

Irina Tulbure

*Architecture and Urbanism in Romania, 1944-1960:
Constraint and Experiment*

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To be an architect during the early communist era in Romania must have been a strange professional privilege. This is the concluding idea one retains after reading Irina Tulbure's latest publication: *Architecture and Urbanism in Romania, 1944-1960: Constraint and Experiment*.

The book is based on her doctoral research at the "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urbanism in Bucharest, defended in 2011. The overall aim of the research is to discuss the architectural profession during a very complicated period, that of the onset and stabilization of the communist regime in Romania. With one notable exception, but much more concentrated in scope,¹ this complex period has been met mostly with shallow attention until now from architectural historians and theorists in Romania, who focused mainly on the country's Socialist Realist buildings and early development efforts. The great merit of this book is indeed that of carefully discerning between the various competing forces on the one hand, and between the different instruments shaping the professional realm on the other, in a continuously changing political environment.

Irina Tulbure has found four transitory intervals, as she actually approaches the entire period as a continuous yet slow adaptation of professional responses to the changing sociopolitical context: 1944-1948; 1948-1952; 1952-1956; 1956-1960. While proposing a precise periodization is difficult, as the author acknowledges,¹ apparently each of these four intervals is characterized by a markedly different type of interaction between the professional core and the political leadership. The first period, until 1948 – the year of the first Soviet-style Constitution – was one of professional continuity with the interwar practice and slow acknowledgment of an emerging political situation, i.e., the increasing Soviet influence in Romanian public affairs. The next period was mostly one of major institutional and organizational changes, culminating with the complete centralization and absolute integration of the architectural profession into the state apparatus, with some early ideological impositions on the architectural practice. The most consistent transpositions in the local context of the official Soviet architectural style and city planning principles, usually known under the Socialist Realist label, are to be found between 1952 and 1956. Lastly, 1956-1960 would be period during which a professional discourse is gradually restored in its autonomous functions, under a receding political pressure.

The book is, however, not organized around this periodization, but seemingly around six major research directions: the Soviet formulation of the "socialist project" and of some key-concepts,² relevant as the architectural profession is concerned; the Romanian pre-communist ideas on organizing the national territory and on social policies; the postwar institutional changes in Romania, encompassing the construction sector and the architectural profession; the propaganda in the media – books and periodicals – involving the architectural practice, the role of the architect under the communist regime and the stylistic characteristics of the professional-public discourse of the time; the very ambitious and rarely applied ideas of city planning; and new programs as well as stylistic expression of the period architecture.

1 Mara Mărginean, *Ferestre spre furnalul roșu: urbanism și cotidian în Hunedoara și Călan (1945-1968)* (Iași: Polirom, 2015).

2 Irina Tulbure, *Arhitectură și urbanism în România anilor 1944-1960: constrângere și experiment* (Bucharest: Simetria, 2016), 12, note 6.

The research supporting the book is certainly vast and meticulously conducted. This constitutes both its strength, and its weakness. It is unquestionable, for example, that chapters such as: “Architects, Organizations, State”, “The *Arhitectura* Review” and “In a New World, New Programs ...”³ are exceedingly well documented, bringing forth novel material, raising interesting parallels and obviously succeeding in capturing the spirit of those times. Nevertheless, throughout the book, even the informed reader misses a personal appreciation of how her research is positioned in relation to its sources, especially to the primary ones. Nevertheless, the most intriguing issue raised by this research is revealed even from the title: placing postwar Romanian architecture between „constraint” and „experiment”. Such framing would naturally be associated to the infamous confrontation in the prewar Soviet Union, between Constructivists and proponents of an academic style. Certainly, Romania had no movement even remotely comparable with Constructivism, mostly because, as Irina Tulbure mentions, there was no active left-wing group of architects hailing the dawn of the Socialist Revolution.⁴ But then, where is the experiment?

The constraint seems to be clearly defined throughout the book as political pressure and, sometimes, as economic and technical limitation. The experiment should appear, therefore, when such constraints become looser. And, at first sight, this anticipation could be confirmed at least by the chapters “Red Architecture” and “White Architecture”.⁵ The former refers to an aesthetic transfer from a pragmatic and rigorously conceived industrial architecture to urban buildings, of whose typical characteristic is the striking appearance of red brick facades. The chapter “White Architecture” investigates mostly a series of manifestly modernist buildings as well as a series of projects and buildings hybridizing an obvious modernist stylistic aspiration. Just about all projects analyzed in these two chapters, of certain appeal and refinement, are conceived and built either during the very early postwar years, before the major institutional changes and imposition of Socialist Realist principles, or after 1956, when the Stalinist orthodoxy in architecture was publicly challenged. One may hastily conclude, indeed, that the most significant individual contributions of the period are those escaping the most intense period of political pressure.

And yet, there seems to be a second understanding of the word “experiment” in this book, one which is more intimately connected to the overall guiding principle of the research, and which is more provocative at the same time. In a sense, Irina Tulbure claims that the constraint itself is turned into an experiment.⁶ Apparently, this entire period, 1944-1960, is characterized by a troublesome relationship between political and professional ideology. While the concept of professional ideology would have certainly deserved elaboration, as it seems central to the main argument, this thought probably just expresses an otherwise commonsensical perception about the late Stalinist times in the Soviet sphere of influence. In a nutshell, it appears that requests for a monumental, academic expression in architecture, as well as the political expectations to apply the unclear principle of “national in form, socialist in content” in architecture, were really hindering the capacity of the professionals to propose realistic designs for the kind of massive development schemes in industrial and urban areas that the regime required. Nevertheless, during the years of most manifest political constraint, 1952-1956, the architect Nicolae Pombulescu, along with several others, thought appropriate to attempt a “popularization”⁷ or simplification of the academic style, especially for working class housing in industrial towns. Thus, he mediated between the unreasonable political expectation and those public promises the working class probably expected to be fulfilled by a regime claiming to represent its interests.

3 Irina Tulbure seems to have been particularly fascinated by the Soviet Constructivist concept referring to the architectural object as „social condenser”. This concept is repeatedly employed throughout the book to comment on aspects not directly related to the Constructivist movement. An elaboration of her hindsight perspective about the relevance of the concept for the Romanian and even the Eastern European context, in a future article, would certainly be welcome.

4 Tulbure, *Arhitectură și urbanism*, 84-89, 110-116 and 213-223.

5 Ibid., 283.

6 Ibid., 224-232 and 236-244.

7 Ibid., 249.

Scrutând cu un fel de curiozitate tăioasă perioada dintre 1944 și 1960, Irina Tulbure îl introduce pe cititor în hățișul unei complicate și, din punctul meu de vedere, dramatice istorii profesionale și a moștenirii ei construite, care atunci se nășteau, într-o traumatizantă schimbare de societate. (...)

... arhitectura nu apare numai din formele construite (tratate exhaustiv de la programe și obiecte la oraș și teritoriu), ci și dintr-un întreg context profesional, cuprinzând și litera scrisă (povestită în anchilozarea ei treptată sub ideologie), și întreaga metamorfoză instituțională (o sinteză inedită și clarificatoare), și ca instrument de propagandă (exemple de-a dreptul „mustoase”, dacă n-ar fi triste). Toate acestea se conturează la intersecția unor linii compoziționale care vin de mult mai departe în timp și în spațiu. Linia „tare”, a puterii sovietice, vine invaziv dinspre Răsărit și dinspre Revoluția din Octombrie. Sub ea se conturează cu tușe precise (și noi în literatura noastră profesională) linia instrumentului de colonizare culturală, *realismul socialist*, pe care autoarea îl disecă analitic în geneza, semnificațiile și ambiguitățile lui și, de subliniat, chiar în magnetismul lui, și îl descrie sintetic în nuanțele pe care le-a căpatat în revărsarea sa implacabilă peste teritoriile satelizate. (...)

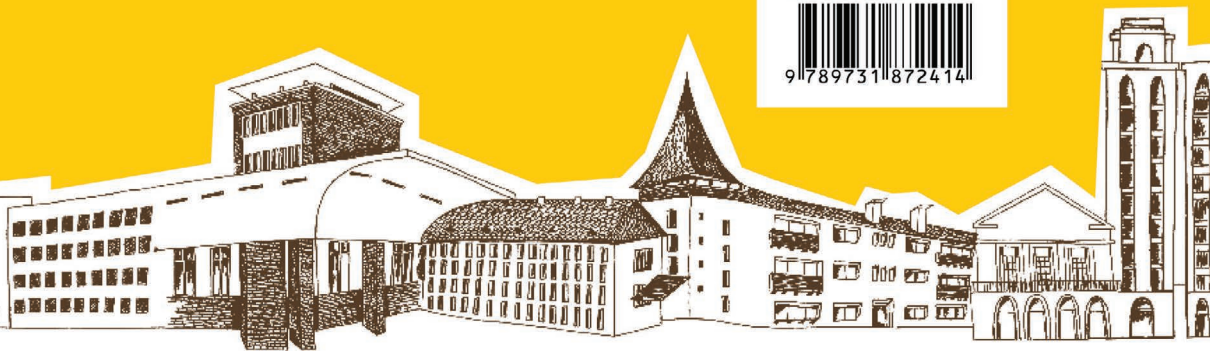
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From this perspective, it seems that at least some architects managed to carve out for themselves, under the most intense political pressure, a limited but no less significant space of personal initiative and personal expression. As such, they converted political impulses into opportunities for their own explorations. The comprehensive and meticulous historical investigation conducted by Irina Tulbure enables understanding these fine lines. No doubt, her book is difficult to read and understand, as she addresses mainly an academic audience, but it is also most rewarding, not only with its elegant and elaborate illustrations but, most importantly, in its capacity to reveal nuances of an otherwise misunderstood period.

Editors' note

In 2017, this book has received the Best Book of Architecture Prize, awarded by the Chamber of Architects of Romania.

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Tulbure**

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S I M E T R I A