

RESEARCH REPORT

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Shortage and Urban Renewal in 1980s Romania

My dissertation project examines the spatial reorganization of Romanian cities during two periods of economic crisis: the austerity years of the last decade of the Communist Party rule and the period following Romania's 2007 EU accession at the start of the global economic crisis. Different as they were, both periods of economic downturn were accompanied by significantly intensified state-led urban development. My research at the Open Society Archives (OSA) has focused on spatial transformations in Romania during the 1980s, a period of austerity and widespread shortages. During this decade urban renewal and village resettlement schemes—also known as the Systematization Program—brought massive population displacement, further straining scarce resources. My research goal was to gain a better understanding of the conditions that gave rise to a significant acceleration of urban restructuring in times of austerity. Architecture and urban history scholars have characterized these spatial transformations as the product of authoritarian nationalist ideology and the cult of personality of Nicolae Ceausescu. These urban development schemes are commonly viewed as a planning folly that was at odds with the principles of rational planning. The documents I examined at OSA portray a more complex picture that reveals how these spatial transformations were related less to nationalist ideology than to planning policies that helped to bring about an era of self-financed municipalities vying for centrally disbursed resources. The materials I have consulted at OSA—such as letters, press surveys, press clippings, situation reports, confidential reports, and B-Wires—have illuminated the roles that a variety of actors and institutions—municipalities, cultural institutions, architects, writers—played in this shift in governance. Letters and appeals from Radio Free Europe (RFE) listeners in Romania chronicled the demolitions and displacement taking place across the country. Particularly valuable are the eyewitness accounts and pleas of residents who described the demolitions of their own homes and the conditions under which they were resettled.

Preliminary Findings

At the OSA I examined records in “Communism Cold War and After,” in particular “Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute” (HU-OSA-300) and “Records of the Open Media Research Institute” (HU-OSA-205). The documentation I consulted in the “Romanian Unit” (HU OSA 300-60) included, but was not limited to: “Administration: National Committees” (300-60-1), “Administration: People’s Councils” (300-60-1), “Description of the Country” (300-60-1), “Confidential Reports on Romania” (300-60-2), “Letters and Appeals From Romania” (300-60-3).

The series “Administration: National Committees” and “Administration: People’s Councils” contain documents that trace the changes in the planning process in Romania in the 1980s. These records provide information on the Systematization Program and the accelerated pace with which Romania embarked in spatial reorganization after the 1977 earthquake. Newspaper clippings, B-Wires, and situation reports detail the legislative changes at the beginning of the 1980s that made municipalities self governed and self financed. As the flow of subsidies from the republican budget was gradually reduced, municipalities themselves had to generate most of the funds necessary for their survival. This institutional overhaul began in 1979 and was enacted into law in 1985. This shift to fiscal austerity at the local level occurred while lavish investments, resources, and manpower were dedicated to urban redevelopment and village resettlement schemes. The records in these series provide data that sheds light on this apparent contradiction. For example, legislative documents and press clippings show that while the central government no longer contributed with fiscal resources to many functions of local government, it continued to subsidize the construction of housing and institutional buildings, which local authorities planned, drafted, and executed. While this process entailed an apparent decentralization of responsibilities, it also increased localities’ dependence on development funds from the central government, and it placed localities in competition with each other for scarce, centrally disbursed resources.

Records in “Administration: People's Councils” and “Description of the Country” shed light on the relationship between central planners and local authorities. Particularly informative were the meeting minutes and speeches at the People’s Councils bi-annual congresses, and interviews with mayors and planners featured in the official media. A small number of listener letters to RFE provided a limited glimpse into the motivations and role of institutional actors, planners, and architects involved in executing urban renewal schemes. For example, an anonymous letter describing the demolitions carried out in the city of Brasov provided insight into the competition between city managers, stating that in their quest for higher political positions, mayors and city officials “use the city and its inhabitants as Guinea pigs for spatial experiments” and austerity measures. A few letters address an important moment in the urban restructuring of Romanian cities—the sudden closure of the Department of Historic Monuments (*Directia Monumentelor Istorice*) and the transfer of its assets to the Council of Culture and Socialist Education (*Consiliul Culturii si Educatiei Socialiste*). This act symbolically and effectively eliminated the role of historic preservationists and paved the way for the demolition of many historic city centers. In addition to the materials consulted at the OSA, I have been conducting interviews with architects and planners who have witnessed and participated in the spatial transformation of Romanian cities. Together, the archival data and my ongoing interviews provide a more complex picture of the roles that various actors and institutions played in the planning decisions that transformed Romanian cities.

The series “Letters and Appeals From Romania” contained numerous eyewitness accounts that expanded the scope of my research in unanticipated ways. Many of the letters sent by listeners to RFE contained detailed accounts of daily life in the 1980s and early 1990s, reports of the worsening life conditions as austerity took hold, and descriptions of the large-scale demolitions and development in cities and villages. Of particular interest were the appeals to RFE from residents of Bucharest, a city in which 40,000 people were displaced by the wrecking ball. Residents whose homes and neighborhoods were razed described the violence of the evictions and demolitions, as well as their subsequent relocation to the peripheries and the often inadequate

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compensation they received. Some of these residents' letters included the addresses of the homes that were demolished, information that will allow me to search municipal records in Bucharest for parcel maps. A few letters discussed the razing of villages across the country, but I did not find any personal accounts of those who were displaced from rural areas. Foreign press surveys covered the demolition of villages at length, but more research will be necessary to gain information on this process.

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