

ARCHITECTURE COMPETITIONS – A SPACE FOR POLITICAL CONTENTION. SOCIALIST ROMANIA, 1950–1956

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Abstract. This is an account of the relationship between architecture and power in Romania during the Stalinist period. A cursory glance at *Arhitectura* – the only specialist magazine to resume publication after the change in regime – suggests compliance with political direction, and professional interest in translating the theoretical method of Socialist Realism into a specific, culturally localized architectural language. Architecture competitions are a medium of intersection between theory and practice, power and the profession, ideology and economy – a space where political contention based on professional knowledge becomes possible even in totalitarian regimes. Between 1950 and 1956, *Arhitectura* published several competitions which, far from reinforcing Socialist Realism as the dominant architectural discourse, exposed the method’s internal contradictions and utopianism. In the ensuing confusion, there emerged a creative, practice-based counter-discourse centered on previously hegemonic dialects (the ‘national’). Based in equal amounts on the pre-established dynamics of professional culture, and on the willingness and ability of the architecture field to speculate the rules of the political game, this counter-discourse gradually led to the dismantling of Socialist Realism into alternative readings of Socialist architecture.

Keywords: Socialist Realism, Romanian architecture, Stalinist architecture, architecture competitions, architecture practice, professional culture.

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Introduction

Something inherently heterotopic is coded into the breakdown pattern of utopias. Transcription into a reality ruled by contention between a multiplicity of constraining factors leads to the gradual disintegration of their internal logic. This is the space of alternate, hybrid interpretations of utopias stripped of the pretence of totality. Socialist Realism is no exception.

Socialist Realism is a perpetually indefinite structure – a method, style, tactic of social reform via politically-defined cultural orientation – it is manifestly utopian in nature, but curiously dogmatic in application. Rife with contradictions, it casts itself in the role of a doctrine enabling stylistic freedom for the arts (Cooke 1993: 86), while setting up a highly restrictive framework of implementation. It works best in the abstract,

the a-contextual, and – despite a purported receptivity to interpretation – tends to lose internal coherence when faced with the peculiarities of local adaptation and professional culture. Best understood as a process of translating theory into practice for a specific, culturally localized artistic discipline, Socialist Realism under interrogation reveals a fragmentation independent of political dictum, and the alternatives thence derived.

This is an account of the space of political contention created in Romanian architecture through competitions attempting to develop a local translation of Socialist Realism (roughly 1948–1956). The study highlights relationships of negotiation, mutual manipulation, oppression and subversion between the regime (embodied by State institutions involved in construc-

tion) and the profession's locus of power (*Arhitectura* magazine, the Society of Romanian Architects, the University of Architecture in Bucharest), reflected onto practice and reinforced by the competitions published in *Arhitectura*.

Drawing from the works of Michel Foucault, Katherine Verdery, Mikhail Bakhtin and Alexei Yurchak, the analysis tracks disruptions in the discursive exchanges between power and the profession on the subject of Socialist Realism in order to examine architecture as a tactic of governance and cultural product. A Foucauldian reading of power and architecture encourages a less reductive take on socialist architecture. Power is understood as a network permeating the social fabric, equally coercive / restrictive and productive / creative. Outside aesthetics, architecture is read as potential for transformative action affecting the built environment and social processes alike, crucial to the implementation of utopian projects based on absolute social reformism. Verdery's (1991) study of national ideology and cultural production in the Romanian socialist system serves as a basis for understanding architecture as a professional culture with a pattern of interaction with power slightly divergent from that of non-visual disciplines. Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia and Yurchak's (2005) analysis of the transformation of authoritative discourse through social practices help reveal the unexpected, creatively liberating effects stemming from the subversion of Socialist Realism via architecture as practice.

In architecture, public competitions facilitate intersection; theory and practice, the profession and the political, ideology and economy are drawn into a dialogue on the nature, scope and role of architecture, demanding, if not resolution of these issues, at least an ongoing effort of definition and boundary tracing. As Catherine Cooke (1993: 93) remarks, matters are further complicated in socialist systems by the use of competitions as means to translate the ideologically appropriate methods of creation outlined by Socialist Realism into actual architectural language. Moreover, they double as a pedagogical device outlining a correct process of translation, from the development of an ideologically sound professional mindset to the critical application of Soviet experience and knowledge gained through extensive documentation. But if the body of works dedicated to architecture theory in widely-circulating professional media is governed by a serene, scientifically justified certainty, post-competition analyses published in the same periodicals inadvertently expose – by addressing the shortcomings of submitted entries – the state of widespread confusion inherent to this process. Multiple fallacies and contradictions between Soviet dogma and local idiosyncrasies become

apparent in the attempt to reconcile an ideological basis of political inception (far stricter when exported to USSR satellite states¹) with the demands of practice and the pre-established dynamics of local professional culture. These points of conflict are the seeds of a space of political contention based on professional discourse, which will prove destabilizing enough to trigger the breakdown of utopian absolutism and encourage the emergence of alternative readings.

Pre-war competitions – national exclusivism, international connectivity

Architecture competitions have been a staple of *Arhitectura* since the magazine's inception. Featured in most issues published between 1906 and 1944, articles focusing on architecture competitions cover design briefs, announcements of results, analyses of projects submitted and attempts to define legislation applicable to architecture competitions. The frequency, subject range and the evident professional preoccupation with transparency, clarity and fairness suggest a thriving liberal practice. This apparent freedom, however, applies to a rather narrow (and politically and economically well-connected) segment of the professional body.

In essence, *Arhitectura* magazine was conceived as the official publication of the Society of Romanian Architects (S.R.A.), founded in 1891 by 24 of the country's most prominent professionals: Alexandru Orăscu, Ion N. Socolescu, Ion Mincu, Grigore Cerchez, Alexandru Săvulescu, etc. (Tabacu 2005: 31). Quickly established as the *de facto* authority in all matters architectural, the S.R.A. kept itself just out of reach of the legal bounds applicable to nation-wide professional organizations. In nearly six decades of activity, the Society remained at the apex of professional culture and practice, but even an extensive membership of approximately 230 of the 340 architects eligible for State-approved practice in 1932² did not transform the S.R.A. into a legalized national professional body (Tabacu 2006: 30–42). The society's disinclination to become more politically and socially active suggests that one of its aims was to create such a comprehensive organization, tacitly subordinate to the S.R.A. but legally and

¹ Aman (1992: 53–57), Tarkhanov and Kavtaradze (1992: 54) and Udovički-Selb (2009: 467–495) emphasize the variety of Socialist Realism within Russian borders, where modernist-classicist cross-pollinations continued into the late 1930s, driven by an energetic architectural practice. This subtle multiplicity extended to Stalin's rule – see Langman's corporate-style STO building, Zholtovsky's classical Sadovaya street building, and the exuberant eclecticism of Moscow's Seven Sisters.

² According to the history of the S.R.A. published on the official website of the Union of Romanian Architects (the post-war restructuring of the S.R.A.) <http://www.uniuneearhitectilor.ro/istoric.html>

administratively enmeshed in State decision-making forums, enabling professional participation in previously inaccessible processes, such as the initial stages of social policy and urban strategy development.

Arhitectura was, nevertheless, the country's most authoritative specialist magazine, precisely because the wide scope, overall quality and critical depth of the material published – from theoretical considerations³ to urbanism, monument conservation, graphic design, legislation and construction techniques – served to disguise its connection to and enforcement of the field's locus of power. For the better part of the pre-war period, the magazine's editorial team was practically identical to that of the S.R.A. committee, with most members also teaching at the School of Architecture in Bucharest⁴. From these key positions, the core of the S.R.A. was able to prolong the dominance of a neo-traditional architecture discourse into the 1930s, when the balance started to tip in favor of modernism. At this point, the field of architecture was more or less hermetic in Romania, as intense, in-field discursive contention for professional power and control left little time or energy for political and social engagement. Caught between the introversion of professional culture, the disinterest of the authorities and the bolstering short-term effects of a rapidly developing construction market⁵, Romanian architecture remained adrift for the first half of the 20th century. As Gabriela Tabacu remarks, the inconsistency of the S.R.A. (as dominant professional organization) – in terms of goals and their strategic pursuit through sustained action – did great disservice to the profession, ultimately preventing its access to the State's decision making forums, much to the detriment of society (Tabacu 2006: 57). In this context, the apparent variety of public competitions was merely programmatic. Competitions generally targeted large-scale, unique urban programs – churches, headquarters for State institutions or major private companies (Tabacu 2006: 255–58) – and favored instances of erudite architecture most associated with the portrayal and perpetuation of institutional power. The undeniable professional thoroughness and critical attention with which they were addressed in *Arhitectura* constitutes further proof of the magazine's exclusive nature and narrow professional focus, especially at a

time when the need for affordable social housing in Bucharest had become stringent enough to attract the attention of private development companies seeking to partner the authorities in providing this service.

Arhitectura's intended audience was a limited professional segment: the core of the S.R.A., who could gain access to and benefit from the mechanism of commission attribution through almost cliquish competitions. A resolute professional focus on high commission also translated into reduced concern for the study of more banal architecture programs, regardless of their beneficial impact on the lives of broader segments of the population. This is not to say that architecture considered banal or utilitarian (by competition standards) did not form a sizable portion of the practice. Rather, that it was relegated to the peripheral field of dominant architectural concerns – outside theoretical debate, not the target of innovation, nor the grounds for architectural experiment. Therefore, it was often the remit of civil engineers enlisted in public service, rather than architects, who would continue, with a few notable exceptions⁶, to disregard its critical importance for social and urban development, as well as not acquire the ease (and knowledge background) of its design.

For all its national hermeticism, the field remained remarkably well-connected to the architecture cultures of Western Europe throughout the pre-war era, focusing particularly on France, Italy, Austria and Germany. This receptivity did not diminish after modernism rose to discursive prominence at the beginning of the 1930s, although the change did engender an increased tendency towards synthesis and adaptation of the modernist agenda to local conditions, and hybridizing with conceptual models of different origins⁷ in a non-discriminate stylistic manner. Pre-war Romanian modernism, writes architect and theorist Ana-Maria Zahariade, is elegant but pragmatic, with minor inclinations towards experimenting, mostly confined to the expressionist branch of the movement. Closer to a merge between Art Deco and the subtle, Parisian version of the modernist aesthetic during initial stages of inception, it later became heavily influenced by Italian fascist architecture (Zahariade *et al.* 2003: 16). Of particular relevance to post-war developments is the fact that, through tailoring to a socio-cultural context dominated by the traditionalism vs. modernity dispute, Romanian architecture dispensed with the progressive, socially-oriented

³ Albeit in a traditionalist framework.

⁴ Lists of the teaching staff can be found in Ionescu, G. 1973. *75 years of higher architectural education in Romania*. Bucharest: "Ion Mincu" University Press, 69–90. For lists of the S.R.A. council and *Arhitectura* editorial team over the years, see Tabacu (2006: 21–55).

⁵ Engendering a false sense of security with regard to the urgent need to develop a solid administrative and legislative basis for the future practice of architecture.

⁶ Radical low-income housing experiments include Ferentari neighborhood (Bucharest, 1945–1947) and the urban expansion of Hunedoara into a 'Labor City' (designed 1947–1948). For further details, see Zahariade (2011) and Mărginean (2008).

⁷ Haussmannian Paris, the Garden-City.

agenda of the Modern Movement, and refocused the ideology of local modernism on aesthetics and conceptual rationalism (Zahariade *et al.* 2003: 17).

The professional milieu tasked with casting Socialist Realism into architectural form was forged in a pre-war modernist paradigm, and stretched across two generations. The first comprised the initial wave of modernist architects, those who shaped the movement's theoretical basis: Marcel Iancu, Horia Creangă, Duiliu Marcu, Octav Doicescu – highly cultured, widely traveled, and, with few exceptions, recipients of a double architecture training combining traditionalism (at the University of Architecture in Bucharest) and modernism (in various schools in France and Switzerland, but mostly through practice in architecture offices abroad). The second generation, trained in Bucharest under the first and beginning practice just after WWII or at the beginning of the 1950s, shifted the focus of Romanian modernism onto more radical, reformist issues. Influenced to a great extent by CIAM, Le Corbusier, Bauhaus and the principles of the Athens Charter, they were concerned with the social aspects of architecture clustered around the idea of housing in the context of post-war reconstruction. Despite a homogeneous professional milieu (in terms of the social background, upbringing, education and professional mentality of its members), architects navigated the transition to a practice legally bound to Socialist Realism in a number of different ways. Of the five most common, summarized below, three are illustrated by practitioners involved in the competition analyses to follow (Gusti, Enescu, Nițulescu).

Octav Doicescu was one of the key figures of pre-war Romanian modernism. A talented and active practitioner, he responded to the change in political regime by recasting himself as an academic, out of genuine interest in matters theoretical as well as in a bid to safeguard a privileged situation. In fact, his involvement in education – as a studio tutor, lecturer and theorist at the University of Architecture in Bucharest – had an important role to play in the reception of Socialist Realism in Romania. Part of a teaching staff espousing modernism – but a subdued, non-confrontational, almost anti-technicist version – Doicescu's legacy to the second generation of architects consisted of a solid core of modernist principles disguisable at will through aesthetic flexibility, and a lesson on the importance of cautious silence or non-committal discursive engagement with ideology.

Of the same generation, Gustav Gusti epitomizes the type of political engagement practiced by architects during the Stalinist years on an individual, rather than collective professional basis. A competent architect with an already solid pre-war professional standing, Gusti managed to preserve his position within the

privileged core of the profession through duplicitous action. On one hand, he subscribed to a modernist take on architecture which would continue to inform his work; on the other, he became a virulent critic of 'cosmopolitan' architecture and a vocal supporter of Socialist Realism and Soviet architectural dogma. During Socialist Realism, he occupied increasingly more important functions in the etatized architecture system: director of the Institute of Construction Design (I.C.D.) (before 1950), representative of the State Committee for Architecture and Construction (1955), etc. (Mărginean 2008).

Graduating in 1946, Ion Mircea Enescu represents modernist architects of the second generation, who built successful careers without becoming manifest advocates of an ideology to which they remained opposed. Through a combination of irrefutable professional skill and determination doubled by a strategic focus on programs less given to ideological debate, and more dependent on technical and structural innovation (sports, industry, etc.), Enescu circumvented most hardships of practice under the new regime, especially for someone under continuous suspicion for harboring American sympathies (Enescu 2006).

Another member of the second generation, Virgil Nițulescu was the voice of professional disgruntlement, and endured systematic persecution throughout his career: public shaming in *Arhitectura* for practicing a decadently bourgeois architecture, denied access to certain projects, relegation to low-pay, minor positions during employment in Design Institutes, and a ban from entering architecture education as a tutor (Enescu 2006: 318–331). According to his colleagues, Nițulescu was perhaps the most forward-thinking, radical architect of their generation⁸.

Eugenia Greceanu falls somewhere between overt subversion and tacit dissimulation of discontent. In a way, hers was the default position adopted by the majority of Romanian architects, who, unwilling or unable to become enmeshed in politics to gain access to privileged commission and higher professional status, devoted themselves to niche areas of architecture less exposed to political influence, such as restoration. In addition, her profile is that of the typical Romanian architect: a solid intellectual upbringing (not necessarily coinciding with financial affluence) steeped in exposure to Western culture and art; a fundamentally pro-Western mentality reinforced during the years

⁸ Ion Mircea Enescu recalls that Nițulescu's entry for the competition for the Romanian Opera (1946) – an aluminum egg containing the hall and foyer, set against the prismatic volume of the stage and annexes – created quite a buzz due to its radical concept, predating Utzon's Sydney Opera House.

spent at University; a framework of architectural reference sourced from Western Europe and America through periodicals such as *Architectural Review* and *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (Greceanu 2005: 113–142).

Ideological convictions versus professional inadequacies

Launched in November 1949 by the I.C.D., the first public architecture competition organized after the communist take-over was a bid to secure ideas for the development of typified housing projects to be built in 1950⁹. Half a year later, the competition made the pages of *Arhitectura's* first post-war issue, re-configured as a guide to the logic of Socialist Realism. The brief called for the design of workers' housing focused on living standard improvement and construction cost reduction. Built areas of 45, 65 and 85 m² combined with 9 hypothetical family types¹⁰ into a total of 25 housing options per entry, submitted at construction scale, fully detailed. With only two months to complete at the end of the year – the busiest time for architects employed in Design Institutes – the competition gathered only 16 complete projects.

The article written for *Arhitectura* by jury member, academic and Socialist Realism enthusiast Gustav Gusti combined project criticism with a sketch of the ideal socialist competition, used to highlight the deficiencies of this first application. In a socialist system, reflection of ideological principles, performance in the framework of planned economy and the immediacy of

concrete results are paramount. With entries not only ineligible for further study at the I.C.D. due to subpar quality, but also eschewing the core challenge of the brief – redefining workers' housing from a socialist perspective through sustained dialogue between architects and beneficiaries – the competition had failed. This letdown stemmed from three factors: a problematic brief, technical and restrictive in terms of planning, but tenuous as to the ideological issues at play; poor organization by the Ministry of Construction and the I.C.D., including dismissal of competition improvement ideas forwarded by the Architecture branch of the S.A.T.¹¹; professional shortcomings, mostly inexperience with the more banal subset of architecture, and the inability (or reluctance) to make the transition to a Socialist Realism method of creation.

For Gusti, these deficiencies came from a lack of familiarity with Soviet documentation, ineffective ideological (re)education, and the still prevalent bourgeois mentality of a professional culture just recently divorced from liberal practice and adverse to changes mandated from outside its sphere of interests. Found by the jury to differ little from the 'cheap housing' schemes developed in pre-war Bucharest, submitted projects combined severe design flaws (dysfunctional layouts, under-dimensioned rooms, scant natural lighting) with a disregard for standardization based on mass-produced construction materials. Even the winning entries dispatched the program in a utilitarian, inexpressive manner, with little concern for the socio-cultural complexities of housing design. The article did feature the prize recipients, with the caveat

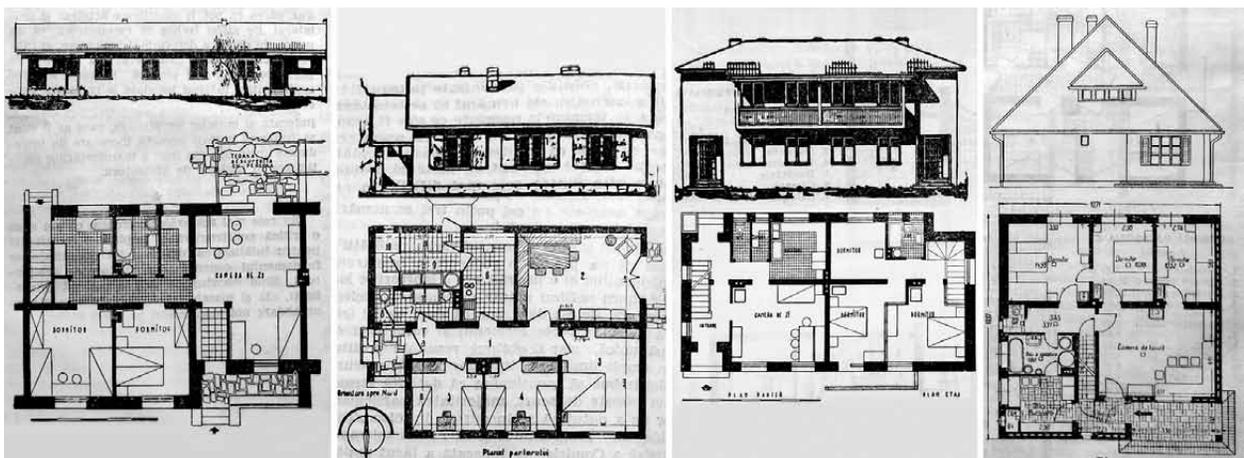


Fig. 1. Four of the winning entries. Source: *Arhitectura*, 1950, 2–3: 72–73.

⁹ *Arhitectura*, 1950, 2–3: 69–75.

¹⁰ These hypotheses referred exclusively to family composition (number and gender of children), ignoring crucial data like social background, urban or rural origin, lifestyle, and the type of work family members would be engaged in.

¹¹ Scientific Association of Technicians of the P.R.R., created in 1948 after the dissolution of the Society of Romanian Architects, grouped architects, urbanists, engineers of all denominations, technicians and workers in one massive, State-controlled professional organization.

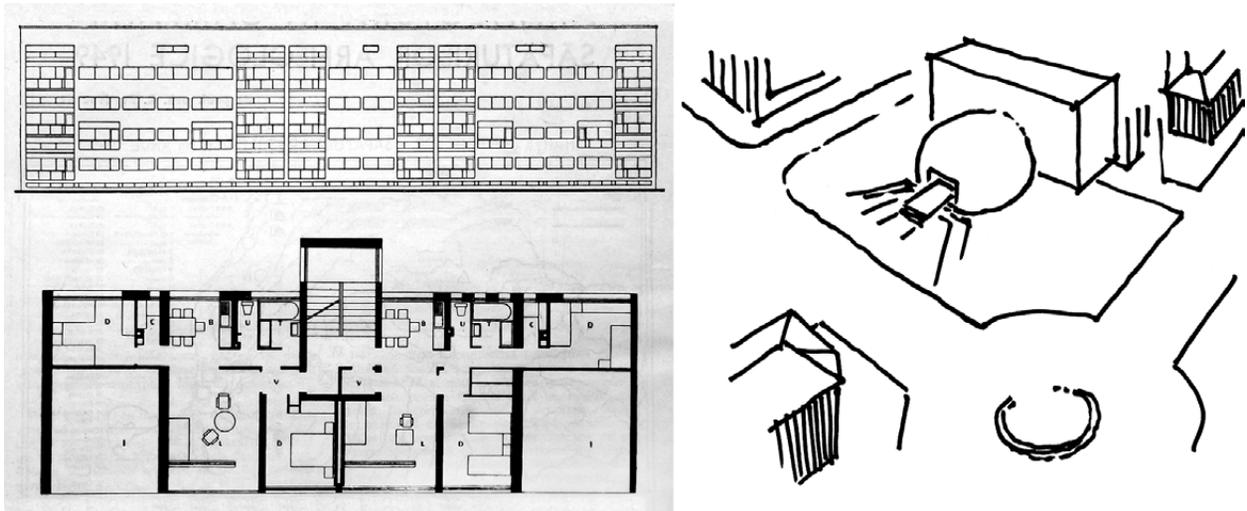


Fig. 2. Left – Virgil Nițulescu’s project. Right – the architect’s project for the National Opera. My sketch after a drawing by Ion M. Enescu. Sources: *Arhitectura*, 1950, 2–3: 75; Enescu 2006: 319.

of their falling short of brief fulfillment in terms of ideological content or professional standards.

Gusti’s analysis ended with a virulent critique of cosmopolitan architecture pursued against the interests and aspirations of the working class, illustrated by a project whose author was publicly vilified. Paradoxically, Virgil Nițulescu’s project, if somewhat deficient in contextuality and social profiling¹², came closest to improving living conditions for the nascent Romanian proletariat¹³.

With pre-war urban policies of relegating worker communities to the quasi-urbanized outskirts of cities still visible in the individual housing schemes developed by the winners, a four-level apartment building suitable for most urban contexts as either stand-alone or street-front insertion went beyond the provision of shelter and amenities. In a modest design with minimal constructive complication, Nițulescu’s re-imagining of the proletarian dwelling offered quasi-central, collective housing, access to a wider variety of services and a semi-open, decently-sized apartment plan with ample natural lighting and flexible furnishing. Given the relative cost of construction versus the percentage of workers provided with decent urban housing, Nițulescu’s proposal may have been the more economically viable choice – even more aligned with the aims of the socialist project. For an economy of endemic shortage reliant on State-controlled redistrib-

utable resource accumulation (Verdery 1991: 126), it is paradoxical that an architecture practice under strict, politically-mandated economic constraints for quick delivery of decent mass housing would be banned for doing so outside the more resource-consuming and financially-taxing political enforcement of a nebulously defined Socialist Realism.

The competition results indicate that, despite public calls for a professional clarification of Socialist Realism in the local context, attempts to merge socialist ethos and non-classicist architecture languages were summarily discouraged. This added to the general professional apathy towards political action. Throughout the gradual subordination of the architecture system to the State and planned economy, architects were minimally engaged in normalizing, on a broader social level, the visual representation (Socialist Realism) of the regime. For Foucault (1986b: 64), the State is a metapower stemming from “multiple and indefinite power relations” (including knowledge), based on which it operates. In modern society, power is exerted through heterogeneous exchanges between a sovereignty discoursing through law and a “polymorphous disciplinary mechanism” whose discipline-specific discourses normalize it (Foucault 1980: 106). Legally enforced¹⁴ in too short a time-frame to allow critical assimilation through discipline-specific discourse (architecture), Socialist Realism remained on uneven footing between 1945 and 1952.

Furthermore, the Party jostled in-field equilibrium by propelling a peripheral sector (social housing) to the center, forcing it into coexistence with the previously

¹² Insufficient knowledge of the target demographic. The apartments seem to be designed with a more financially modest type of urban intellectual in mind.

¹³ At the beginning of the 1950s, Romania was still an agrarian economy, with around 80% of the workforce engaged in agriculture, and the figure only fell to 65% by 1960. <http://countrystudies.us/romania/55.htm>

¹⁴ Ana-Maria Zahariade makes a note of Social Realism becoming legally enforced through the Constitution, at the end of the 1940s (Zahariade *et al.* 2003: 21).

dominant focus of discursive concerns (privileged architecture) and dictating their equal treatment in the same method and language. Insufficient training in the practice of affordable architecture for a previously un-profiled beneficiary thickened the haze of confusion. Privileged architecture would retain a crucial role in visually representing the new regime's ideology through urban networks of markers – and reminders – of its legitimacy, but access to high command would be henceforth conditioned by political involvement.

Outside the internal coherence and unity of expression of styles contending for discursive dominance before the socialist takeover, even radical modernist practitioners had failed to reduce the disparity between banal and high-brow architecture, especially in terms of their theoretical underpinnings. The strategy of splitting the central focus of discourse into divergent halves to be addressed through a single, yet undefined creative method backfired, temporarily plunging the profession into inaction. With the added difficulty of translating said method (linking politics and aesthetics into a rigid cluster of ideological tenets) into architectural language, the hesitant re-definition of architecture as etatized activity would stretch well into the 1950s, accounting for the wildly varying quality of the works produced during this time.

During the consolidation stage, the shortage economy of Romanian socialism also redefined contention for professional authority in cultural production. Through tentative, ideology-focused dialogue with State institutions, practitioners made cultural fields permeable to political discourse in exchange for material, professional and social gain. Political activism now conditioned participation in the production of culture, but this did not necessarily imply that, from this point onward, cultural activities were entirely subdued by the State. Architecture deployed a dual discursive mode – textual and visual – complicating in-field dialogue and intra-field communication with exclusively textual disciplines. Competitions entries, for instance, displayed a variety of ideologically inappropriate professional interpretations of briefs based on political text.

Although similar to other arts in this respect, architecture had other facets inseparable from the aesthetic – scientific, economic, socio-cultural – already engaged in visual/textual competition for the discursive upper-hand, making professional authority difficult to bring under a political control whose predominant mode of address was text. To some extent, this peculiarity preserved the in-field focus of professional power and authority – the University of Architecture, *Arhitectura* and the professional association – since the effort needed to attain control based on professional standards in each sub-branch of discourse would

have been unmanageable. Instead, control was exerted through institution, bureaucracy and legislation, dismantling the unity of professional bodies and the complexity of practice through relegation to minor roles in gigantic hierarchical structures.

Despite political infiltration, the connections between the entities forming architecture's pre-war nucleus survived this breakdown. While the school wavered between undeclared resistance enduring through the inertia of the apprenticeship system, and curricular adherence to Party-sanctioned education, *Arhitectura* became the scene of struggles for professional preeminence. As a result, critiquing and reviewing on the basis of a still unclear Socialist Realism aesthetic enjoyed greater visibility in printed media than actual architecture production.

Still, incipient political involvement of architects on an individual level did not signal the emergence of an adequate, architectural response to challenges of the socialist project. If permeable, the field remained silent on the matter. This absence of a counter-discourse¹⁵ (understood as creative dialogue, not antagonistic critique) ensued from a political ban on national discourse and the obligation to develop Romanian Socialist Realism on the unchallengeable theoretical and practical bases of the Russian architecture model¹⁶. In an effort to subdue previously hegemonic forms of discourse, the national was forced underground during the Stalinist years, depriving intellectual groups of their default form of self-definition and interaction (Verdery 1991: 303). Without access to the repertoire of national symbols and values shaping cultural production across discipline boundaries, and unable to challenge an authoritarian Soviet canon, architecture could not have devised a culturally-specific adaptation of Socialist Realism principles outside immediate practicality and disappointing utilitarianism.

The underlying issue, however, was one of divergence between power's concept of space – tactic of governance, population control and social relationships coding – and architecture's focus on objects-in-space (Foucault 1986a: 241–244). Foucault considers the 19th century political idea of society to have generated a model of space informed by socio-economic processes extending “far beyond the limits of urbanism and architecture”, subsequently developed by engineers and

¹⁵ For a discourse to be socially relevant – instrumental in forming consciousness, animating civil society or implementing change – it must generate counter-discourses and engage them in dialogue (Verdery 1991: 126).

¹⁶ In addition to translations from Russian architecture theorists, the 1950–1952 issues of *Arhitectura* repeatedly published articles on a few iconic developments of Muscovite architecture: the Seven Sisters, the Metropolitan, Lomonosov University.

polytechnicians (1986a: 244). For the socialist project aiming to create a new society by radically altering the space-power relationships architecture had difficulties grasping even in the capitalist paradigm, this was quite the setback. Conversely, early Socialism's obdurate determination to create this fundamentally new built environment in a neo-classicist dialect already imbued with the space-power relations of the past proved equally hindering for progressive-minded architects, who saw their way into the new paradigm through architecture languages making a clean break from previous ones.

Together, competition entries and Gusti's critique reveal a Socialist Realism operating on a double definition different from the clear-cut Soviet theory published in *Arhitectura*. Positive in theory, it combined Party-mindedness, class-consciousness, delivery of Marxist-Leninist ideological content, clarity and significance for the masses. It pursued a creative synthesis between traditional and contemporary progressive elements, drawing upon a variety of styles to produce the meaningful imagery needed to shape a collective psychology focused on social progress (Cooke 1993: 86–89). In practice, the definition was recast in the negative, through opposition to and exclusion of manifold instances of Western architecture either contemporary or sourced from times of monarchic authoritarianism. In other words, opposition to the tares of capitalism made ideologically-correct form more important than performance in service of the socialist project, disqualifying early attempts (like Nițulescu's modernist take on collective housing) to channel the method into alternative architecture languages.

Another aspect detrimental to the emergence of a counter-discourse to the early, monolithic version of Socialist Realism was the disastrous effect of Party-specific time on disciplines mobilizing significant material and economic resources. Politically-mandated stage-skipping robbed architecture programs recently moved to the center of field preoccupations of enough time to mature through the usual feedback between professional practice and society. If Western architecture had undergone a long process of transformation since the first attempts to address the crisis of the industrial city and post-war reconstruction, Romanian architecture had just begun, during the 1940s, to explore the social aspects of architecture through the efforts of a more radical generation of modernist architects (Zahariade 2011: 25–28). Regardless of preparation, know-how, even resource availability, Socialist Realism drove architecture towards implementing stages logical in an ideology-fueled chronology, but difficult to sustain in terms of in-discipline discursive coherence and current economic conditions.

Boris Groys draws attention to the imaginist side of Socialist Realism: an objective rendition of external reality still in the making, shaped according to Party objectives at the time of production (1992: 51). Expanding this idea, architecture was the 'visual manifestation' of a perpetually emerging, unendingly redefined notion of the perfect society. Bound to convey the social force of the dominant order, it remained the one artistic domain where, given the considerable resources involved and the long-lasting effect on the built environment, failure to conform to (or anticipate) changes in Party directives had drastic consequences for practitioners and beneficiaries. Once applied, Socialist Realism subdued previous discourses, stripped away agency, controlled the knowledge and instruments used in ideologically-correct cultural production, but demanded creativity and innovation impossible to obtain through institutional application of a politically-designed method.

In pursuit of the untranslatable character

Calling for submissions for the V. I. Lenin hydroelectric plant, the second architecture competition reviewed in *Arhitectura*¹⁷ shifted the focus to grand-scale industrial architecture. With a similar institutional affiliation and jury (led by Gustav Gusti, who also penned the review), it brought to the forefront of architectural debate the question of a tripartite character: socialist, industrial, national. The first two aspects were easily reconciled in a socialist paradigm equating the struggle for a better society with the transformative effect of industrial architecture over nature. Moreover, the hydroelectric plant, essential to putting electricity – light and power in a literal and figurative sense – at the disposal of the proletariat, epitomized 'socialist accomplishments'. Expressing two elements with a history of pre-war antagonism through a single method and one cohesive architecture language complicated matters for the national and industrial aspects of character. With the industrialization of Romania until WWII depending largely on foreign investments, industrial architecture leaned towards modernism. In turn, architecture classifiable as 'national' was inevitably traditionalist, and generally belonged to neo-Romanian stylistic variants. Before the socialist era, national and industrial architecture scarcely crossed paths, and were regarded as antithetic, if not mutually exclusive. With the addition of Socialist Realism's propensity towards the neo-classical, architects were hard put to reconcile all three aspects of said character.

¹⁷ *Arhitectura*, 1952, 1–2: 40–45.

Part of the country's electrification plan, the V. I. Lenin hydroelectric plant was the first major industrial development subject to a public architecture competition. According to Gusti, the competition initiated by the Ministry of Electric Energy and Electrotechnical Industry partnered by the I.C.D. unfolded along disappointingly similar lines to the previous one. Though slightly better organized (coherent brief, on-site research visits, availability of specialist engineering advice), it suffered from the same drawbacks. The low participation rate was inevitable considering the Stalinist tradition of institutionally-mandated 'volunteering' for tasks additional to the workload, but for which no extra time or resources could be dispensed. Once again, overall project quality bordered on the underwhelming. At fault, the same inadequate ideological training, nescience, and inconsistency of organizers and contestants alike. A niche event held in a 'narrow, highly professional setting', the competition failed to reach the public and trigger an exchange of ideas between architects and beneficiaries. Communication between participant institutions was minimal, as was the involvement of other professional organizations¹⁸ with expertise on the subject.

Gusti rehashed the ideal competition profile from his previous review, adding a few points on ideological, conceptual and organizational matters to be observed for future improvement. Consistency was vital: from launch to submission and evaluation, organizers had to prevent departure from the brief and tenets of Socialist Realism. Beyond the provision of professional support and ample Soviet documentation, this carried an element of error-correction concomitant with design, meant to ensure the production of advanced, progressive, error-free solutions. In Gusti's view, the implied policing of the design process to weed out deviations¹⁹ – mimicry of national forms, gratuitous ornamentation, the fetishist overemphasis of technique – in no way impinged on the "enthusiastic development of architectural expression... clarifying the conceptual and creative method of Socialist Realism" (Gusti 1952: 42). Probably intuiting the complications involved in the careful 'monitoring' outlined above (mostly dealing with subjectivity), the author did not delve into the particulars of how this procedure might be organized.

From an ideological perspective, Gusti bemoaned the misreadings of Soviet canon and the disparity between the grandeur of the historical moment and the results of architecture practice, as well as the dis-

trussing inability of architectural design to reflect the ideological core of the socialist project, while also remaining true to local context and program specifics. This suggests that significant disparities between the regime's demands – voiced through a select number of politically-active architects – and their broader professional interpretation still endured half a decade after the official instatement of Socialist Realism.

As for the organizational aspects of competitions, Gusti's valid demands for increased cooperation, communication and visibility unwittingly exposed a grave flaw of the institutionalized architecture system – an inability to manage complex aspects of practice requiring active coordination of several institutions and individual holders of specialist knowledge. The system's modus operandi – breaking down complex processes into disparate tasks for a number of inefficient structures with narrowly-focused departments, subordinate to a central super-structure designed to re-assemble and interpret the work thus produced – made it impossible to arrive at the desired results, much to the frustration (and half-articulated protest) of the professional body. The malcontent over the poor handling of competitions – by Ministries, no less – reached such heights that, by 1952, their organization was handed to the newly instated Union of Romanian Architects.

Gusti expedited the three featured projects rather summarily, alarmed by their "inability to deliver an architectural image national in form and adequate to the ideological content of the hydroelectric plant" (1952: 40). Leaving aside the unintentional hilarity of architecture critique steeped in political jargon, the review hinted at a fruitless pursuit of the tripartite character resulting from the combined resurrection of the 'national' as a concept indispensable to design with professional attempts to infuse some semblance of discipline-defined standards²⁰ into the application of Socialist Realism. Since the brief included strict technological constraints for the master-plan, building layout and volume, the conceptual pursuit of a national form to convey the desired ideological content was reduced to a lackluster manipulation of façade collages.

Two of the projects emulated Soviet architecture at opposite ends of the spectrum: megalomaniac, excessively ornate, with gratuitous gestures devoid of functional purpose; and understated, monotonous, uninspiring. Both projects fell short of expressing the essence and grandeur of the industrial, or, paradoxically, "merging with the landscape" (Gusti 1952: 43).

¹⁸ *Arhitectura*, the architecture branch of the S.A.T., the University's department of industrial architecture design, etc.

¹⁹ Process to be undertaken by the jury, as holders of professional authority and representatives of the institutions involved.

²⁰ For example, the insistence on a connection between architectural expression and program functionality, which is, in the Romanian context, an idea sourced from modernism.

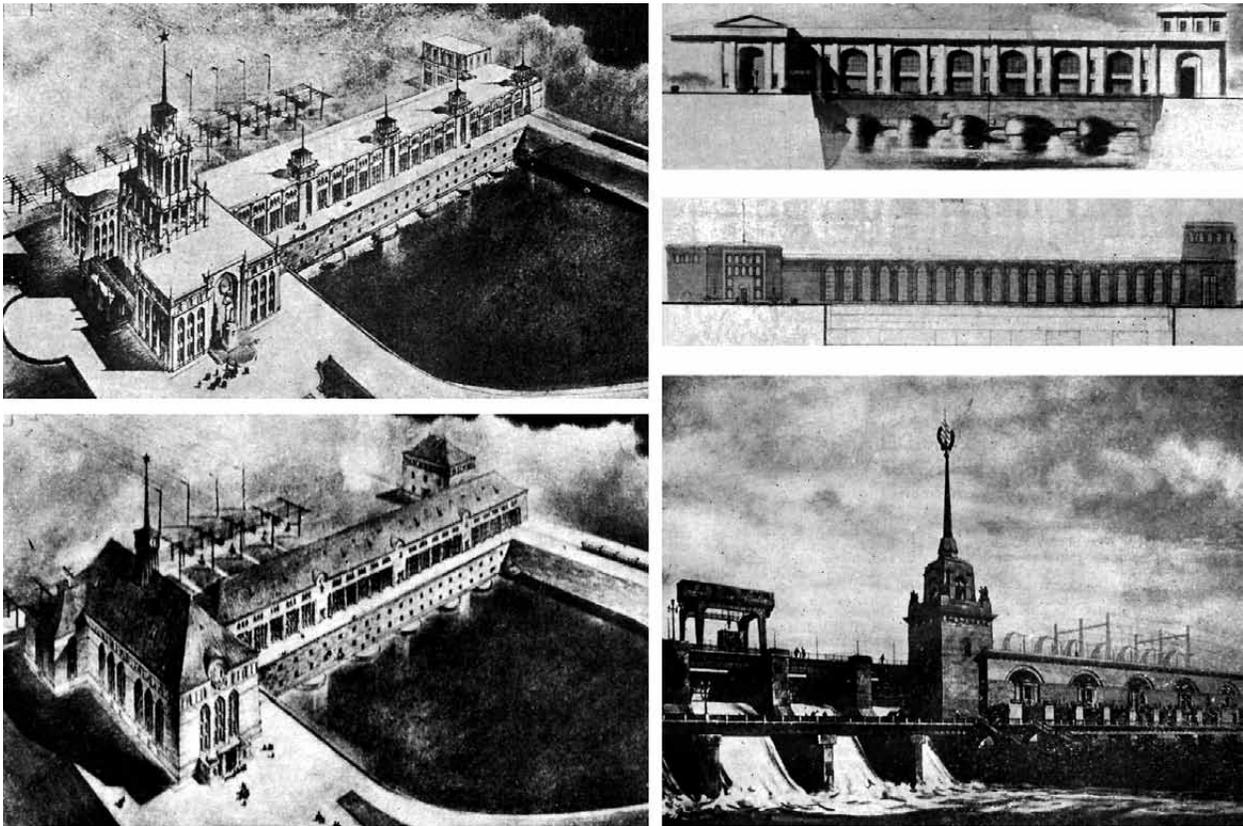


Fig. 3. Left – two versions of the 2nd prize entry. Top right – 1st mention and 3rd prize recipients. Bottom right – Tymliansk hydroelectric plant – project illustration. Source: *Arhitectura*, 1952, 1–2: 43–45.

A variant in a national style by the recipients of the 2nd prize, the third project analyzed did strive for the ‘national’, but garnered critique for lack of industrial progressivity, as it almost literally referenced the Gothic language of religious Moldavian architecture. Gusti closed the argument with an illustration from a Soviet project epitomizing socialist industrial architecture: Tymliansk hydroelectric plant. Judging by the picture provided, the characteristics attributed to a successful synthesis – a fair balance between architectural and technical requirements, pleasing proportions in detail and ensemble, attention afforded to perspectives from afar and up close – hinted more at architecture which was simply competent, rather than socialist, and tended towards a pre-modernist industrial aesthetic.

The projects, however, illustrate the beginnings of authoritative discourse subversion through practice, latent though it may have been at first. Authoritative discourse, writes Bakhtin, makes artistic representations impossible without inventive subversion through the social practices of the quotidian or professional practice (1981: 342–344). Moreover, Yurchak’s study of Soviet authoritative discourse reveals an increasing imbalance between its performative dimension (ritualized participation in acts perpetuating discourse) and constative dimension (engagement with the meanings

coded in said acts). Supported by the disappearance of an external editorial figure evaluating the accuracy of representations (Stalin), this performative shift normalized authoritative discourse at a structural level. With the constative dimension rendered indeterminate, irrelevant even, professional practice reorganized around visible engagement in ritualized reproduction of indistinguishable instances of authoritative discourse. Far from restrictive, the increased importance of performativity “... actually enabled the emergence of diverse, multiple, and unpredictable meanings... including those that did not correspond to the constative meanings of authoritative discourse” (Yurchak 2005: 25–26).

For a Romanian architecture twice-edited – through the canon of Soviet architecture reviewed against the Stalinist version of Marxist-Leninist discourse – the shift came sooner. In this context, Nicolae Nedelescu’s²¹ submission observed the ritual form, but not the meaning of socialist architecture production: his design could support both Moldavian neo-gothic and Muscovite neo-classical without spatial alterations. Together with other projects tepidly mimicking a Soviet aesthetic with

²¹ Nedelescu worked in Horia Creangă’s studio between 1935–1939, and was an enthusiast of functionalist architecture.

little care for local contextuality, Nedelescu's attitude towards Socialist Realism suggests a refuge from meaning into form, signaling the dissolution of the method's ideological hold on the socialist project.

This competition heralded the second stage of Socialist Realism (roughly 1952–1955): a resurgence of national discourse in architecture²². In an effort to nullify a flagrant contradiction – insisting on national form to convey socialist content during Stalinist repression of national values – or perhaps to regain the allegiance of an alienated professional culture and kick-start dormant cultural production²³, the State lifted the embargo on the national. Henceforth, architecture shifted focus from emulating the Russian model to exploring identity, character, and devising an architectural expression to best convey them without clashing with the still-invoked Soviet canon. Regaining an irreplaceable instrument of discursive experimentation seemed liberating, but was not immediately effective. Architecture remained isolated in terms of access to the national. Without support and inter-discipline dialogue – in particular, with the arts, history and philosophy, disciplines in relation with which Romanian architecture had always situated and (re)defined itself – the profession found it difficult to channel it into creative architectural production. The 'national' now accessible was, in essence, problematic, not only through obligation to function in a paradigm of Soviet origin, but also due to its treatment as a compound element of 'character'.

With most practitioners coming to professional maturity in a pre-war climate where national discourse included matters of identity and character, moderated access to the previously dominant cultural dialect under a new political order only prolonged confusion. Despite earlier incorporation into political strategies, these constructs had traditionally been forged through exchanges between the disciplines engaged in cultural production. Socialist logic operated a reversal of terms, prompting cultural production in response to a politically-defined 'character' based on the previously dominant discourse, designed to lend structural strength to the political system without destabilizing it.

In architecture, such a character proved simply untranslatable. Without permitted dialogue on national discourse between the fields involved in redefining the 'character', the forced cohabitation of parallel or ant-

agonistic components (national styles and industrial architecture) resulted in either failure or mediocre collage exercises. Moreover, in the context of pre-war Romanian culture, concepts such as national, identity, character implied an element of belief. The intellectuals (re)writing them through cross-discipline cultural dialogue were sincerely animated by their respective credos, and thought themselves in possession of professional and intellectual freedom²⁴. Furthermore, the tangible 'national' character of applied arts and architecture developed in a feedback loop with its philosophical counterpart and, despite inevitable struggles for discursive dominance between factions, was characterized by plurality. For Verdery, the premature return of national discourse in a Stalinist climate, later embraced by political action and cultural production alike, turned the national monolithic and unshakeable enough to subvert and eventually indigenize Marxist-Leninist discourse (Verdery 1991: 66). During the Stalinist years, however, architects had to render material a politically-defined, singular character, using a partial form of national discourse redefined by the same exclusion intrinsic to Socialist Realism: nobody could quite agree on anything except what it *wasn't* and *couldn't* look like.

Architecture competitions held during the Stalinist period were under institutional monopoly and strict control. Treated as time- and money-saving resources available with minimal expense (professional recognition, remuneration for prizes), they discouraged the initiative and creativity which might have resulted in a concrete definition of the national character. Architect Ion Mircea Enescu recalls their double falsification: institutional, through strict, limiting design briefs and a process of evaluation dominated by (often) non-specialist Ministry representatives; professional, by participants who would develop their designs based on the known aesthetic preferences of the jury (2006: 232). But even in times of destabilizing systemic changes and frustrating institutional obstruction of professional practice, architects intuited the potential of competitions to open up a productive form of dialogue with the political. The disciplines, writes Foucault, can also be the origin of local, discontinuous criticisms able to work against "the inhibiting effect of global, totalitarian theories". While his assertion focused on research,

²² Verdery's study of national ideology in Socialist Romania focused on history, philosophy and literature. For these fields, the ban on national discourse was only lifted in the 1960s, suggesting that, in architecture, it was reintroduced slightly earlier.

²³ The absence of national discourse severed the past-present link, depriving disciplines of controlled continuity with the previous hegemonic form needed to maintain cultural production levels (Verdery 1991: 109).

²⁴ Regardless of the fact that both action and belief result from interlocking social processes and events. The difference between this dynamic and that prevalent during the Stalinist years hinges on belief in intellectual autonomy and sincere adherence to the values promoted.

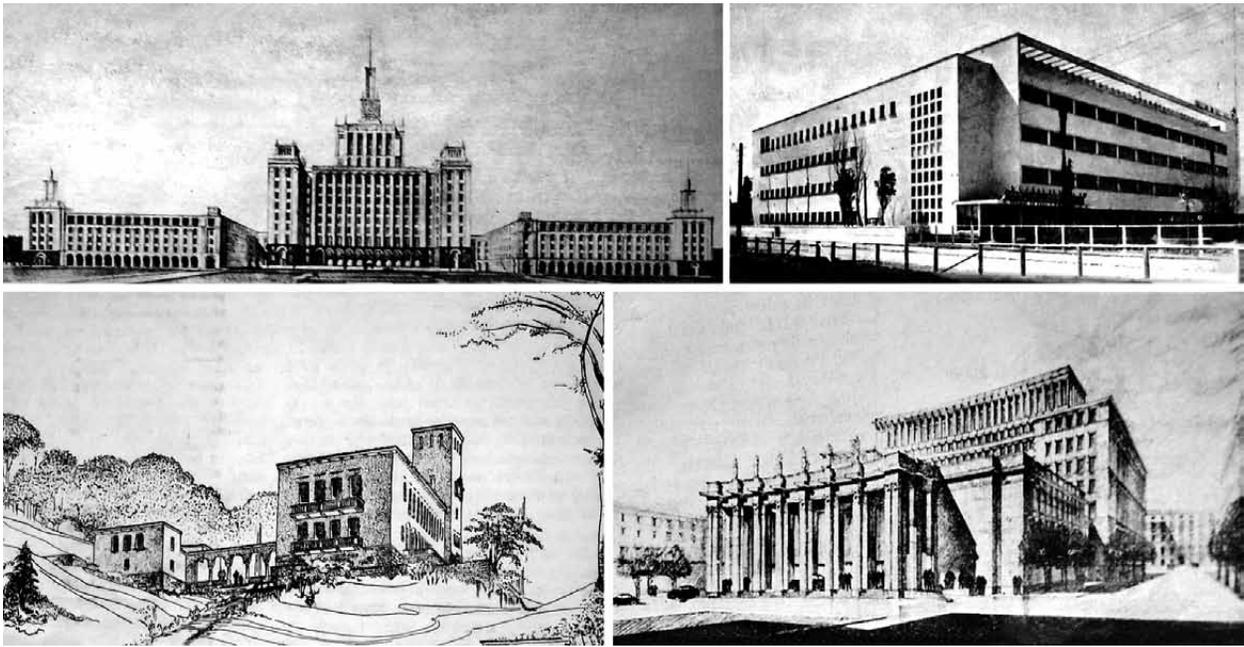


Fig. 4. Official Socialist Realism (top left, Casa Scînteii) and its subversion through practice: Emilia Irza Hospital (G. Ionescu, top right), Hunedoara Sanatorium (H. Delavrancea, bottom left), Casa Radiofoniei (T. Ricci, bottom right). Sources: *Arhitectura*, 1952, 1–2: 8–9; *Arhitectura*, 1952, 8: 10; *Arhitectura*, 1952, 9–10: 11.

the idea of viable alternatives for social change based “on the condition that the theoretical unity of these discourses was in some sense put in abeyance, or at least curtailed, divided, overthrown, caricatured, theatricalised” (1980: 80–81) can easily be extended to the relationship between Socialist Realism and architecture.

Effective subversion also emerged from the passive existence of a multitude of individual professional voices, privately unaligned with the official discourse on architecture. Architect Mircea Alifanti, co-author of the most iconic Socialist Realist edifice in Romania (Casa Scînteii), worked surrounded by examples of modernist logic: sectioned radio lamps and brakes from a Delage automobile (Enescu 2006: 221). As a repository of alternative discourses gradually converging around the national, professional culture set in motion what Bakhtin called the de-normalizing, centrifugal forces working against the centripetal, hierarchizing drive of dominant discourse. Multiplicity of meaning stems from the locus of collision between these forces – in a word, *heteroglossia* – a state of creative tension counteracting the homogenizing logic of authoritative discourse (Bakhtin 1981: 262–273).

An open-ended conclusion

Aggravation over institutional deficiencies continued to rise until 1955, when an urbanism competition on

a real site²⁵ followed by a public debate led to a first public confrontation between State and profession. Reformed in 1952 as the Union of Romanian Architects, the professional organization had polarized enough collective professional authority to be perceived as semi-institutional. From this strengthened position, the U.R.A. challenged the institutionalized embodiment of power over the lack of professional agency and the failings of organizations involved in architectural practice. Requesting the development of a legal framework for public architecture competitions disguised the call for a more coherent interpretation of socialist architecture – since Socialist Realism had been proved, by practice, more hindering than conducive to the goals of the socialist project. Beyond the practical advantages of connecting competitions to planned production through building codes mandatory for design, devising an assessment method might have triggered the revision of a paradoxical method still far from translation into architectural language. Foucault considers discursive intervention, no matter how subtle, as political: “to speak on this subject, to force the institutionalized networks of information to listen, [...] to point the finger of accusation [...] is the

²⁵ The competition brief called for the redesign in a Socialist Realist key of the Central Army House Square (Bucharest, at the intersection of Calea Victoriei and Regina Elisabeta Boulevard). *Arhitectura*, 1955, 4: 9–22.

first step in the reversal of power and the initiation of new struggles against existing forms of power.” (Bouchard 1977: 214).

This gradual reclaim of professional status and influence mobilized the field’s pre-war locus of power: the U.R.A., recently separated from the professionally-homogenizing S.A.T., *Arhitectura* (publishing increasingly less censored, ideologically-skewed material), and the University of Architecture (on the rebound after politicization in the late 1940s). Still, the profession remained impassive to social commitment, prioritizing the recovery of advantages lost in the post-war transformation of its relationship with power. Consequently, the field became selectively permeable towards the apex of the social structure, remaining hermetic towards broader social strata. With dire consequences for social progress, this prevented the post-war re-shaping of a cognizant public linking intellectual elites and society at large by disseminating knowledge made accessible through dialogue (Verdery 1991: 197–198). Architecture’s pre-war cognizant public had been exclusive and restrictive. Curiously, it was not recreated in Socialist Romania as an agent for widespread social development. Instead, the field split into a specialist cognizant public (the architect-employees of State Design Institutes) and an elite-within-the-elite: the select council of the U.R.A., the editorial team of *Arhitectura*, University teaching staff and practitioners with access to the privileged sector of architecture for State apparatus and Party nomenklatura. With little time and interest for social reform, the effect of this split on architecture’s new-found propensity for dialogue confined it to professional circles or circulation between holders of decisional power. As a result, the social progress desiderata of Socialist Realist architecture remained, regrettably, utopian.

Intended as a safe urban design exercise, the 1955 competition revealed, through entries and the subsequent discussion, an unplanned confrontation between Socialist Realism and a place of strong character. Already destabilized after the resurgence of national discourse, Socialist Realism was exposed by this encounter as dependent on a-contextuality for the upkeep of discursive coherence, and possessed of an utopian allure dispelled through confrontation with the realities of place. Practical applications preserved a semblance of logic as autonomous objects or self-contained urban ensembles with minimal connections to (an irresolute) context. But its overlay onto spatially-compelling, functional, plurivalent spaces²⁶ triggered the breakdown of this isolationist, homogenizing logic. A topic of frequent

debate in competition analyses, the transition from theory to practice cast Socialist Realism as the never-fulfillable dream, a method able to disqualify, through too strict a mix of utopianism, economy and ideological hyper-correctness, applications based thereon. Moreover, the place highlighted the theatrical aspects of privileged Socialist Realist architecture. Concerned with regime legitimation and the portrayal of political and institutional power, it transformed space into a scene displaying and eliciting power-consolidating social practices. After this confrontation, the profession called for the political reconsideration of the yet unmatched values of pre-war Romanian architecture production (Petrașcu 1955: 17).

By 1956, Socialist Realism had nearly slipped into oblivion. Following intense professional debates ignited by Khrushchev’s speech²⁷ – published at a time of tacit political distancing from Moscow and absence of clear directives concerning the new orientation – architecture gravitated towards modernism. When the Party decided, in 1958²⁸, to fall in line with Khrushchev’s call for an architecture that was, essentially, modernism couched in terms of rationality, a hybrid type of modernist discourse (plurivalent and experimental) was well underway, illustrated as early as 1956 by a competition for single-family housing²⁹. With competitions tentatively exploring architecture along slightly divergent lines from the official direction, post-competition analyses now promoted critique dominated by professional standards, addressing politically-induced dysfunctions too long ignored. Issues of particular concern were the professional ignorance deriving from the Party’s scientific monopoly on knowledge of ‘the masses’, and the need to reconnect with disciplines providing complex data regarding beneficiaries (sociology) or cultural dialogue and symbolic exchanges (the arts, history, philosophy) (Caffé 1956: 28–31). While critique roughly followed a consistent agenda, practice during the breakdown of Socialist Realism’s utopian unity was more diverse, hinging, once again, on national discourse.

²⁷ “On the extensive introduction of industrial methods, improving the quality and reducing the cost of construction”, delivered at the “All-Union Conference of builders, architects and workers in the construction materials industry, in the machine-building industry, in design and research organizations” in 1954. Khrushchev’s speech, readable as a pre-emptive, oblique attack on the ideology behind the architecture (Stalinism), did indeed trigger Socialist Realism’s demise. His choice of allegory was not arbitrary, however, but based on the increased infeasibility of Socialist Realism in the Soviet socio-economic and political system. *Arhitectura*, 1955, 2: 30–42.

²⁸ Speech given by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej in November, at the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Romanian Worker’s Party.

²⁹ *Arhitectura*, 1956, 3: 21–27.

²⁶ In terms of social practices, collective memory strata, architecture languages, etc. – e.g., Calea Victoriei, Bucharest.

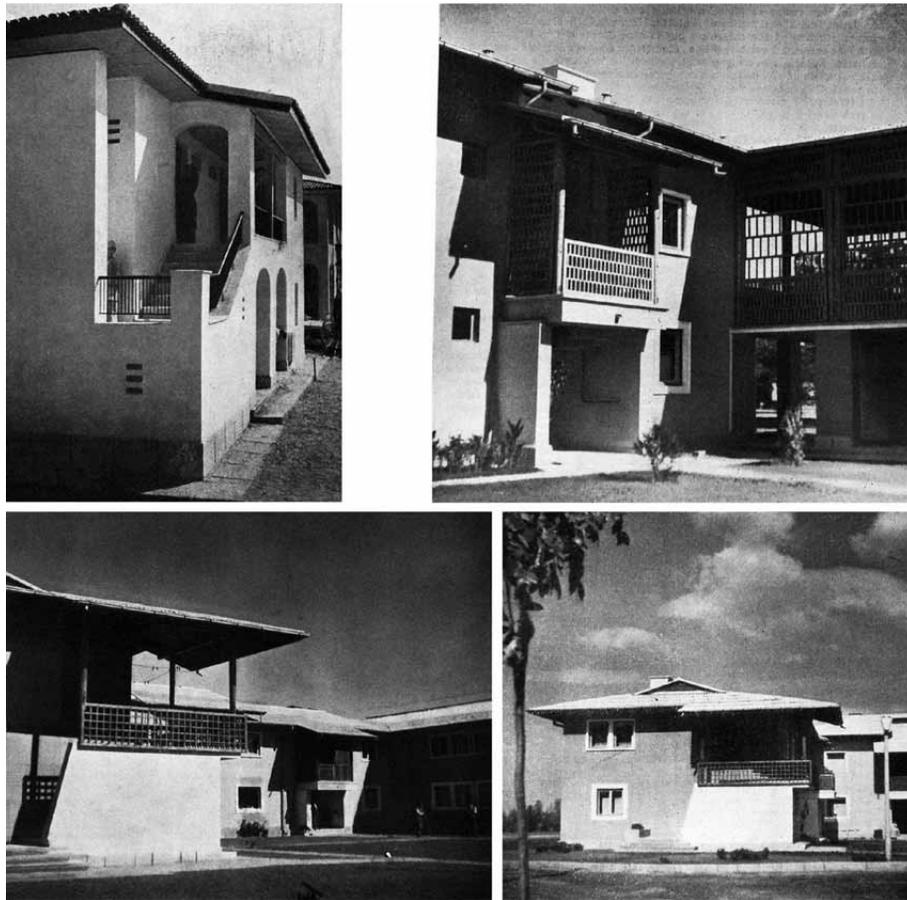


Fig. 5. Social housing, 1957–1958. Top left: Cățelu cvartal, architect Tiberiu Niga. Top right, bottom row: Băneasa housing estate, architect Octav Doicescu. Sources: *Arhitectura*, 1957, 2: 11; *Arhitectura*, 1959, 6: 32, 34–35.

Two factions emerged, one advocating a modernism centered on the national, and the other, a reconnection with Western architecture and the ‘international’ modernism thought to have been disrupted by Socialist Realism. It is not evident whether the former was a genuine attempt to rewrite a contradiction-free ideological agenda of Socialist Realism, or simply a strategy to ensure the permanence of modernism through a connection with the formerly hegemonic discourse. In a tolerant atmosphere similar to the pre-war diversity of architectural discourses, these groups revitalized architectural production, each focusing on a particular sector. The more creative hybrid between modernism and the popular vernacular, naturally given to the small-scale and to housing, was channeled into mass architecture. Modernism of an international ilk – the domain of avant-garde, quasi-Bauhausian aesthetics – suited privileged architecture for the nomenklatura.

The persistence of an international modernist aesthetic in what Zahariade defines as ‘occult’ architecture – “the area of building activity [...] somehow exempt from the Communist planning [...] maneuvered by the members of the ‘inner circle’ in their own private

interest” (2011: 112) – supports a Foucauldian view of Socialist power in Romania as a simultaneously restrictive and permissive network traversing the social body to produce, create, enable knowledge *and* discourse (1986: 61). In the end, power’s duplicitous treatment of the modernist aesthetic contributed to the speedy development of a post-war hybrid with local vernacular architecture, and inadvertently facilitated an easier switch to rationalist architecture after the official dismissal of Socialist Realism.

For Foucault, utopian schemes dependent on spatial distribution have the potential to enforce oppression or enable freedom, depending on the coincidence of initial intent with “the real practice of people in the exercise of their freedom” (1986a: 246). The utopianism of Romanian Socialist Realism claimed totality, but was in fact partial. Its use of architecture as a technique of power deployed for the government of individuals and the purpose of complete social transformation only extended to mass architecture. Translated into a restrictive framework for the practice of banal architecture, from which privileged architecture continued to be exempt, the incongruities of Socialist Realism

gave rise to a professional confusion expressed with unexpected honesty – for instance, in discussions focusing on competitions, which helped undermine the overarching authority of the discourse.

According to Yurchak, the demise of Soviet authoritarian discourse was disguised by the unanimous participation in its reproduction which, in fact, enabled “diverse and unpredictable meanings and styles of living to spring up everywhere within it” (2005: 28–29). This paradoxical structure of mutually constitutive immutability-predictability and creative-unpredictability also characterized Romanian Socialist Realism. Using permeability, deflection and selective engagement, Romanian architecture weathered Socialist realism through the creative use of practice, securing a place in the uncertain terrain of confrontation between architecture and power whence plural, alternative modes of discourse could emerge under favorable circumstances.

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