November 1952 with the reorganization of the architectural profession through a series of three decrees reiterating Soviet legislation. As the main architect of *Casa Scântei* has described it, the original design for the building suffered severe alterations or corrections, received both from the political authorities and from the Soviet specialists. The official recognition of the project for *Casa Scântei* took place in the summer of 1952, in Moscow.

In 1949, the team of architects which had been commissioned to design *Casa Scântei* visited Moscow to receive instructions on improving the project and in 1950, as previously mentioned, the plans were made public in the newspapers and the work started on the building site. On the 24th of June 1952 the opening of an exhibition of Romanian architecture, in Moscow, presented both traditional architecture and new achievements. The centerpiece of the main room was the three-dimensional model of *Casa Scântei*. It was only after their pilgrimage to Moscow, after the issuing of the constitution and the changes in the field of architecture that the authors of the design for *Casa Scântei* received the First Degree State Award in November 1952. The granting of the State Award for architecture had been postponed since 1948 under the motivation that none of the projects presented (in 1949) had found the *true* way to express "the great transformation of society".²²

Following the political decisions of November 1952 the social imaginary of the communist future began to be constructed in *tempo allegro*: the first (local) *Socialist Realist* iconic buildings were on the front pages of all kinds of magazines and reviews, such as *Scântea* [*The Spark*], *Contemporanul* [*The Contemporary*], *Știința și cultura* [*Science and Culture*], *Știința și tehnica pentru tineret* [*Science and Technology for Youth*], *Constructorul* [*The Builder*], etc. Images of the buildings, only presented as models or as work in progress, were joined with expository texts or, in the absence of pictures,

18 After 1948, *Arhitectura* was the only specialised periodical. In fact, beginning with 1950 it became, more or less, a mirror of the Russian publication bearing the same title. And between 1953 and 1956 the Romanian review *Arhitectura* borrowed all the characteristics of the Russian magazine, including format, page arrangement, content, etc. For further details see Ana Maria Zahariade, Nicolae Lascu, Augustin Ioan, *Arhitectura românească postbelică – Istorii reprimare; revista Arhitectura ca sursă a arhitecturii postbelice* [Romanian Post-war Architecture – Repressed Histories: *Arhitectura* Magazine as Source for Post-war Architecture], [2001]; Ana Maria Zahariade, Irina Tulbure, "Parcurgând anii 1950" [Through the 1950s], in *Arhitectura* 43 (2006), 34-41, Miruna Stroe, "Iluzia libertății în 'Arhitectura': Anii '60" [The Illusion of Freedom in *Arhitectura*: the 1960s], *Arhitectura* 45 (2006), 38-43.

19 The Act of the Five-Year Plan was issued on the 16th of December 1950 and stipulated financial investments for specific buildings: *Casa Scântei*, Bufta Cinematographic Studio, the National Radio Studio, the National Theater and the Opera House, all of them situated in Bucharest. As in the case of the yearly plan for 1949, not all these constructions were completed before 1955.

20 Zahariade, *Arhitectura în proiectul comunist*, 24-33.

21 As Zahariade calls the year 1952 (Zahariade, *Arhitectura în proiectul comunist*, 25).

22 "Premiul de stat și laureații premiului de stat" [The State Prize and its Winners], in *Arhitectura* 4 (1951): 1.

rhapsodic articles depicted the future. In 1952, through the iconic image of *Casa Scânteii*, the role of architecture became decisive for the communist propaganda²³:

“The recent documents regarding the socialist reconstruction of cities in our country, of Bucharest itself and the construction of the metropolitan subway are a brilliant expression of the party’s tireless efforts for the maximal satisfaction of the material and cultural everyday needs of the working masses. The function of architecture in our country – the party teaches us – is to serve the entire people.”²⁴

What is more, in November 1952, the architect himself was assigned the task to underline in the pages of a newspaper the relevance of the award and the importance of *Casa Scânteii* as an iconic image of the communist regime:

“Relying on the technical abilities and the creative urge of the working people of our country, the party and the government entrusted some architects, engineers and technicians with the elaboration of the design and the construction of the building. And they took these tasks as a moral duty.”²⁵

In fact, everybody was involved in the construction of *Casa Scânteii*, no matter if they were working on the site or not. Beside the workers, technicians, engineers and architects who were directly involved in the construction, all other categories claimed – through the newspaper’s voice – their participation in building *Casa Scânteii*: miners by subscribing funds from their salaries, artists and orphans by singing and dancing in special shows organized to collect money for the construction. This was undoubtedly a *socialist project* that concerned everybody but, in the background of the iconic image of the building, propaganda for the construction of *Casa Scânteii* might be seen as a network making the delivery of Soviet ideology to the masses possible²⁶. Its channels were all the mass media outlets of the time: journals (and popular literature), radio, cinematography and theater, all these were the central focus of the investment in culture envisaged by the financial plans. *Raising cultural standards*, a recurrent slogan of the communist regime, was correspondent to the indoctrination with communist ideology. The building of *Casa Scânteii* was the main official strategy for satisfying this requirement; as the ultimate *socialist project*²⁷, it represented a self-sufficient structure ready to launch political messages such as the dominance of the Soviet Union, the supremacy of sophisticated Soviet technology and of the Soviet scientist, the

23 With all the political changes that occurred in 1956, and despite the restyling of the architectural language, the (political) importance of architecture never decreased after 1952. And during the entire communist period, Romanian newspapers used architecture as one of the most efficient instruments of *visual propaganda*.

24 “Recentele documente privind reconstrucția socialistă a orașelor țării, a Bucureștiului și construirea metroului din Capitală, sunt o strălucită expresie a neobositei griji a partidului pentru satisfacerea maximală a necesităților zilnice de trai, materiale și culturale ale maselor de oameni ai muncii. Arhitectura țării noastre – ne învață partidul – este pusă în slujba întregului popor.” *Contemporanul*, November 21, 1952, 8.

25 “Partidul și guvernul, biziindu-se pe capacitatea tehnică și elanul creator al oamenilor muncii din țara noastră, a încredințat realizarea proiectului și a executării lui unor cadre de arhitecți, ingineri și tehnicieni care au socotit îndeplinirea acestor sarcini ca o datorie de onoare.” *Constructorul*, November 6, 1952, 3.

26 In 1953, the construction of a series of buildings of socio-cultural significance began alongside that of *Casa Scânteii*. Some of these had been already announced in the financial plans up to 1951, but at the beginning of 1953, *Scânteia* was declaring proudly that the Fourth Youth Festival would take place in Bucharest that summer. Since then, the identity of these buildings has been related to the Youth Festival in Bucharest. Since neither the case of *Casa Scânteii* nor the one of the *Youth Festival Buildings* was singular, it seems that the construction of a *complete socialist project* was based upon the association between an official party decision accredited through a legislative document, a festival (or at least *festive working by team challenge* taking place during a *red* holiday, well promoted in the press), the construction of a building (either civil architecture, industrial buildings or infrastructure works) and the official recognition of the merits both of the architects and of the workers and technicians. This entire propagandistic framework was intended to make the buildings be of interest to everyone.

27 *Casa Scânteii* was one of the main *socialist projects* built in Romania not only because of the association with the fundamental legislation based upon the Soviet model, but also because its appearance strongly resembled the project for Lomonosov University in Moscow. And, as it was planned to happen in all of Eastern Europe – the most striking example being the Palace of Culture in Warsaw – these buildings were meant to visually express the superior role of the Soviet Union in the communist camp.



Fig.2.

top left: illustration in *Contemporarul* magazine, August 22, 1952, 3;

top right: illustration in *Contemporarul* magazine, January 2, 1952, 1, both drawings made by the same author. Architecture represented in the background: Casa Scântei, Thermal power station Doicești, Bicăz Dam.

bottom left: illustration in *Contemporarul* magazine, May 1, 1953, 1;

bottom right: illustration in *Contemporarul* magazine, November 5, 1954, 1. In the background: Soviet architectural landscape.

new (Soviet) man in his different embodiments (the Stakhanovite worker, the Soviet woman, the Soviet child, the party activist²⁸).

The different faces of *the new man* were also present in a local version of propaganda, embodied in the workers (the Romanian Stakhanovites following the Soviet example) and technicians, the Stakhanovite woman (peasant or worker, but nevertheless, a mother), the child (usually an orphan who had the party as protector) or the youngster, the young activist, the peasant. They were the recipients and at the same time the heroes of the propaganda:

“For the celebration of the 1st of May, workers and technicians on the ‘Casa Scântei’ building site organized a festive shift. (...). Their success was mostly due to the usage of Soviet working

28 For a description of these categories see Adrian Cioroianu, “Lumina vine de la Răsărit. ‘Noua imagine’ a Uniunii Sovietice în România postbelică, 1944-1947” [The Light Comes from the East. The “New Image” of the Soviet Union in Post-war Romania, 1944-1947]. In *Miturile comunismului românesc* [The Myths of Romanian Communism], ed. Lucian Boia (Bucharest: Nemira, 1998), 41-53.

methods. Together with his team of iron workers, the Stakhanovite Dumitru Manea exceeded the daily plan by 85 percent. Dumitru Manea is using the Soviet production line method.”²⁹

Forty years later, the central place in the picture was taken by *the most beloved of all the people in Romania*, a figure cumulating all the heroic features of the *new man*. Ceaușescu was the *revolutionary*, the *theoretician*, the *guardian of peace*, the *architect (the greatest national architect of all time)* of a new Romania, the *most beloved son* and at the same time the *most beloved father* of the nation³⁰. After the consolidation of power through his election as president of the country, Ceaușescu (and his wife)³¹ received all the titles of a communist hero: *first miner of the country*, *supreme commander of the army*, *honorary president of the Romanian Academy*, etc. In this respect, he represented one by one all the protagonists of the propaganda of the Fifties and therefore, the propaganda created around Ceaușescu's personality in the Eighties had his image as complex icon and himself as its only truly susceptible recipient, while the former actors were confined to secondary or even non-speaking parts.

In 1984, on the 23rd of July, the newspaper *Informația Bucureștiului* announced the “Constructor’s Day”. Instead of focusing on celebrating the workers, the article (entitled “Tribute to the people on the scaffold” emphasized the prevalence of Ceaușescu:

“As a symbol of the great consideration that the party and the whole nation have for the devoted work of people on the scaffold, the celebration of the “Constructor’s Day” is an opportunity to review the magnificent achievements of the building enterprise in Bucharest and throughout the country, especially during the most fertile age of our country history - the Nicolae Ceaușescu Era.”³²

It was on the 26th of June that all printed media festively announced that “Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu, together with Comrade Elena Ceaușescu, had inaugurated [on the 25th of June] the building site of ‘Casa Republicii’ and the ‘Victoria Socialismului’ Avenue”. Almost the entire edition of *Scânteia* was dedicated to the event. A document - signed by the presidential family - was buried at the foundation of *Casa Republicii*:

“In the 40th year of celebrating the revolution of social and national liberation, of the free and independent development of Romania, we inaugurated the work for the construction of ‘Casa Republicii’ and ‘Victoria Socialismului’ Avenue, bright and magnificent foundations belonging to this era of profound and innovative transformations. Monumental buildings that will endure over centuries, as an important proof of Bucharest citizens’ aspiration, of the whole nation’s aspiration to invest our metropolis and country with dignity and magnificence.”³³

29 “Muncitorii și tehnicienii constructori de pe șantierul ‘Casa Scânteii’ au organizat în întâmpinarea zilei de 1 Mai, un schimb de onoare. (...) Succesele obținute în această zi se datoresc în cea mai mare parte folosirii metodelor sovietice de lucru. Stahanovistul Dumitru Manea împreună cu echipa lui de fierari betonisti a realizat o depășire de 85%; Dumitru Manea aplică metoda sovietică de lucru în bandă.” *Constructorul*, April 28, 1952, 3.

30 Adrian Cioroianu, *Pe umerii lui Marx, O introducere în istoria comunismului românesc* [On the Shoulders of Marx. An Introduction to the History of Romanian Communism] (Bucharest: Curtea Veche: 2005), 490.

31 The cult of Ceaușescu's personality was accompanied since 1974 by the twin cult for his wife, Elena Ceaușescu, and it was extended by the end of the seventies to a family cult. See: Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism pentru eternitate, O istorie politică a comunismului românesc* [Stalinism for All Seasons. A Political History of Romanian Communism] (Iași: Polirom, 2005), 242; Cioroianu, *Pe umerii lui Marx*, 489-490.

32 “Simbol al înaltei aprecieri pe care partidul, întregul popor o acordă muncii pline de abnegație a oamenilor de pe schele, sărbătorirea ‘Zilei Constructorului’ prilejuiește trecerea în revistă a mărețelor realizări ale operei constructive desfășurate în Capitală, ca deopotrivă în întreaga țară, îndeosebi în perioada cea mai fertilă a istoriei patriei – ‘Epoca Nicolae Ceaușescu.’” *Informația Bucureștiului*, July 23, 1984, 1.

33 “În al 40-lea an al aniversării revoluției de eliberare socială și națională, de dezvoltare liberă și independentă a României, am inaugurat lucrările de construcție la Casa Poporului și Bulevardul Victoria Socialismului, mărețe și luminoase ctitorii ale acestei epoci de adânci transformări înnoitoare, construcții monumentale ce vor dăinui peste veacuri, ca o importantă mărturie



Fig.3.

left: illustration in *Contemporanul* magazine, March 30, 1984, 1;

right: illustration in *Contemporanul* magazine, August 22, 1984, 1.

All printed media used the same series of pictures to illustrate the articles and even if the architectural work was claimed to be the guest star, most of the pictures had *the great architect* and his wife as the main focus. He (and usually his wife also) was the only person in action, talking over the architectural model or dropping the first scoop of cement to the foundation of the building.

Unlike *Casa Scânteii*, the huge building of *Casa Republicii* did not have an explicit and pragmatic aim³⁴, the intention – as it emerges from the printed media – being rather to celebrate the glorious times of socialism, the *golden era* of Ceaușescu and Ceaușescu himself. Building the new civic center (*Casa Republicii* and *Victoria Socialismului* Avenue)³⁵ represented the “writing of a page of communist history”, “a deeper link with history”, “providing evidence of the glorious era”, “proof of the peaceful work of a free nation, owner of its destiny, constructor of socialism and communism”.³⁶ The role that *Casa Republicii* was meant to have for the people was nothing more than the embodiment of the headquarters of power, a symbol of the people’s subordination to the party and its leader and a genuine expression of national unity³⁷:

“In the beautiful and warm house of the country, the building of *Casa Republicii* has started, where the motherland will permanently connect with herself, with her past, her present and future; the motherland will speak to herself and to the world from there, because the

a voinței locuitorilor Bucureștilui, a întregului popor român, de a conferi demnitate și măreție capitalei țării, patriei noastre.”, *Informația Bucureștilui*, September 26, 1984, 1.

34 As it has been shown before, the legislative documents and the propaganda stipulated that *Casa Scânteii* would be the most consistent source of literature dedicated to the masses, under the pretext of mass enlightenment.

35 The area was described as “the most powerful political, financial, administrative and socio-cultural center of the country”, *Scânteia*, June 26, 1984, 3.

36 As it is commonly known, the pretext for constructing the buildings for the political center as well as for the whole *systematization* and reconstruction of Bucharest was the devastating earthquake that occurred in 1977. The documents reveal that in a meeting of the Executive Political Committee, Ceaușescu declared that “If we demolish everything, Bucharest will be a beautiful [city]”. Apud. Damiana Oțoiu, “Construind Victoria Socialismului” [Building the *Victoria Socialismului*]. In *Transformarea Socialistă. Politici ale regimului comunist, între ideologie și administrație* [The Socialist Transformation. The Policies of the Communist Regime, between Ideology and Administration], edited by Ruxandra Ivan (Iași: Polirom 2009), 182.

37 Lucian Boia, *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească* [History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness], (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1997), 74.

outstanding building will be the headquarters of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, the R.S.R. Government State Council.”³⁸

The opening of the building site for the monumental architectural ensemble was also intended to mark the reelection of Nicolae Ceaușescu as general secretary of the thirteenth congress of the Romanian Communist Party, held in November 1984. Already on the 29th of June 1984 the magazine *Contemporanul* announced on the front page the decision of the Central Committee to reelect Ceaușescu. The news was followed by a two-page fully illustrated article entitled “The bright forshadowing of future Bucharest in the Communist Era”. He was presented laying the foundation of *Casa Republicii*. The thirteenth congress was the second confirmation of Ceaușescu’s power; his election as president of the Republic had taken place during the eleventh congress, ten years before, in 1974. The wind of change was already perceptible in 1971 when Ceaușescu pronounced the “Thesis of July”, a moment identified as the beginning of the “Romanian cultural revolution”³⁹. In 1971 the destiny of Romania changed suddenly: the cultural field marked – since Ceaușescu’s nomination as the party’s General Secretary in 1965 – by a touch of liberalization transformed, little by little, into one of the most atrocious embodiments of a totalitarian regime.

It was at this point that Ceaușescu became more and more interested in connecting with national history. And it was also in the mid-seventies that history began to be rewritten around Ceaușescu’s cult. Historians call the moment the beginning of a “radical re-Stalinization”⁴⁰, but they also point out that even if Ceaușescu reactivated most of the projects⁴¹, policies and methods of the Fifties, he neglected to emphasize the direct filiations with Stalinism⁴². His relation to history was to be found as deep as possible in national history. If reference had to be made to the Fifties, the main focus was on emphasizing the present and its central personality. Even if most of the newspapers and journals heralded 1984 as the anniversary year of the Soviet power’s taking control⁴³, the main event of the year was still the thirteenth congress of the party. Of course, 1984 marked the celebration of forty years of a communist era, but Ceaușescu’s era was *the golden one*, the *peak*, etc. Giving a double significance to an existing event to outline the importance of the new moment was a common Soviet practice used in order to rewrite history and to create a bright new *red calendar*. And Ceaușescu used the same method.

As opposed to the building site of *Casa Scânteii*, situated at the periphery of the city, in an area free of constructions, the site of the civic center was located next to the heart of the city, part of the traditional urban fabric. Ceaușescu was inspired (and advised?) in choosing it by a series of projects that envisaged the same area: the construction of the Patriarchal Cathedral in the interwar period and the potential construction of a new University Center in Bucharest, stipulated in a draft version of the mid-sixties *systematization* plan for Bucharest⁴⁴. But the source of inspiration can also be easily found in the projects of the Fifties for Bucharest (also draft

38 „În frumoasa și ospitalieră casă a țării se zidește Casa Republicii unde patria va vorbi permanent cu sine, cu trecutul, cu prezentul, cu viitorul său; de acolo va vorbi patria sieși și lumii pentru că importanta construcție va avea sediul Comitetului Central al Partidului Comunist Român, Consiliul de Stat al Guvernului.” *Contemporanul*, June 29, 1984, 9.

39 Boia, *Istorie și mit*, 74, Adam Burakowski, *Dictatura lui Ceaușescu. 1965 – 1989. Geniul Carpaților* [Ceaușescu’s Dictatorship. 1965 – 1989. The Genius of the Carpathians], (Iași: Polirom, 2011), 155 – 159.

40 Tismăneanu, *Stalinism pentru eternitate*, 242.

41 In the same period, regarding architecture and infrastructure, beside the construction of the political center in Bucharest that recalled the construction of *Casa Scânteii*, two other projects from the Fifties were reactivated: the construction of the Danube – Black Sea Canal and the Metro network. Being too ambitious and expensive, both projects had been abandoned at the end of the Fifties.

42 Boia, *Istorie și mit*, 77.

43 Boia underlines the different filters used in the public perception of the 1944 moment: from “liberation of the country by the glorious Soviet army” to the “insurrection of the antifascist army” and in the end “the revolution of social and national liberation, of antifascist and anti-imperialist liberation”, Boia, *Istorie și mit*, 77.

44 Panăitescu, *De la Casa Scânteii la Casa Poporului*, 188.

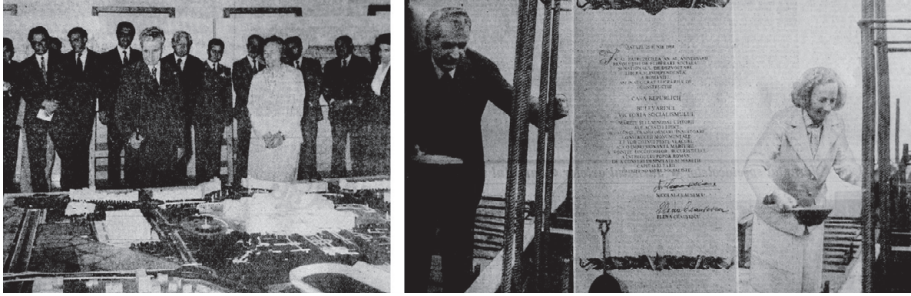


Fig. 4.

left: The architect (illustration in *Scântea*, August 4, 1984, 3);

right: the builder of *Casa Republicii* (illustration in *Contemporanul* magazine, March 30, 1984, 3)

sketches) that imagined the systematization of Dâmbovița and the creation of a great landscape of skyscrapers accommodating cultural and educational facilities.⁴⁵ The lyric lines of an article published in *Contemporanul* in 1952 reveal a striking resemblance to the landscape envisaged in the Eighties for the civic center:

“We will walk some day along the avenues running like rivers of shiny asphalt through the tall, equal, magnificent and powerful city; [we will walk] across fresh lawns and among cascades of roses, along alleys of lime and chestnut trees. We will descend the white stone steps, through a carved arch, into the shiny and bright halls of the metro and we will head for the harbor.”⁴⁶

In the Fifties, *Socialist Realist* literature had architecture and the city as its main pretext. The two volumes written by George Călinescu⁴⁷ provide a controversial example of such novels and show the transformation of society between the mid-thirties and the early Fifties. The main character is an architect who survives professionally through the change of political regime. Călinescu depicted in his novel the *Socialist Realist* architecture built in the Fifties, including a palace that might be easily identified as the Opera⁴⁸. Still, a *Contemporanul* article from the 14th of November 1984 disregards any possibility of identification with the *Socialist Realism* of the Fifties, claiming that the novel was only foreshadowing the communist society accomplished in the Eighties. The author seems to suggest that the construction described by Călinescu is in fact a premonition of the construction of *Casa Republicii*, or at least a construction in the spirit of the new architecture⁴⁹. In the view of the author, it was only with Ceaușescu at the head of the party that our dreams for grandiose cities (such as the one Călinescu described) could have become true. Thus, the propaganda around the construction of *Casa Republicii* as well as the entire propaganda

45 The Opera seems to be one of this series of buildings, facing the banks of Dâmbovița.

46 “Ne vom plimba într-o zi pe magistralele care vor străbate ca niște fluvii de asfalt lucios, orașul înalt, egal, puternic și măreț, printre peluze de iarbă proaspătă și cascade de trandafiri, printre alei de tei și castani sădite de-a lungul lor. (...) Vom coborî pe treptele de piatră albă, printr-un portal sculptat în culorile licioase ale metroului și ne vom îndrepta spre port.” *Contemporanul*, November 21, 1952, 1.

47 George Călinescu was a famous writer and critic, very well known for his passion for architecture. His career began in the interwar period and he survived under the communist regime, being first discredited for his insufficiently *Socialist Realist* fiction and later rehabilitated. The novels taken into consideration here are *Bietul Ioanide* and *Scrinul Negru*.

48 Mariana Celac has recently identified Călinescu’s character, pointing out that the architect was the embodiment of a real-life person whose practice lasted from the interwar period until the ‘60s (his projects also included *Socialist Realist* architecture). Mariana Celac, “Arhitectul B. Ioanide (1887-1964)” [The Architect B. Ioanide], “Ioanide la cincizeci de ani” [Ioanide Turns 50], “Nu sunt Michelangelo dar aş vrea să fiu” [I am not Michelangelo, but I Wish I Were] *Secolul 21*, No. 4-9/2005.

49 There were no references to *Socialist Realism* in the article, but the author was talking about the “classical style, of a great austerity and geometrical purity, enlivened by evocative details” that Călinescu dreamed of.

of the Eighties was a series of lies and omissions aiming to distort the future but also the non-communist and the communist past.

At the time when it was built, *Casa Scânteii* was intended to be the *correct* model of the new architecture, following the *method* of *Socialist Realism*. The prescriptions of *Socialist Realism* were – ambiguously – clarified in the *Arhitectura* review, and the use of *the method* was until 1956 a must. *National in form, socialist in content* was the obsessive refrain of that time, justified through the use of national architecture (under the control of the party) as a source of inspiration. And, like forty years before, the construction of *Casa Republicii* was seen as the inauguration of a series of extensive transformations of the city (and its architecture), only this time any reference to *Socialist Realism* was avoided. In the pages of *Arhitectura*, still the only magazine dedicated to architects, there was no debate about the echoes that *Casa Republicii* and *Victoria Socialismului* Avenue should have in terms of *urban* systematization or architectural style. Nevertheless, some articles in the printed media were trying to elucidate the features that the new architecture would be expected to possess. The explanation was equally or, perhaps, more ambiguous than the definition of *Socialist Realism*:

“Seeking of the new [in architecture] brings us to meet the tradition of our people, its spirituality, in all its essential content: optimism, joy, sensitivity, the graceful shapes, the lack of grandiloquence, and the profound humanism.”⁵⁰

Even if the voice of *Casa Scânteii*’s architect was public, it was only used to officially confirm the supremacy of the brilliant Soviet architects and engineers. In the Fifties, Romanian architects had been compelled to follow the example of the Soviet specialists, but in the Eighties, Romanian architects, never the main actors in the construction of *Casa Republicii* (but rather humble actors in the general work of constructing communism), had to follow the commands of the supreme architect, Ceaușescu. Not only did Ceaușescu play the role of the Soviet architects, it now seemed that there was not any place at all left for the Romanian professionals.

Closing the circle, the construction of *Casa Republicii* found its inspiration in the Fifties, borrowing some of the architectural features (and of the propagandistic mechanisms) yet neglecting the filiations. Like the propaganda of the Eighties, the *communist project* of *Casa Republicii* seems to be a reinvention of something that already existed, confirming once again Orwell’s assumption that in a communist system past is the most unpredictable time.

50 „Căutările noului ne duc la întâlnirea cu tradiția poporului nostru, cu spiritualitatea ei, cu tot ceea ce constituie esența ei: optimismul, vioiciunea, sensibilitatea, gingășia formelor, lipsa de emfază, profundul umanism.” (Cezar Lăzărescu), *Contemporanul*, August 3, 1984. Without doubt, the source of inspiration for this description was Ceaușescu’s discourse at the Bucharest Party Congress of 1984.