Civic Centers under Ceaușescu's Rule.
The Failure to Articulate a Professional Discourse

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This article summarizes part of a broader doctoral research on Romanian civic centers.[1] The purpose of the broader research was to understand the expectations architects and politicians invested in civic centers, within a period extended from the end of WWI until 1989. This article is limited, however, to narrating the story of professional, political and linguistic convolutions around the processes of conceiving civic centers in late communist Romania. The aim of the article is to expose how a debate failed to be articulated around the policies including civic centers, as well as on the programmatic concept itself.

Along the 20th century, one frequently invoked principle for modernizing Romanian villages and cities was that of the civic center. A civic center could be retrospectively defined, by observing both its historical origins and predominant application in real cases, as constituting central squares by grouping new, aesthetically correlated, public buildings. It was only under Nicolae Ceaușescu, though, that a wide consensus seems to have been reached about constituting civic centers, thus transforming the built environment and living patterns for millions of people.

There are two major policies applied during the Ceaușescu years of ruling over Romania (1965-1989), which involved the civic center principle: the officially assumed program of urbanizing several hundreds of large villages and the less clearly formulated yet quite systematically followed program of restructuring county capitals. For both these policies, the civic center component was apparently intended to fulfill political aims specific to the communist regime: firstly, by demolitions, homogenizing the country through erasing built memory and through forced displacement of inhabitants[2]; secondly, by new buildings, implanting symbols of power and official culture into public spaces where people were hoarded into political meetings, for proving their loyalty to the regime,[3] and, thirdly, through the acts of building and using these civic centers, offering contexts and pretexts for an ethics of individual and mass-mobilization necessary to the regime for occupying, directing and unifying both working and spare time of ordinary citizens[4].

In reality though, the civic center principle of intervening in fabrics of cities and villages was advocated by elite Romanian architects and planners long before the communist regime was instated. Moreover, civic centers were a defining trait of the American "City Beautiful"

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1 Alexandru Răuță, "Negotiating the Civic Center. Architects and Politicians in 20th Century Romania" (PhD diss., KU Leuven, supervisor Hilde Heynen, co-supervisor Ana Maria Zahariade, 2012), published in bilingual edition, under the same title (Bucharest, Editura Universitară "Ion Mincu", 2013).

2 Comisia prezidențială pentru analiza dictaturii comuniste din România, eds. Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dorin Dobrîncu, Cristian Vasile, *Raport final* [Final Report] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007), 416-421.

3 Augustin Ioan, "Romanian Civic Centers: A Showcase of Nationalism under Ceaușescu," in *Modern Architecture and the Totalitarian Project. A Romanian Case Study*, (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Cultural Român, 2009), 185-198.

4 Idea inspired by Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996).

movement, which actually consecrated the concept starting with the early 1900s[5]. At the time, it was certainly not associated with any communist-type of ideals. From the beginning, debates and practice defined the "civic center" concept predominantly as a group of new public buildings, aesthetically correlated with each other, defining a central public space in cities[6]. By analogy, it soon came to describe also such public ensembles conceived at neighborhood level and for villages. Somewhat later, and not in Romania, also assembly halls, as well as cultural and community centers financed by local authorities, were termed as "civic centers"[7].

In fact, it seems that, in Ceaușescu's Romania, the usage of the "civic center" concept became slightly disconnected from international practice. Moreover, the concept itself was not as clearly defined as it could be expected in the following of prolonged pre-war public debates around its potential. Civic centers, as presented and applied - especially in cities - represented to a large extent responses to one overwhelming concern. This concern used to be described before the war in terms of "patriarchal" character[8] and backwardness of most Romanian villages and cities, especially those of the extra-Carpathian areas, thought to have originated in both Ottoman influence and in the predominantly agricultural character of the economy[9]. During communism, the same concern was expressed in terms of lack of hygiene,[10] poor and dispersed buildings in villages[11] while the historic value of some urban cores was simply dismissed as irrelevant for any debate[12]. During both contexts, before and during communism, professionals agreed that many cities were only very large villages, and this was meant in no way as an appreciation for the state of Romanian rural life.

The "civic center" expression in publications before 1960

In the aftermath of a 1925 administrative act, which required for the first time cities to have development plans established, several planner-engineers from a technical department of the Bucharest administration started to discuss, teach about and advocate openly the "civic center" concept.[13] At the time, they understood the concept very much in the trail of the American City Beautiful movement, which was mentioned sporadically as source of inspiration.

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5   John DeWitt Warner, "Civic Centers," *Municipal Affairs*, no. 1, vol. 6 (1902): 1-23. There are earlier cases, such as Charles Mulford Robinson, *The Improvement of Town and cities: or, The Practical Basis of Civic Aesthetics* (London: the Knickerbocker Press, November 1901, first edition May 1901), see especially ch. XI, 186-199. However, a historian specialized in the history of the City Beautiful Movement supports the idea that DeWitt Warner consecrated the concept of civic center, see Jon A. Peterson, *The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840-1917* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 376, endnote 14.

6   This definition appeared for the first time in *Webster's New International Dictionary. Unabridged* (Springfield (Mass.): Publisher G. & C. Merriam Company, 1934).

7   *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1996).

8   George Matei Cantacuzino, "Orașele de provincie" [Country Towns], in *Despre o estetică a reconstrucției* [On the Aesthetics of Reconstruction] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1947), 71-74, and George Matei Cantacuzino, "Piețele orașelor" [City Squares], in *Arcade Firide și Lespezi* [Arches, Niches and Tombstones] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1932).

9   Cincinat Sfințescu, "Urbanistica Generală" [General Urban Planning], *Urbanismul* 1-2 (1933): 72.

10 Alexandru Iotzu, "Puncte de vedere asupra construcției ansamblului central din Piatra-Neamț" [On the Construction of the Piatra-Neamț Central Ensemble], *Arhitectura* 1 (1966): 10-13.

11 ANIC/ CC al PCR/ Cancelarie/ file 153/1971, "Protocol nr. 31 al ședinței Comitetului Executiv al PCR din ziua de 28 decembrie 1971" [Protocol no. 31 of the meeting of the PCR Executive Committee, December 28th, 1971], Annex 1.

12 Cezar Lăzărescu, "Studiu pentru sistematizarea zonei centrale a orașului Pitești" [Study for the Systematization of the Central Area of the City of Pitești], *Arhitectura* 6 (1966): 50-51, 71.

13 Cincinat Sfințescu is the main figure of that department, of the mentioned advocacy process and of the early days of Romanian city planning. Nevertheless, it appears from public sources that his immediate subordinate, Theodor Rădulescu, understood several years earlier than Sfințescu the potential of the civic center principle for the Romanian context, see T. A. Rădulescu, "Adunarea documentelor pentru întocmirea planurilor de sistematizare" [Gathering the Documents for Drafting Urban Plans], *Monitorul Uniunei Orașelor din România* 11-12 (1927): 49-56.

The 1925 Act basically established the grounds in Romania for the new profession of city planner. It was nevertheless a top-down enterprise, slowly and incompletely accepted, even by mayors of large cities. Planners of the time were aware that they were expected to be very convincing about the advantages of their consultation. The civic center, as an aesthetically impressive group of administrative buildings, was probably one of those ideas set forth by professionals in order to establish a communicating bridge with politicians. This was the case with the 1935 plan of Bucharest and the published civic center proposals of Cincinat Sfințescu[14], as well as the 1939 classicizing civic center designs for several villages and small cities, published in *Arhitectura* and a propagandistic volume of the time[15]. Slowly the idea gained ground and, during the war, two civic centers were realized, in the villages of Dioşti and Corbeni (Antoneşti).

Immediately after the war, while the communist Worker's Party was seizing power, the "civic center" concept seems to have been gradually abandoned by professionals. It was not only a question of the new regime promoting different values and a different vocabulary, more focused on the condition of the working class and on Soviet Union examples, but also professionals hesitated to display, through language, affinities with their pre-war experience. Starting with late 1940s, until late 1950s, generally recognized as the most repressive decade of the communist rule, when the "civic center" expression appeared in print, it was usually associated with somebody else than the author of the article. Of course, other descriptive collocations were sometimes used, such as "social (cultural) – administrative center". Even so, the principle of grouping public buildings to create central public space was not applied during this period.

After the worst period of terror was left behind, and the self-censorship of publicly active professionals loosened, the "civic center" expression re-entered the public discourse alongside other expressions, such as "new center", "central ensemble" and "political-administrative square". It will gradually regain its ground until the 1980s. The story of the Romanian civic center is, as many others of communist regimes, one about differences between practice and discourse, about tacit continuities for lack of better ideas, as well as about grandiose but unconvincing projects.

Rural civic centers

Starting with 1960, a USSR program of restructuring the Ukrainian network of settlements had some echoes in Romania. Apparently, this program was presented in a Sofia COMECON meeting and had some impact over the Romanian delegation[16]. Retrospectively, the historian Dennis Deletant notices striking similarities between plans of Khrushchev and of Ceauşescu to dismantle and regroup villages in systems of local and regional interdependencies, as well as to constitute "agro-industrial towns"[17].

Very early during his rule, in November 1965, Nicolae Ceauşescu approved the formation of a committee in charge of "systematizing", *i.e.* planning, villages[18]. The work of this committee resulted in an ample administrative reform (1968), conceived as a first step in a longer process of

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14 See especially Cincinat Sfințescu, *Estetica Bucureștiului* [The Aesthetics of Bucharest], extrait from *Urbanismul* 9-12 (1932) (Bucharest: Institutul de Arte Grafice « Bucovina », 1932).

15 *Un an de aplicare a legii administrative din 14 august 1938* [One Year since the Approval of the Administrative Law of August 14th, 1938] (Bucharest: Monitorul Oficial și Imprimeriile Statului, Imprimeria Centrală, 1939).

16 D. Vernescu, "Sistematizarea satelor" [Rural Systematization], *Arhitectura* 2 (1962): 9-10.

17 Dennis Deletant, *Ceaușescu și Securitatea. Constrângere și disidență în România anilor 1965-1989* [Ceaușescu and the Securitate. Constraint and Dissidence in Romania, 1965-1989] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998), ch.8, 274-196: "Planificarea centralizată ca mijloc de constrângere: sistematizare" [Central Planning as Means of Constraint: Systematization].

18 Deletant, *Ceaușescu și Securitatea*, 275.

restructuring the national network of settlements. The most radical proposal of this committee was that the more than 14000 existing villages be amassed in only about 4000, these in their turn grouped in 2000-2500 "communes". Increased densities of inhabitants resulted from this process would have rendered, among others, civic centers more likely to be accessible for enough people to justify their existence.[19]

In 1972, the strategic aims for rural areas were somewhat scaled-down. At a National Conference of the Party, it was stated that 300-350 villages would be "complexly developed" in order to gain an "urban character"[20]. These future "agro-industrial towns", as they were often named in official occasions, were each to receive "special attention" for their "civic centers", containing "social and cultural" institutions.

The 1972 National Conference of the Communist Party offered a tangible goal and, as such, triggered a series of debates inside the architectural community. For the first time since the 1940s, civic centers were approached openly, not only as normative components of rural planning but also as goals in themselves. The debate is continuously fueled by new political actions and programmatic statements. In 1974, the "Systematization Act" is adopted, which specifies that civic centers of rural settlements should group related functions into single buildings[21], and the 11th and 12th Party Congresses, from 1974 and 1979, required hundreds of new cities to be created in following 5-year plans, by redeveloping villages[22].

Pushed by this apparent political determination, slowly, a consistent body of publications accumulated about these rural-to-urban civic centers. There were passive-technical approaches, restrained to a mere review of political goals, of data from preliminary studies conducted before setting this goals, and of the steps achieved that far by involved institutions[23]. There were also quite prudent voices, reluctant about the capacities of architects alone to conceive civic centers, calling for an effort to overcome the "intuitive stage" of designing civic centers and referring to sociology and psychology for help[24]. Interestingly enough, some allusions to a pre-war experience could find a discreet place[25]. A hard-line technocratic position is to be distinguished just as well. Actually, the most elaborate writing on the subject of civic centers for future towns is inscribed in this perspective. In a book, entitled *Centre civice*[26], as well as in a subsequent article[27], the author, Cosma Jurov, indicates that architects and planners already have access to consistent and relevant

19 ANIC/ CC al PCR/ Cancelarie/ file 123/1967, "Propuneri pentru sistematizarea rurală și administrativă a României" [Propositions for the Rural and Administrative Systematization of Romania].

20 "Directivele Conferinței Naționale a Partidului Comunist Român cu privire la sistematizarea teritoriului, a orașelor și satelor, la dezvoltarea lor economico-socială" [Directives of the National Conference of the Romanian Communist Party as to territorial systematization of cities and villages and to their economic and social development], *Secera și Ciocanul*, July 23rd, 1972: 4-5.

21 Law no. 59/1974, art.13. par. 3, 4.

22 "Dezvoltarea Județelor și sistematizarea economic-socială a teritoriului" [The Development of Counties and the Social and Economic Systematization of the Territory], *Congresul al XI-lea al Partidului Comunist Român. 25-28 noiembrie 1974* (Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1975), 782-783; "Construcția de locuințe și echiparea tehnico-edilitară a localităților" [Housing and Public Works Construction]*, Congresul al XII-lea al Partidului Comunist Român. 19-23 noiembrie 1979* (Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1981), 813-814.

23 Mircea Cardaș, "Sistematizarea și reconstrucția localităților rurale din România" [Systematization and Reconstruction of Villages in Romania], *Arhitectura* 3 (1980): 10-12.

24 Doina Cristea, "Centrele civice ale viitoarelor localități cu caracter urban" [Civic Centers of Future Urban Settlements], *Arhitectura* 3 (1974): 54-55.

25 Doina Cristea, "Accesul în urban al viitoarelor centre orășenești din România" [The Urban Status of Future Urban Centers in Romania], *Arhitectura* 4 (1978): 33-37.

26 Cosma Jurov, *Centre civice. Contribuții la definirea și conceperea unor tipuri de centre civice multifuncționale pentru viitoarele orașe mici* [Civic Centers. Contributions to the Definition and Conception of Types of Multifunctional Civic Centers for Future Small Towns], (Bucharest: Editura Tehnică, 1979).

27 Cosma Jurov, "Integrarea centrelor civice în structura localităților" [Integrating Civic Centers in the Existing Urban Structure], *Arhitectura* 3 (1980): 19-24.

literature from certain fields of study, such as topology and proxemics. By employing this help, architects would be able to guide through civic centers the process of urbanization not only at the level of built environment, but also at community level, by controlling individual choices.

In 1980, the Union of Architects organized a debate on the subject of urbanizing large villages, which is summarized in a small article in *Arhitectura*[28]. While participants seemed very interested in the urbanization process, a presentation on civic centers raised surprisingly few questions. The only significant exchange seems to have been conducted between the moderator, Cezar Lăzărescu, and the speaker, Romeo Rău. Romeo Rău saw civic centers for agro-industrial towns as opportunities for creating diversity by appealing to local traditions. Lăzărescu underlined that industrialized building methods, including prefabrication, would be unavoidable. The verbal exchange is not thoroughly reproduced, but it seems that Lăzărescu felt the need to lower the expectations of the audience in regard to the expressive potential of such groups of public buildings.

Published drawings indicate that architects had been capable at the time to advance reasonable and diverse ideas about conceiving these civic centers for agro-industrial towns. The 3/1980 special issue of *Arhitectura*, dedicated to small settlements, offers considerable proof in this respect. (Fig.1,2).
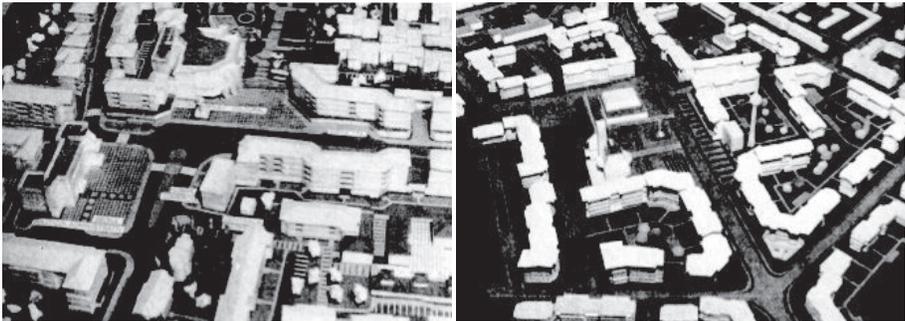
Fig.1. Proposed civic center of the future agro-industrial town Salcia (Teleorman), *Arhitectura* 3, (1980): 10.

Fig.2. Proposed civic center of the future agro-industrial town Drăgănești (Teleorman), *Arhitectura* 3, (1980): 10.

Interesting about this special issue is that it represents the last substantial attempt to publicly and collectively address the subject of agro-industrial towns. By 1980, it must have appeared clear to most professionals that the overall program had not only been a failure but also that its future was rather uncertain. The 1975 request of the Party Congress to urbanize more than 100 large villages in the following 5-year plan had not been even partially fulfilled. In addition, since 1977, rumors had started to circulate about a new project captivating the attention of Nicolae Ceaușescu: the remodeling of the Bucharest central area.[29] Moreover, starting with 1977, and more evident during

28 Mariana Celac, "Cronica: Viitoarele centre urbane in dezbaterea Uniunii Arhitecților" [Chronicle: Future Urban Centers under the Debate of the Union of Architects], *Arhitectura* 4 (1980): 4-5.

29 See subch. "Povestea centrului civic" [The Civic Center Story] from "Arhitectura care nu a existat: 'Arhitectura ocultă'" [The Architecture that Did not Exist: "Occult Architecture"], in Ana Maria Zahariade, *Arhitectura în proiectul communist. România 1944-1989* [Architecture in the Communist Project. Romania 1944-1989], Bucharest: Simetria, 2011), 121-128. See also subch. "Centrul autocratic al puterii comuniste. *Casa Poporului*" [The Autocratic Center of Communist Power. *Casa Poporului*], in 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 1945-1989], (Bucharest: Simetria, 2012), 184-211.

the 1980s, there had been an acute decline in consumption, signaling major economic problems.[30] In this economic context, and with new major projects just launched, only scarce resources could have been expected for new agro-industrial towns, even less for their civic centers. Nevertheless, in response to programmatic aims stated a few months earlier, at the 12th Party Congress, *Arhitectura* was obliged to reflect a failed process without stumbling in too many lies when speaking of its success.

There are no obviously new and imaginative techniques of manipulating the truth within the pages of *Arhitectura*. It was said that small settlements to be transformed into agro-industrial towns feature very diverse urbanizing patterns, which should be correctly understood. Moreover, much should be achieved in order to overcome their historic condition, comprising aspects such as excessively large occupied areas, absence of amenities, and rural type of property structure.[31] It was reminded that there had been substantial investments directed toward rural areas, such as complete electrification of villages, new housing and new non-agricultural workplaces. Officially assumed goals for urbanization were re-stated, without mentioning what was their current level of achievement.[32] Generous plans and designs are published, from various counties, with brief presentations of intents, always mentioning the civic center, but never with construction site photos. (Fig.3,4) Likewise research on the subject is presented, by the above-mentioned Cosma Jurov, who argued in favor of complex combinations of functions and public spaces in such civic centers, without mentioning though whether such complex designs are to be found also among Romanian proposals [33].
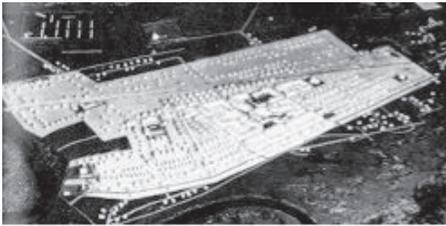
Fig.3. Model of the future agro-industrial town of Fălciu (Vaslui), Arhitectura 3, (1980):11.
Fig.4. Model of the future agro-industrial town of Bălcești (Vâlcea), Arhitectura 3, (1980):11.

The overall message that could be discerned in this above-mentioned group of articles from *Arhitectura* described architects as having been that far fully involved in the urbanization process, as having fulfilled their assigned part of proposing appropriate designs, and as being ready to continue. In a sense, much resembling the well-known parable of the greengrocer by Vaclav Havel[34], architects were displaying a politically aware sign, a group of articles, in their window, the review *Arhitectura*. This sign, by analogy with Havel's interpretation about his generic greengrocer, was just one among many other gestures architects were expected to perform in order to reinforce the "social auto-totality"[35]. The variety of published illustrations and professional approaches was meant to serve as example not only of good practice but also of good attitude. A united professional front, fully aware of its duties, reminded every reader of their own responsibility to

30 "Eșecul economic al socialismului românesc" [The Economic Failure of Romanian Socialism], in Bogdan Murgescu, *România și Europa. Acumularea decalajelor economice (1500-2010)* [Romania and Europe. The Accumulation of Economic Disparities (1500-2010)], (Iași: Polirom, 2010), 369-407.

31 Adriana Popp, "Probleme privind dezvoltarea orașelor mici din Republica Socialistă România" [Problems of the Development of Small Towns in the Socialist Republic of Romania], *Arhitectura* 3 (1980), 9.

32 Cardaș, "Sistematizarea," 9-12.

33 Jurov, "Integrarea," 19-24.

34 Vaclav Havel, The Power of the Powerless. Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990), 23-96.

35 Ibid., 36.

stay committed to the cause. This task could not be fulfilled by any individual author, no matter how convincing in writing, but by many aligned side-by-side, and apparently this was the main function the editorial team of *Arhitectura* achieved.

There would be a question mark to be placed on this judgment. It is true that no matter how hollow such commitment rituals were, simply by gathering a significantly numerous group in such practices, underlining thus a social norm, critical thinking was discouraged. *Arhitectura* appears either as a helpless, almost neutral support, or as a catalyst, assuming that the editorial team invested considerable efforts in order to gather and coordinate the published material. One detail though indicates the *Arhitectura* editorial team as more than a neutral or catalytic agent for the official ritual of auto-totality. Separate from the collection of articles concerning the future agro-industrial towns, there is a published material on the same subject, conceived by student-architects.[36]

Perhaps not so surprisingly, the most direct public questioning of the official policy was performed by these students. Their professor, Peter Derer, explains in an interview that they should find in their school projects, based on real cases, solutions for creating a transition between rural, individual housing and the area of the civic center, which should have been nothing less than markedly urban. However, some students seem to dispute this vision, by wondering whether the old-new contrast would be not only unavoidable by these premises, but also undesirable. They propose examining more closely the rural inhabiting experience and start the modernization process from an already accumulated body of local practices. Peter Derer diplomatically agrees that, at the level of construction techniques and energy saving, there is a lot to learn and transpose into the new buildings.
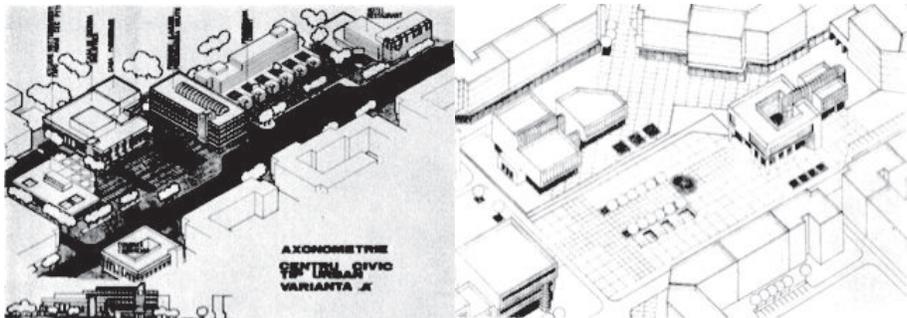

Fig.5. School project, civic center design for an urbanized village, Rădulescu Mihaela, *Arhitectura* 3, (1980): 78
Fig.6. School project, civic center design for an urbanized village, Mihăilescu Cristina, *Arhitectura* 3, (1980): 78

Clearly, student challenging of designing principles for future agro-industrial towns could hardly be interpreted as a contestation of the regime or of the urbanization process. Such interpretation seems even less probable, since published drawings (Fig. 5, 6) are authored by other people than those writing an article[37] and conducting the interview with Peter Derer. As such, the overall student material appears more as an agglutination of separate opinions than as a programmatic attitude proposed by a specific group. It could even be suspected that such mild questioning, with dissipated responsibilities, and in tacit agreement with the principle of replacing entire villages with something newer, represents just a more sophisticated mechanism to legitimize the regime,

36 Andrei Feraru, Mihai Popescu, Petre Derer, "Centru de comună urbanizată" [Center of an Urbanized Commune], *Arhitectura* 3 (1980): 78-79.
37 Dragoș Pătrașcu, "Despre continuitate" [On Continuity], *Arhitectura* 3 (1980): 80.

by mimicking freedom of expression and thus allowing some discontent to be dissipated in controlled forms of criticism. While the degree of refinement in such staging techniques is never to be underestimated under a Soviet-type regime, for this case, evidences point toward a different interpretation.

The united front type of material is clearly grouped in an opening section of the *Arhitectura* special issue. No criticism is to be found there. The student material is in a completely different section, "School Page", placed towards the end of the issue, between a section dedicated to recent works in Romania and one about recent works outside Romania – the last section of the review. As such, it appears that it was disassociated from the "united front" not only through opinions but also physically. This obvious separation is more subversive than the actual student questions. It signals that there is something left outside the freshly reinforced social norms. However, in no way this proves the editorial team of *Arhitectura* to have displayed rebellious intents. It only points toward some reluctant editors in resuming their activity to a mere support of official policies. It may be interpreted as a minimal gesture of preserving self-esteem. It is difficult to understand the real-life impact of such special issues of the professional review. They are significant today as testimonies of canonic modernizing visions and not as witnesses of professional exchanges.

By 1981, only one mining and energy producing center, Rovinari, had been newly declared as city. Unfortunately, even this single example is not presented publicly. By 1985, the failure of the entire program is even more visible in the fact that the Party Congress assumes only a very general goal in regard to urbanizing villages, without reminding of previous engagements[38]. No special issue of *Arhitectura* is published, as there probably were no new approaches to discuss. However, at this point, Nicolae Ceauşescu decides to become personally involved in the process. A wave of demolitions in rural areas is initiated, forcing inhabitants to move into newly created settlements. Almost nothing transpires in professional publications about these new initiatives; however, organizations in Belgium and France are mobilized to protect Romanian villages.[39] In April 1989, a new administrative reform is approved. By means of this legal instrument, 23 new cities were declared. At least some of them have newly built monumental Houses of Culture, defining central public spaces[40]. By investigating public sources of the time, Dennis Deletant finds articles mentioning several settlements apparently ready to become new cities, some of which are different from those acknowledged through the administrative reform. Almost nothing is published in *Arhitectura*, probably because of the international scandal around this process.

Unfortunately, the Romanian research community is still in debt as to the public opinion with investigating these results. Significant clarifications are needed on the nature of these new cities and their eventual civic centers.

County capitals civic centers

There are two reasons why the case of county capitals civic centers is not as easy to follow through public discourses as the one of agro-industrial towns. Firstly, there is no clear programmatic statement, originating at high levels of power, to specify that county capitals resulted after the

38 "Sistematizarea teritorială şi îmbunătăţirea condiţiilor de muncă şi de viaţă" [Territorial Systematization and Improvement of Working and Living Conditions], in *Congresul al XIII-lea al Partidului Comunist Român. 19-22 Noiembrie 1984* (Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1985), 613-614.

39 "Operation Villages Roumains 1989 – 2005"*, Supliment 22 Plus*, 28.06.2005, http://www.revista22.ro/operation-villages-roumains-1989--2005-1854.html, last accessed 31.08.2013.

40 Cornelia Şucu, "Casa de cultură a sindicatelor din Colibaşi-Argeş" [Workers Union House of Culture in Colibaşi-Argeş], *Arhitectura* 2 (1989): 20-27.

1968 administrative reform should receive manifestations squares bordered by county "political-administrative" seats, Houses of Culture and various other buildings for public services. Such statement not only misses from programmatic documents of the Party but also from planning norms, which refer to a "central area" of cities, easier to introduce in the zoning rationale. Secondly, these civic centers are not consistently denominated as such. There is a variety of names under which they are found in publications of the time, such as "political-administrative square (center)", "(new, representative) central ensemble". To complicate the debate even further, sometimes, in various public instances, the "civic center" concept designated the entire central area of a city and not just its main public space.

Already, during late 1940s, after the communist party had seized power, it was evident that only architects with a consistent pre-war career advocated publicly civic centers. For most architects who enjoyed the appreciation of the regime, the subject was close to non-existent. This division line was still noticeable at cultural level more than two decades later, under Nicolae Ceaușescu. In two consecutive issues of the review *Arhitectura*, 4/1973 and 5/1973, two designs are published, both referring to a "civic center". The first appeared design is for the city of Reșița (see Fig.7)[41]. The team explicitly mentions in the accompanying article that their design continues the work of preceding plans for Reșița, drawn by Octav Doicescu and Dinu Vernescu. Both Octav Doicescu and Dinu Vernescu were associated at some point in their careers to pre-war elite architects (G.M. Cantacuzino and Duiliu Marcu). Their designs and usages of the "civic center" concept are consistent with its initial maeaning, launched by the City Beautiful movement. The second design published is for the city of Focșani[42]. For this second design, its authors refer to an area of about 40 hectares as the "civic center" of Focșani. None of the mentioned Focșani authors had been that far publicly associated to pre-war elite practitioners. They do not even seem aware that a "civic center" may mean something else than the central area of a city. Curiously, however, they also publish the design of a square, defined by a combination of new and old buildings, which they denominate as "central nucleus" (Fig.8). Another team, with a different professional genealogy and background, could have indicated this group of buildings as a "civic center". Although practice is somewhat similar, the vocabulary is different.
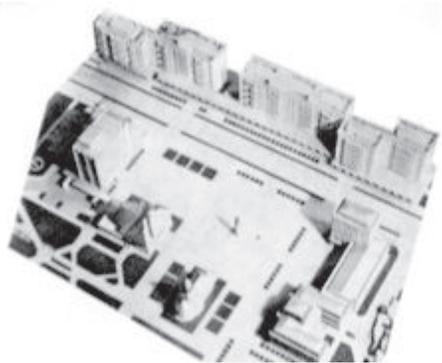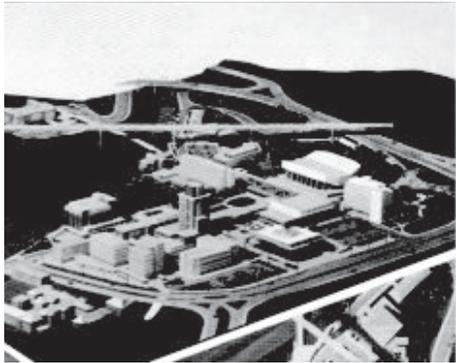

Fig.7. Reșița civic center, Rădulescu Gabriel, *Arhitectura*, 4, (1973): 57.
Fig.8. Focșani 'central nucleus', Novac Claudia, *Arhitectura*, 5, (1973): 53.

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41 Gabriel Rădulescu, "Centrul Doman – Reșița" [The Doman Center - Reșița], *Arhitectura*, 4 (1973): 54.

42 Claudia Novac, "Centrul civic la Focșani – Detaliul de sistematizare" [Civic Center in Focșani – Systematization Detail], *Arhitectura* 5 (1973): 53. The architects involved in the project are Claudia Novac and Boris Grünberg. They were employed by the same institution in Bucharest (ISART) as the Reșița team.

During the Ceauşescu period, the usage of the "civic center" expression is not, however, conditioned only by this division line. There is actually a trend which could be distinguished. During the 1970s, in the professional review *Arhitectura*, architects seem to prefer the "new center" expression for manifestations squares associated to new administrative buildings in county capitals. The 1970s represent a period when professional and political interest in the value of historic quarters was slightly favored by the context. Multiple projects for renovating entire urban neighborhoods are published and several steps are taken to applying many of them. For several articles, it appears that the "new center" expression was forming a pair with that of the "historic center". They were perceived as completing each other in imagining a rich urban context. On the contrary, the terrible 1977 earthquake seems to have favored at political level a different perception on historic buildings, as well as on rural settings, emphasizing its frailty and need for replacement. During the 1980s, historic studies from *Arhitectura* are published as goals in themselves, not anymore as preliminaries for urban renovations. As of now, conceptually, the historic center is separated from its modern sibling. Instead, the "civic center" expression regains its initially lost ground.

The actual process of constituting civic centers in county capitals started without a deliberation phase *per se*. During late 1960s, two related topics are debated with renewed energy in the professional review *Arhitectura*: firstly, recovering through stylistic expression a sense of rootedness, restrained that far because of a modernist momentum and of economic constraints; secondly, re-integrating historic centers into the living patterns created by those new, industrial cities developed around them. The energy invested in both these topics seems to originate in a genuine fervor in responding to a general sense of dissatisfaction, expressed for several years already both at political and professional levels, in regard to the monotonous appearance of cities. Key-figures from the upper echelons of the Party seem to not have been content with the overall results of placing emphasis on building costs, in the trail of Khrushchev's criticism of Socialist Realism, reproduced locally by the documents of the November 1958 Plenum meeting of the Central Committee. Cities such as Galaţi, Baia Mare and Suceava had their main squares defined by fronts of collective housing with commercial ground floors (Fig. 9,10). While their pictures had been previously published by *Arhitectura* as illustrations of exemplary developments, they were openly criticized in the immediate aftermath of Nicolae Ceauşescu's coming into power.[43]
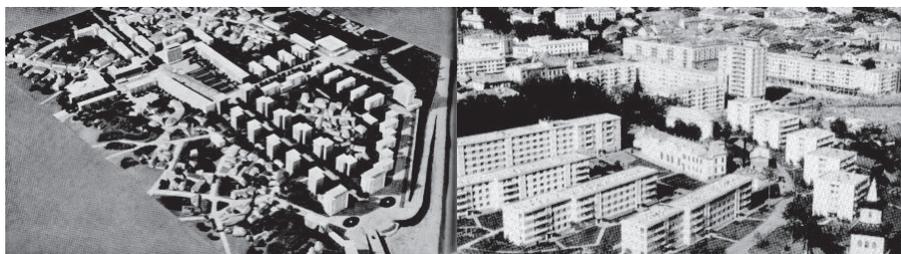

Fig.9 Central square, Galaţi, Sebestyén, V., *Arhitectura* 4, (1959): 36.
Fig.10 Main square, Suceava, Latiș Eusebie, *Arhitectura* 6, (1964): 37.

In a debate, from October 1966,[44] during which architects struggled to define their future ethics in regard to building around and inside historic centers, a first civic center design is presented

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43 Horia Hudiță, "Construcţia şi reconstrucţia oraşelor şi noile ansambluri de locuit" [The Construction and Reconstruction of Cities and the New Housing Ensembles], *Arhitectura,* 1 (1966): 21-23.

44 Reproduced in a special issue of *Arhitectura*, 6 (1966).

publicly. Cezar Lăzărescu, head of the planning ("systematization") section of the Architects Union and organizer of the debate, displayed his design for a new square in the city of Pitești (Fig. 11). Relative to the political context, there is an undeniable dose of prudence in Lăzărescu's proposal. His aims are not stylistic, even less about expressing a sense of rootedness and appealing to local traditions. Lăzărescu had established a reputation as a courageous modernist and remained faithful to this posture. His design does not prove sensitive to the built patrimony either. More precisely, a very large area is proposed for demolition and rebuilding, except for the most prestigious church of the city. In a nutshell, Lăzărescu did not seem eager to have his project involved in current debates, but he would rather have his own version of a success story.
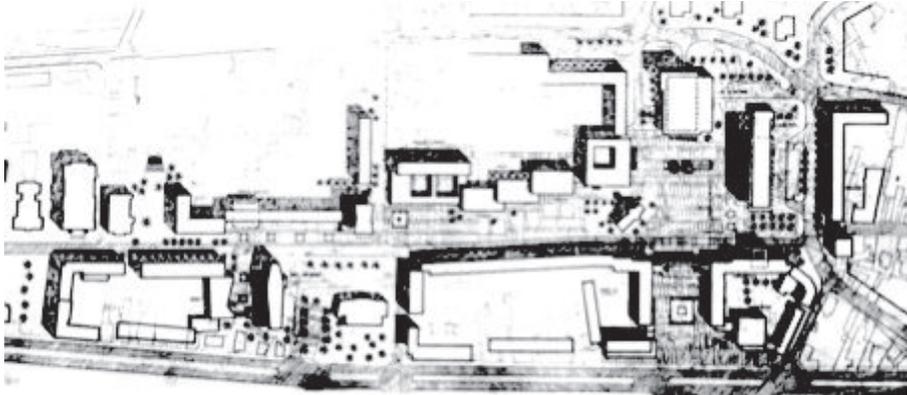

Fig.11. Civic center and esplanade Pitești, Lăzărescu Cezar, *Arhitectura* 6, (1966): 51.

Lăzărescu was surely a respected member of the architectural community, at least respected enough to have nobody present at the meeting publicly challenge his design, although the general professional trend seemed to head toward different professional values. Political awareness probably played an important role in this debate. Just few years later (1971) Lăzărescu will become president of the Architects Union. Starting from his Pitești project, an article from *Arhitectura* concluded that this approach, based on eliminating collective housing from defining the urban central square and including public services, is appropriate for future designs just as well[45]. Except for this article, however, no reaction will be publicly formulated. Nonetheless, one after another, county capitals started to constitute squares similar to the one of Pitești, with political-administrative headquarters and Houses of Culture around manifestations squares.

Of course, the Pitești case only served as a trigger for a process that had merely been delayed by the ascetic stance of post-Stalin communism. The general dissatisfaction with the state of Romanian cities, even more so with those acting as administrative centers, had not been eased at all through public spaces defined by collective housing with commercial ground floors. As the Pitești project proved, the critique of "monotony" brought to previously achieved squares implied expectations of politicians not to stop replacing historic fabrics but to allocate means for more emphatic squares. Until 1989, with some degree of incertitude depending on what could be accepted as civic center, 16-17 county capitals (out of 40) constituted central public spaces defined by new public buildings.

45 Dinu Vernescu, "Centrul să cuprindă în primul rând dotări" [The Center Must First Harbor Amenities], *Arhitectura* 6 (1966): 70-71.

The end of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s represent the final part of a more prosperous period in communist Romania. This relatively prosperous period coincides with the most ambitious program ever of planning all cities and future cities of the country. Subsequent to the 1974 "Systematization Act", Nicolae Ceauşescu, through the State Council, invited for verification, later approved and even followed the application of development plans for most cities, especially the large ones. The "Systematization Act" submitted to the authority of the president all "important" projects concerning central areas of county capitals. Within a promising economic context, also most spectacular civic center designs were approved, alongside the corresponding plans of cities, such as those for Satu Mare (Fig. 12, 13) and Miercurea Ciuc (Fig. 14, 15). About a decade later, both were finished and would be included in the Annual Prize of the Union of Architects, in consecutive years. What is remarkable about these public spaces is that they represent the most faithful embodiments of the "civic center" concept, as defined by the American "City Beautiful" movement and assumed during pre-war Romanian debates.

Fig.12. Political administrative seat, civic center Satu Mare, Nicolae Porumbescu, *Arhitectura* 1, (1987): 19.
Fig.13. Civic center Satu Mare, Nicolae Porumbescu, *Arhitectura* 1, (1987): 19.
Fig.14. Civic center Miercurea Ciuc, House of Culture, Gheorghe Dorin, *Arhitectura* 4, (1988): 23.
Fig.15. Civic center Miercurea Ciuc, Political administrative seat and hotel, Gheorghe Dorin, *Arhitectura* 4, (1988): 22 (next page).

In spite of these projects being publicly saluted by the professional community during the 1980s, it seems that Nicolae Ceauşescu had become in the mean time rather ambivalent with regard to civic centers. Archive sources suggest that, during the planning process following the 1974 act, various architects in charge of planning medium-size cities repeatedly proposed civic centers to the State Council. Archived documents register recurring remarks of Ceauşescu in regard to these civic centers, demanding city halls either to be placed in the axis of the main street, either to dominate the other buildings, either to occupy the center of the composition. Clearly, he could not conceive that cultural institutions, even if financed by the state and unmistakably associated to official culture, could compete with corresponding political seats. Moreover, at the end of 1977, Nicolae Ceauşescu seems to have arrived to some conclusions of his own in regard to planning, which he did not want to repeat for each team he summoned for verification. He thus established a set of "general indications". The first of these general indications states that each time a civic center design is presented to him for approval, he should be also offered an alternative consisting in a manifestation square associated to a single building, that of the city hall.[46]

This general indication is not as easy to interpret as it may appear at first sight. Clearly, Ceauşescu had perceived in the multitude of civic center proposals he had received a pattern which he was not willing to endorse. At the same time, the same archive records indicate that, just few months earlier, he had recommended to the team in charge of the city of Oradea to constitute a civic center on the site of the already built House of Culture. It may thus appear that he preferred having groups of public buildings defining a central public space only in large cities, where communist interventions were either competing with surrounding pre-communist contexts or replacing an urban fabric deemed no longer suitable for the new society. Still, for Bucharest, after the 1977 earthquake, Ceauşescu preferred to have a single building dominate the central area intervention, the House of the People, while other public buildings were rather scattered along a major axis centered on the political seat. This late choice serves as proof that the principle of grouping a political seat and a cultural institution around the same public space was not really understood by Ceauşescu. Central public spaces had a predominantly political role in his perception, while cultural institutions were useful at best to enhance the awareness of power.

By correlating discourses from *Arhitectura* with the practice of constituting county capitals civic centers, there is to be noticed an underlying condition, which characterizes the professional review. In absence of a debate, of an explicit ideological predisposition, and of an explicit programmatic political request, the editorial team of the review does not group county capitals

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46 ANIC/ CC al PCR/ Secţia Economică, file 20/1977.

civic centers, or manifestations squares, in a special issue. The review does not invest much energy in pursuing this subject and its role seems rather neutral.

The lack of initiative from the editorial team is paradoxically convenient, as it allows us to observe a chronological development in describing these civic centers. As already noticed, the "civic center" expression appears more frequently during the 1980s than during the 1970s, when other expressions were preferred. It could be speculated that, starting with Cezar Lăzărescu's project for Piteşti, which emphasized the new square more than the rest of the central area development, a certain political expectation was established. This political expectation was in its turn more focused on the proper defining of a new manifestation square than on integrating this square into a larger central area development. As such, slowly, the professional language adapted to this political expectation, by singling out central squares from the overall central area developments proposed in the master plans of the 1970s. This linguistic singling out of the political expectation was achieved through the "civic center" expression, already in use and no longer associated to pre-war debates. It could be stated, by observing this correlation, that political expectations blocked professional departure from an initial understanding of the "civic center" concept and, thus, rural and urban focused policies remained in the end based on the same language and practice for restructuring their built fabrics.

Conclusions

Obviously, the two policies described above were closely interrelated. The question of urbanizing large villages and that of renewing large urban structures, beyond other measures, received at least one common answer: civic centers. Obviously, the fact that the policy-level answer was common has its cultural roots deeply entrenched in the generalized dissatisfaction with the state of Romanian cities, as well as its political roots in the extreme centralization of decision-taking process under Nicolae Ceauşescu. As urban cores were often criticized for providing to inhabitants only little more infrastructure and amenities than villages, the sole obvious rural-urban difference being that of size, it appeared quite clear that a policy for urbanizing villages would be applicable also for restructuring cities. In addition, as there was just one supreme instance for approving new designs for central areas, the State Council presided by Ceauşescu, a successfully applied project was immediately converted in a canonic example. Imitation was the best safeguarding method against having plans rejected.

Reflections of these two policies in public sources of information are different. One immediately noticeable difference is that of vocabulary. For planning and urbanizing villages, there is a very consistent conceptual approach. Everybody speaks of "civic centers", apparently everybody agrees on their basic functions, administrative and cultural, and hardly anybody raises questions or proves to be interested publicly about what is replaced by these civic centers. For designs concerning central areas of county capitals, architects spoke of "civic centers" and "political-administrative ensembles" as often as of "new centers" and "central areas". Clearly, architects wanted more for each of these large cities than just a central square. During the 1980s, in a sense, architects were forced to recognize in their language usage, for many cases that, even if they wished for more, new central squares with their public buildings represented a maximum of what they were able to achieve.

Another difference between reflections of these two policies in public sources of information is noticeable in the consistency of their debating at the civic center level. Civic centers, as components of urbanizing large villages, were not very often but thoroughly discussed at the

level of principles, even in absence of really applied cases. Obviously, if the Party had explicitly demanded some goals to be achieved but allotted little to no resources, the only way for architects to prove eager to fulfill these goals was by organizing debates, as well as by conducting and publishing studies. For county capitals, designs are actually applied. Nevertheless, the civic center principle for county capitals was never really questioned under Ceauşescu.

It appears that the two reflections of these policies in public, professional sources of information have something in common. Debates on fundamental principles of civic centers, as well as competitions for two county capitals civic centers[47], served as mere replacements for actual intentions to pursue investments. As cynical as it may sound, such debates and competitions appear today more as forms of mobilization in controlled environments, similar in many ways to the political meetings held in actual civic centers. Unlike civic centers, however, the virtual space of professional debate did not aim exclusively at replacing old ideas and concepts. The ideological inheritance of the late years of the regime only blocked explicit references to the local pre-communist experience. The autarchic character of the regime, since it allowed only a limited level of exchanges with professional environments from abroad, it appeared even to favor the reworking of old concepts, such as the civic center.

In addition to these parallels and contradictions between the two processes of constituting civic centers, it must be observed that overall overviews would have not been possible without the neutral-technical character of *Arhitectura*. If the editorial team of *Arhitectura* would have been more militant, striving to unify practice and vocabulary, by organizing exchanges and dialogues, and by having its own authors documenting recent developments, much of the subtle language dynamics would have been less perceivable or relevant. In addition, today's researchers would have been confined by ideological selections. The other side of the coin is that this neutral-technical passivity of *Arhitectura* resulted today in having published mostly final phases of projects, with few exceptions, while some projects from distant and poorer county capitals do not even find a place in its pages, such as the Zalău civic center. In fact, with the notable exceptions of Piteşti, designed by the head of the planning section and future president of the Architects Union, and of Ploieşti, situated 60km from Bucharest, it is nearly impossible to reconstitute by means of reviewing *Arhitectura* at least several major steps in conceiving many county capitals civic centers. Similar is the reflection on constituting new agro-industrial towns, which during the 1980s hardly finds a place among the pages of the review.

47 L. T. Staadecker, "Concursul pentru sistematizarea zonei centrale a municipiului Rîmnicu Vîlcea" [The Competition for the Systematization of the Central Area of Rîmnicu Vîlcea], *Arhitectura* 2 (1974): 73-76; Dan Slavici, Ştefan Datcu, "Concursul – sistematizarea centrului nou în oraşul Bistriţa" [The Competition – Systematizing the New Center in Bistriţa], *Arhitectura* 1 (1975): 65-67.