

“THE FACTORY OF FACTS AND OTHER (UNSPOKEN) STORIES”. AN OVERVIEW

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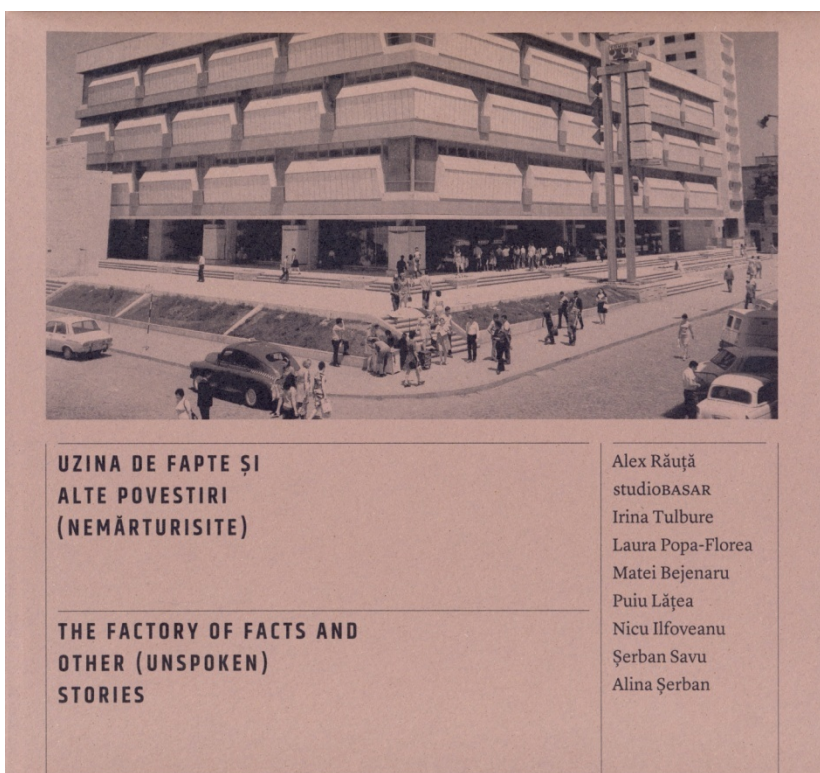
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INTRODUCTION

The legacy of the Communist Regime in Romania is both complex and controversial. From an urban point of view, most cities underwent a serious reconsideration of their function, structure and even ethnical and social composition. The instruments for this radical transformation were many, ranging from general legal dispositions to specific, punctual interventions ordered directly by the central government. Many of the current neighbourhoods of these cities still owe their general aspect today (with both good and bad aspects) to this specific period in time.



Of these, the most notable interventions are generally known under the umbrella term of “civic centres”, usually depicting one or more public buildings, generally adjacent to a newly envisaged square that serves them directly. Although the purpose of their construction was clearly state directed back then, nowadays their fate is very different, depending on a series of factors including the economic and social situation of the city, their relation to a possible prior, more

legitimate, historical centre, or even the ingenuity of the local administration or of the NGOs that have somehow managed to raise public awareness towards their potential.

The Factory of Facts and Other (Unspoken) Stories starts its discourse precisely from these two often divergent perspectives on the now aging civic centres of the '70s and '80s – their image back in the era and nowadays, mixing very efficiently archive photos with current perspectives. Once the symbol of national communism and power, they would simply have to be reinvented in order to survive in a totally different, less centralized mechanic and one of the main purposes of the book is to offer an understanding of this process.

In stark contrast to western urban approaches, the Romanian situation sometimes mistakenly pendulates between abandonment or demolition and reconstruction of some of the urban spaces that were negatively associated with communism or simply lost their urban importance. This practice could be ironically attributed to similar practices the communists themselves employed to dislodge prior identity markers in the cities they had their visor on. However this practice is not only not economically sound, but also disruptive at urban scale and most cities in the West have actually learned to adapt, to reemploy their abandoned sites for multipurpose functions.

Initiated after a successful public art exhibition with the same name, as Alina Șerban states, the intention of the study is twofold: to explain local architecture and urban development trends both then and now by analysing the interventions that fall under the general "civic centre" term, as well as to evidenciate the relationship between the architectural object and the urban experience it generates to passers-by at the same time.

PERSPECTIVES

The problem is visualized through a series of consecutive lenses, from the study of archives in terms of projects, pictures and legislature to more recent photographs and collages or to more personal interviews and accounts from people directly involved in the process.

Nowadays, these public buildings and spaces are seen through the effect of a reverse process from the one that called for them, namely a trend of deindustrialization of our cities and even abandonment *en masse* in certain unfortunate situations. The aesthetic value of these objects, highly prized at a time for being a fusion between local, traditional architecture and contemporary trends, is nowadays looked down upon for being too stern and inflexible to accommodate change.

The study encompasses several distinct architectural programs that were the sum of efforts to undergo this transformation intended for the newly modernized socialist cities of 1970s Romania, namely the civic centre proper, usually grouping together the political party administration building that acted as a platform for public speeches and the adjoining square and sometimes the house of culture. Larger cities also received a universal store building, according to the projected final size of the settlement and its political importance for the territory.

Starting with chapter 1 by Alex Răuță, the civic centre is defined as a term, emphasizing from the very beginning the dichotomy between the word "civic" and the real situation which was actually a top to bottom unilateral intervention that had less to do with the local community and more in terms of power affirmation of a dictatorial establishment. Although it was never legislated, the

apparition of several such centres was decided by the prominent leaders of the Communist Regime, or by Ceaușescu himself, separately and according to their whims for each case.

While planned economy certainly had its positive aspects, notably the possibility to concentrate large sums of money and effort in order to undergo these punctual interventions in record time, it certainly can be blamed for caring little about the dispossessed populace that had to be evacuated in order to build on their former property. The chapter pinpoints with accuracy the tensed relationship between the political establishment and the architects but, strangely enough, somehow does not present the case for a similar situation in the USSR as a possible model for this process.

The second intervention, by studioBASAR, exemplifies the situation of one such civic centre in Ploiești nowadays. It is more or less a success story where locals managed to "adopt" the former civic centre that has somehow managed to survive the transition period due to its multi-functionality and down to people size scale interventions.

Irina Tulbure's incursion into what is a house of culture nowadays starts by stating the discrepancy even then between the sumptuous house and the new citizenry that were mostly dislodged former peasants stimulated to turn into workers in the newly built urban factories. Their primary purpose and the praises they received in the era were not for their architectural or urban value in itself, but by the number of people and shows displayed here as a sign of mass cultural revolution the regime took pride in providing.

The fourth chapter, by Laura Popa-Florea, deals with the third actor of urban renewal in communist times – the universal store – and attempts two questions from the start: firstly, how exactly did the universal store come to be, was it through public demand or a state initiative? and secondly, how are they adapting in the current period?

While the centralization of commerce and the representation of progress at the same time through such a building certainly was appealing from an ideological point of view to the political establishment, it certainly proved to be more comfortable for the people themselves who found all necessary items in one place. The source however might have been found not only in communist countries, but in capitalist societies as well, and we are witnessing the apparition of mall culture even more drastically after the revolution of '89 than before.

The final chapters offer a different account of the story, be it from personal artistic collages, interviews with the former designer at the universal store in Iași, or the study of propagandistic ideas as they unfolded in the local newspapers in Olt County. The conclusion is that although initially prophesized as the engines of progress and urbanization, all these interventions were regarded higher by the propaganda of the newspapers than their actual role turned out to be in the further development of the cities they resided in.

CONCLUSIONS

The study is a thorough, monographic depiction of the symbols of a past yet not quite forgotten age that still impacts the way we perceive our cities even to this day. It is especially important in an era when we are confronted with the problem of whether to assume these objects and consider them pieces of our national heritage or discard them completely and replace them with more suitable interventions to what we now understand our cities to be. But in order to avoid further disruption, it is my belief that the question itself is not *if* we need to safeguard them or not but *how*. For surely another top down intervention resulting in

massive demolitions will not only be economically unsuitable, but it will also be frowned upon in the decades to come just as easily as this one is derided today for replacing the former identity of a place.

The Factory of Facts and Other (Unspoken) Stories observes many perspectives on the matter of the public buildings "decreed" during the communist period and generally achieves its goal. The book is easy to read and insightful, providing lots of imagery to underline the authors' points of view, perhaps lacking only in a parallel between the situation in Romania and all the other former communist countries that had to deal with similar (if perhaps at a smaller scale) situations and objects.

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