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# THE MAKING OF A CIVIC CENTER

Three case studies: Brăila, Pitești, Sibiu

## Introduction

The 'civic center' notion, in its literal translations in English and Latin languages, does not enjoy a precise and commonly accepted meaning. It could designate a community center at neighborhood level, as it is the case in Barcelona, a convention hall for bigger crowds and even indoor sports, as it is the case in some US cities, and it can be as well a public place with municipal and central institutions, inspired by the ancient ideas of Agora and Forum. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in USA, the City Beautiful movement developed the concept of 'civic center' as programmatic shaping of a common central space for urban dwellers, dominated by buildings with authority connotations (Abercrombie; 1911) and the Encyclopedia Britannica refers only to this meaning when discussing the notion (15<sup>th</sup> ed.)

Also in Romanian language, the use of the 'civic center' notion is rather unstable. It could designate simply a larger area with administrative, cultural and other types of collective buildings (Sfințescu, 1930) an Agora-like intervention in small towns and villages (Cardaș, 1983; Constantinescu, 1989) or in large cities (Derer P. 1979). Recent scholarship on the matter (Ioan, 2003, 2005) seems to focus solely on this latter meaning. The legal vocabulary of the communist period, however, employs the 'civic center' notion for all categories of settlements and, during Ceaușescu times, the Agora-like program was used to redefine a great number of large cities, small townships and villages.

This article accepts the premise that the civic center program for departmental capital cities, in the logic of the 1968 administrative reform and consecutive acts, constitutes a distinct aspect of the wider remodeling operation conducted for settlements' centers, both from professional and political perspectives. This premise is validated mostly by the 1976

administrative process, when the systematization sketches for these capital cities were grouped together for the final state approval and all of them had areas marked on the synthesis plans as civic center or city center. Moreover, the program, as well as the spatial and functional relationships to be considered by the architects here are far more complex than for any other type of settlement (except for the national capital) and they include the distinct functions of departmental administration and departmental Party seat - grouped in one building - the immediately following levels of power under the central authority.

While looking at the process of conceiving and constructing civic centers, the aim of this study is to determine in what ways architects negotiated professional environments allowing a relative liberty and autonomous thinking in public stances, as well as to what extent were these possible.

Three case studies were selected, Brăila, Pitești and Sibiu. Each of them is representing a different pattern of historical development, evocative for an entire range of similar departmental capitals. Brăila stands for the 19<sup>th</sup> century pre-conceived geometrical cities along the Danube and from the Danube's plain. Its choice among these cities was appealing because of its specific radial-concentric structure, which guides a planner toward accepting a unique center, while the civic center manages to not contradict and neither subordinate to this logic. By exploiting the vicinity of the Danube and the city's zoning, it rather achieves a different vision on urban structure. Pitești stands mostly for the extra-Carpathian cities with a moderate historical relevance yet rapidly developing during communist times. As so it happened for most of these cities, the traditional fabric was replaced to a large extent by the communist intervention. Nevertheless, its civic center is considered a success even by a critic of the extensive demolishing it imposed. Sibiu is representative for many Transylvanian cities, with their historically constituted central squares, doubled/mirrored with civic centers during the massive development of the communist times (Sandu, 1980; Curinschi-Vorona, 1981). The choice of Sibiu was tempting especially because of its clearly defined historic core as well as because of its recognized cultural value.

## The 1968 administrative reform

In interviews with architects, practitioners as well as involved in communist local administration, in books and articles dealing with the 'civic center' phenomenon, the administrative reform of 1968 is invoked as the first step in a wider political vision pursuing industrialization, a controlled expansion of cities and the institutionalization of an official vision on public life, which included the remodeling of the new departmental capitals' centers.

Surprisingly enough in this context, the declared focus of this administrative reform was first and foremost the rural world.<sup>1</sup> Romania in 1966 still had a preoccupying 61,8% of rural population, had more than 14,000 villages (grouped in more than 4200 'communes') versus only 184 cities and, despite previous intensive administrative patching, still had 32 out of its 150 administrative divisions (*raion*- district) overseen by rural centers.<sup>2</sup> Only one paragraph from these initial guidelines refers to the urban network, calling for the reinstatement of a series of pre-war administrative centers like Arad, Brăila, Piatra-Neamț, Sibiu, Târgoviște, Turnu Severin etc. as well as for more investments in historic towns like Făgăraș, Sighișoara and others.

This return of the Ceaușescu regime toward a pre-war situation could firstly be seen as a partial recognition of failing to propose a radically different vision on the territorial structuring than the medieval and bourgeois historical development had already achieved (Săgeată, 2006). This failure was though summarized only in a punctual critique brought to Ceaușescu's predecessor, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (1948-1965), critique more than explicitly formulated in the mentioned guidelines. Accordingly, the pre-1965 period could have created a too complicated bureaucratic chain and yearly improvised development policies having as result abrupt discrepancies in the country's social fabric.<sup>3</sup>

Also, there should be noted that, throughout the 1960s, Soviet planning academics and practitioners were debating on how to develop a pyramidal structure of cities, towns and villages, based on grouping and coordinating the development of settlements within a series of clusters (French, 1995). The Soviets were actually confronted with a similar problem as the Romanians, facing an overextended system of tiny villages and a reduced and imbalanced urban structure. In Romania, echoes of these debates appear occasionally in theoretical/ideological books and articles like those especially by Gustav Gusti (1964, 1969, 1970, 1974) but also by Dorel

Abraham (1975) and Mircea Possa (1978). The legal frame for regionally integrated studies will appear as early as 1960<sup>4</sup> but it will be only in 1969 that it will be detailed for the systematic use of the professionals.<sup>5</sup>

As a first step inside this pyramidal type of vision, 24 cities became new departmental capitals, joining ranks with 15 previous regional capitals. Almost immediately, discussions began on a 20 years program of developing an important number of towns from existing larger villages. The first proposals appeared immediately in 1968, about 67 future towns<sup>6</sup> out of which 49 were actually declared as such (Săgeată, 2006). In the 1970s the ambitions grew larger and at the 11<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Party (1974) there were talks about 350-400 new towns (Jurov, 1979). All these actions were clearly meant to create an evenly distributed urban network, dense enough to interlock the rural areas into a system of reciprocal dependencies.

Even if the general vision was never completed, the status change of all these cities will soon enough reflect in their population size, level of industrial investments as well as in their urban form.

### **The civic center**

In 1969 a series of instructions<sup>7</sup> for the planning activity were formulated by the soon-to-disappear state agency, C.S.C.A.S.<sup>8</sup> For the case of the urban systematization sketches, a new approach was made obvious through the fact that these instructions required now openly a 'remodeling' of the cities' central areas, conducted in parallel with the 'sanitation'<sup>9</sup> of the peripheral quarters. Previous instructions, from 1967, were only requiring 'community social-administrative centers' for villages.<sup>10</sup>

The publication of these 1969 instructions does not mark however a zero moment for the idea of remodeling city centers and nor does it either for the civic center program. In 1968, there were already more or less inspired projects accomplished or well underway for a significant number of central areas of important cities such as: Baia Mare, Galați, Iași, Piatra-Neamț, Pitești, Ploiești etc. Moreover, the debate starting in the 1920s, about the state's necessity to affirm its presence into the settlements of the newly enlarged Romania by organizing administrative centers, seems to have never stopped completely.

Since the beginning of the century, especially the extra-Carpathian commercial towns, in the principalities of Moldova and Wallachia, long-time under Ottoman sovereignty, were regarded as lacking clear

structuring principles (Cantacuzino, 1977; Sfințescu, 1933). In a very peculiar context, pre-war Romanian leading planners felt seduced by the grandiose visions of the US originate City Beautiful movement and started to debate an eventual civic center version for Bucharest. In the trail of the disputes concerning the capital, which focused much of the professionals' energies, secondary cities appeared sporadically on the drawing boards of the planners: Balcic, Bazargic (today Balchik and Dobrich in Bulgaria), Braşov, Constanţa, Curtea de Argeş, Drăgăşani, Olteniţa, Piteşti, Ploieşti, Predeal, Sibiu etc. and during the war, the most affected ones by the 1940 earthquake: Bârlad, Panciu, Vaslui. Some of these cities' plans contained provisions for an administrative center (sometimes called 'civic center' and 'civic square') but almost none of them are built. After the war, members of the old architectural elite tried to maintain the subject in the public eye but with limited success.<sup>11</sup>

For the regional capitals having strong affinities to the communist type of incipient industrialization, the first half of the communist period is characterized by a focus on creating and remodeling public squares: Baia Mare, Deva (mining), Ploieşti (oil extraction), Galaţi (steel industry). Also Iaşi, considered the Romanian cultural capital, suffered such an intervention. However, the buildings surrounding public squares in these cities were mostly collective housing with ground floor shops and limited other amenities. Such designs appear now more like making didactical statements on how urban life was expected to look like – collective, modest and egalitarian – than like sheer power representation architecture.

It is here that the 1968 administrative reform and its consecutive acts instituted a significant change of attitude. In the 1950s the Party was still using the *raion* administrative division to get closer to the power basis.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, it was preoccupied to build in the *raional* centers some Party seats. The administrative centers receiving such investments were mostly small towns and villages.<sup>13</sup> After 1968, also major cities received systematically new Party seats.

Through consecutive acts like the administrative reform, the request for remodeling city centers, resources allocation for Party seats and cultural houses in large cities,<sup>14</sup> continuous visits and checking upon the progresses achieved in the construction process, through the Systematization Law (1974) which subordinated to the president's authority the systematization details of the city centers, the Ceauşescu regime set in motion an unstoppable system of will and power meant to inscribe the authority of the state in the urban form.

## **Brăila, Pitești, Sibiu, paths to relaying foundations**

The Ceaușescu regime was indeed preoccupied with concentrating power, with preserving the Party's role as an avant-garde of the working class, with cultivating suspicion against bourgeois and 'deviationist' elements (Tismăneanu, 2005). Nevertheless, except for the case of Bucharest, the professional decision seems to have played a critical role in shaping the urban form. The civic centers from cities with such a different layout as Brăila, Pitești and Sibiu, indicate that with all the material constraints, ideological pressure and political unpredictable control, still the civic center program compelled professionals to relate actively to historical patterns of the city and work with the given means as to support logical and symbolical decisions about urban landscape.

The three mentioned cities have very different historical backgrounds. Brăila was constituted as the trade center for the Bărăgan plain, being its most advanced harbor on the Danube River on its path toward the sea. For centuries occupied by the Ottomans, the modern history of Brăila begins with its liberation by the Russian army and its transfer under the authority of Wallachia in 1829. Immediately, guided by the captain Rudolf Borroczyński of the Russian army, Brăila is systematized around a typical geometrical intervention of the neo-classical era (the urban salon of the central square focusing three structuring axes) very much following the end 18<sup>th</sup> century Russian tradition of new town building (Bater, 1980).

Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Brăila is one of the fastest expanding cities in the Romanian principalities (and later Romania) with a population increase of almost 5 times in seven decades. (Giurescu, 1968). This is also the period when the city expands with concentric boulevards. After WWI it stagnates. Nevertheless, now the Palace of the Agricultural Chamber (1923-29), in neo-Romanian style, is erected. Across the street from it, in the 1970s, the communist civic center will be placed.

There were doubts about the creation of the Brăila department as late as few weeks before the enactment of the administrative reform.<sup>15</sup> The fact that only 30 km away from the traditional bourgeois Brăila there was the ever-competing, bigger, heavy-industrial city of Galați represented a problem. A workers' delegation from the machinery plant Progresul went and argued in front of the central authorities the necessity for a separate department of Brăila. Apparently, the fact that right in 1968 the city was celebrating its 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary from the first written mention played an important role in the discussions.<sup>16</sup> While this victory satisfied the local

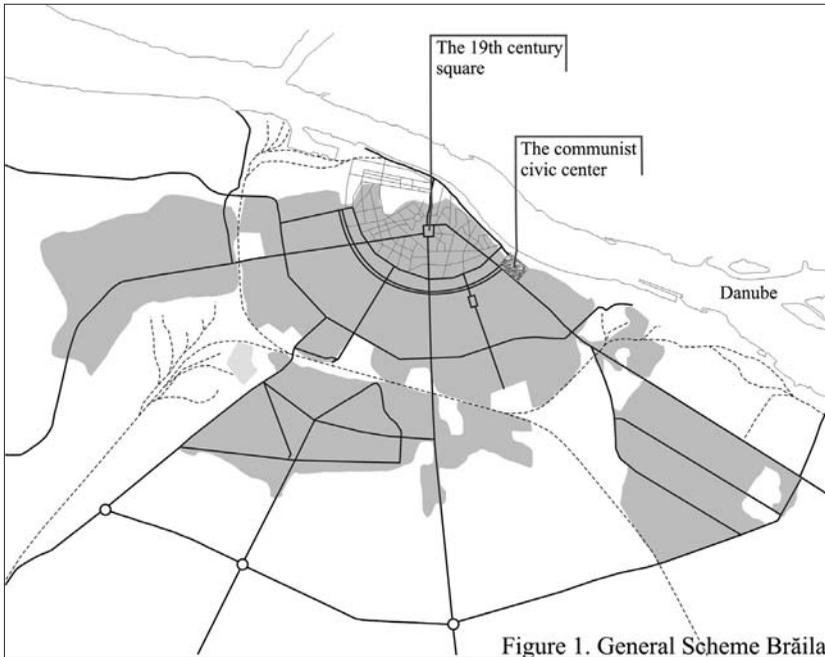


Figure 1. General Scheme Brăila

pride, at least from the point of view of the civic center investments it was just a halfway won battle. The main administrative building is quite cheaply built, the investments for completing the square with a House of Youth and a descending pathway toward the Danube came in very late in the 1980s and the House of Culture was never built. Even so, the chosen site for the civic center represents a very interesting solution, at the intersection between the main circular boulevard, bordering the historic core systematized by Borroczyń, and the traditional axis of development toward the city of Călărași. The created public space reinforces the pedestrian character of the boulevard, articulating it with a riverside promenade toward the previous center of the neo-classical age.

Pitești represents a completely opposite story. Nobody doubted its role as administrative seat, the civic center was constructed in a quasi-continuous thrust, and, unlike Brăila, the system of public spaces created by the communist insertion replaced to a large extent, instead of completing, the previous urban form.

A moderately important commercial town in the medieval period, Pitești starts to shape its modern urban life at the same period as Brăila, in the 1830s, but at a much slower pace. Various street openings, pavements, imposing alignments in housing construction, and sanitation improvements were achieved, but following no directing scheme. (Popa, Dicu, Voinescu, 1988). Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the city replaces continuously its built substance and renews the appearance of its buildings (Greceanu, 1982). The first major urban achievement of the modern times was the public garden, paralleled by the construction of a theatre and by the enlargement of the central commercial square adjacent to the oldest church in town, square replaced later by the communist civic center. Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the departmental administration will have a palace built in a dominant position relative to the public garden.

The 1925 administrative law required all Romanian cities to have a systematization plan ready in a 4 years delay. While the failure in achieving this goal was acknowledged consecutively in several following administrative laws requiring the same thing over and over, there were nevertheless some effects produced by it for Pitești. A topographical land registry appears in 1930, based on photogrammetric technique,<sup>17</sup> and after countless hesitations, in 1939, the architects Kikero Constantinescu and Alexandru Zamfiropol were entrusted with elaborating the first systematization plan.

Unfortunately, the drawings of this first plan for Pitești seem to have been lost during the bombardments, though it remains unclear whether they were ever constituted in a complete scheme. Only blurred and scattered heliographic copies are to be found in the city hall folders.<sup>18</sup> On one of these copies there is an indication on a possible location for the required civic center, in the square bordered by the city hall (now an art gallery), the Financial Administration (now the city hall), the theatre and the Judicial Court. This square seems to have been appropriated by the communist authorities as well, at least in a first instance. Pictures attest its use for political rallies. Moreover, among the first developed Pitești axes was Calea București which connected this square to the entrance in the city coming from Bucharest.

After 1948, the newly installed communist regime takes up immediate interest on organizing and developing Pitești. In 1953 and 1955, studies on Pitești were carried through by the Bucharest institute specialized in systematizing cities and they developed into a full systematization sketch

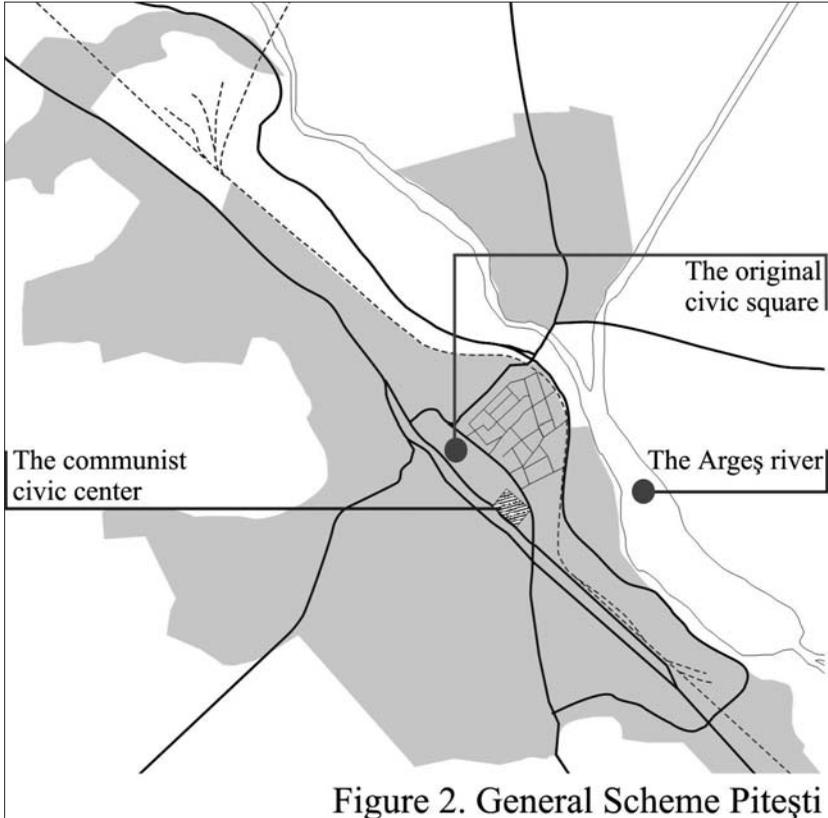


Figure 2. General Scheme Pitești

in 1959.<sup>19</sup> The proposal for the central area is published in 1960 (Pădurețu, 1960) and here there are to be found already some basic principles that will guide the later design for the civic center: the complete replacement of the urban fabric between the former civic square and the commercial square, except for the St. Gheorghe church and some bigger buildings; the replacement of the main commercial square with a civic one, surrounded though only by collective housing in this version; and the attempt to create a rhythm of taller buildings accompanying an esplanade meant to integrate the new civic square with the public garden. A long row of collective housing with commercial ground floors, bordering the esplanade adjacent to the civic center, was realized based on this project.

The systematization detail for the central area and the civic center will be finished in 1967 by an already consecrated modernist architect of the communist period, Cezar Lăzărescu (Lăzărescu, Gabrea 2003). The functional program and spatial organizing for the central area is now fixed and this will be the project that, with minor adjustments, will be realized mostly in a single continuous thrust from the late 1960s to mid 1970s. It was appreciated as one of the most successful examples of civic centers achieved during the communist age even by a critic of the erasure it brought to the historic substance (Greceanu, 1982). After its completion, the city will continue to expand the central area, surrounding a civic center conceived to have some visual escapes toward the environs with continuous, tall rows of collective housing, isolating it from the decaying rests of the old city. Throughout this entire period, the city expands with one of the highest rates in Romania.<sup>20</sup>

If for Brăila the partial failure of having an elaborated and diversified civic center is in tune with the city's partial failure to overcome its neglect by the central communist authorities, and if in Pitești the successful civic center matched the success of the city, Sibiu presents us the paradoxical possibility that the unsuccessful civic center finally constituted a success of the city. (Derer *et. al.* unpublished).

The Sibiu city of the pre-communist period is a fine example of a long and prosperous development. It was founded by the German settlers coming to Transylvania, sometimes in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and it has a long history of autonomy and prestige in the Hungarian kingdom, in the principality of Transylvania and, starting with the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the Habsburg Empire when it became also the capital of Transylvania.

After the 1918 Union of Transylvania with 'little Romania', the city's population doubles in only 12 years due to a massive influx of countryside mostly ethnic Romanians (Oprean 1947). This situation not only creates an administratively precarious situation<sup>21</sup> but it also recomposes Sibiu as an ethnically deeply divided city.

The official celebrations of the interwar period are taking place in the "Union Square", the former customs' square of the Habsburg administration, and not in the central square of the city. This chosen site mediates between the *intra-muros* city and the massive expansion of the 1920s. However, even as it hosted official celebrations of the Romanian administration, it was considered improperly arranged. In 1928 the city organizes a competition for systematizing it and placing a Union Monument. Ironically enough, the competition was won by Joseph von

Bedeus, a German architect, but the project creates intense disputes between leading Romanian architects from Bucharest.<sup>22</sup> Eventually, it will be rejected by the Bucharest authorities and only minimal works will be carried out in the square.

Immediately after 1968 though, with Sibiu becoming again a departmental capital, a first project appears next to the former “Union Square”. Unlike Brăila and Pitești, Sibiu doesn’t focus its civic center on the departmental administrative building, but starts with a House of Culture in 1970 and continues with a general store and a hotel.

According to the local architects<sup>23</sup>, the departmental administration demanded countless schemes before reaching a decision about the site, a notoriously difficult one because of the sloped terrain, because of the proximity to the historic core and because of some industrial facilities. It still remains a largely unresolved piece of urban fabric. What was achieved until 1989 was the demolishing of the regiment’s quarters and of a small beer factory, the construction of the abovementioned amenities and the restoration of several historic items defining the borders of the site. The

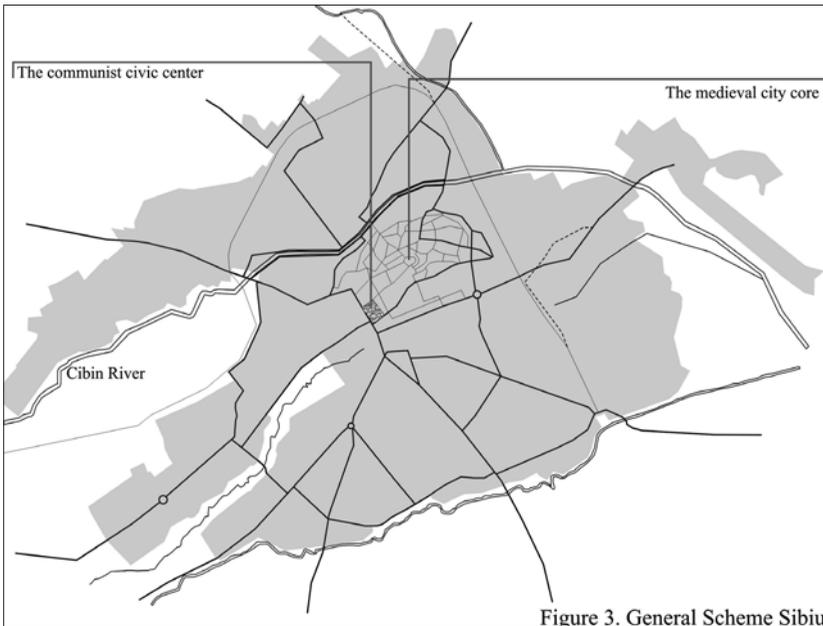


Figure 3. General Scheme Sibiu

departmental administrative building was only began and left unfinished in 1989 (after being partially demolished and modified, now it is a hotel) and the former customs square's emptiness is only accentuated by the parking lots. From the three studied cases, this represents the longest process, as the House of Culture was designed in 1970 and by 1989 there was done only so little.

An interesting hypothesis appears in a study on the area, conducted by pre-Bologna master students from the Bucharest University of Architecture "Ion Mincu" (Derer H. et. al. 2005-2006). In this study, they question the opportunity for a strong public-oriented development in the civic center area, as it would both affect the achieved social balance and functionality of the historic core, as well as the identity of the city, very much centered on its heritage.

### **How to make a civic center**

The subtle correlations to be found between politically oriented development, local tradition and the complexity of the civic center intervention for the three cities, but also the limited range of functions assigned to the civic center program and their different paces of construction, together with the stylistic incoherence of the urban complexes, they all are signs of multiple forces involved in the program's modeling.

While evocating this multiplicity of forces in action is by no means a way of diminishing the importance of the political imprint in all these cases, still, the awareness on the situation's complexity brings forth the question of the dynamic allowing various interests to be correlated (or not) into an urban ensemble. And, of course, it raises still another question, related to the possibility that such complex correlations would allow interstices of relative freedom and personal expression for the architects in their designs.

There are to be found manifesting in a civic center setting at least four sets of intentions: the central political/ideological one, the architectural/cultural and functional one, the community one, even if only described by state institutions in its name, and the punctual/very oriented ones, coming from various state agencies of local or central origin and from directly affected individuals.

The civic center and the surrounding area is usually a mosaic of items controlled by various state agencies. There are commercial venues, demanded by a Ministry of Retail according to its own calculations, hotels,

demanded by the Ministry of Tourism, there are repairing shops, demanded by UCECOM,<sup>24</sup> spaces for people's culture, education and indoor public events, demanded by the Syndicates' Center, youth organizations or local administration, spaces for high-culture (mostly theatres) demanded by the corresponding agencies, collective housing buildings, demanded mostly by industrial ministries, a post-office administered by the corresponding authority, public spaces administered by the municipal authority, and some more. This enormously diverse puzzle of interests was solved to a large extent without the intervention of the architects. Only in Sibiu, the head of the design center assumes credit for convincing the Tourism Ministry to invest in the civic center hotel, despite a previous bad experience with the local contractor. Beyond this bureaucratic setting, architects involved in building departmental civic centers had to deal firstly with the prime-secretary of the departmental administration and lastly with the president. Their main negotiation scene was with the politicians.

The most visible political dimension of the typical Romanian departmental civic center is the presence of the departmental council building (which served also as a Party seat) together with the square for meetings and the adjacent avenue for marches. Also the House of Culture is to be found often in the vicinity, but its imposition upon urban life has not yet been perceived by any author disturbing enough as to provoke a critical reaction, although it purports deep ideological connotations. These items are to be found finished or in project in all three cities, Brăila, Pitești and Sibiu. However, beyond these very easy to read signs of power there are also less obvious decisions and debates, of no less political/ideological significance.

The reconstruction, displacement or expansion of virtually every major city center was in itself a political decision and it incorporated a strong ideological component. Throughout the Soviet block, this goal was pursued by the German Democratic Republic with a very similar functional program (Häussermann, 1996; Heineberg, 1979) Poland, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria (Hamilton, 1979) Hungary (Perényi, 1973) and probably others as well. Ian Hamilton (*op. cit.*) even draws an abstract model of the "socialist city" as it was shaped in Eastern Europe and considers appropriate to mark a distinct new city center next to the historic core. James Bater (*op. cit.*) enumerates ten possible characteristics of the socialist city, which developed since the 1935 Moscow plan, and among them he cites the increased political and cultural use of the central city with a corresponding downgrade of other functions typically found there before.

Until the Moscow plan, apparently, there were debates both in the socialist camp and among the Western modernists about the socialist city of the future, regarded as not needing a center since it should embody principles allowing perfect equality among the urban dwellers. It was the winning project of the Moscow competition, together with the Party's clarification that a city is socialist simply by belonging to a socialist system (Bater, 1980), that put an end to such debates on urban form and consecrated the right of a distinct city center program to exist.

There are also other features of the civic center conceiving process, especially for the cities the size of the herewith examples, which are deeply embedded in the communist ideology. One of the enduring critiques of the capitalist city was based on its tendency to create shopping and entertainment centers, while 'culture' was not given enough attention (Baburov *et.al.* 1968, orig. in late 1950s) The 'social-cultural center' that Baburov and his colleagues were proposing as an alternative, is part of an ideal 100.000 people 'New Settlement Unit'. According to their published scheme, the center of the Unit should be a cultural and personal development hub to which an above ground level rapid transportation system would focus its city-crossing lines so as to make the numerous facilities easily accessible to all residents.

While the 100.000 ideal number is by its scarceness commonly accepted as an implicit refusal of the Western metropolis as well as a blind eye turned toward Moscow, Leningrad (St. Petersburg), Kiev or any Eastern European capital city, it also represents, in the authors' vision, a minimum size of the settlement. Their argument refers to an education-correlated, calculated amount of people capable of generating a diverse enough set of self-maintaining civic circles for cultivating anybody's cultural hobbies or educational aspirations.

By looking at this ideal city proposal, perhaps the House of Culture placed in the central area of each departmental capital becomes important not only through its functionality but also related to the size of the city. These departmental capitals were not only meant to coordinate the growth of an economic system diffusing prosperity in their hinterland. They were also expected to become self-sustaining cultural melting pots, creating and spreading a lifestyle weaved of socialist ideals, local traditions and a centrally controlled cultural policy. In Sibiu, the House of Culture was the first item to be built, in Pitești the second, and while Brăila had its own postponed forever, it still managed to overcome its neglect through a House of Youth, for which the prime-secretary of the department managed

to find a personal link with Nicu Ceaușescu, the heir, and the responsible one in the Party with the youth problems.<sup>25</sup>

A third deeply political feature of the civic center program was the concentration of the decision making process. There are two outstanding years in this development, which are not usually mentioned in the histories published so far, and these are 1975-1976. Now is the time when the effective control of Nicolae Ceaușescu is put into practice.

Starting with the second half of the 1960s the cities' systematization sketches were correlated with the five-year plans.<sup>26</sup> They were supposed to contain definitive and clearly marked proposals for the investments of the coming five-year plan, prospective proposals for the following plan and a general vision for the third five-year interval to come. At the end of each interval, the sketch had to be updated for the corresponding three following quinquennia. These plans had to be approved by a professional state committee (C.S.C.A.S.) and by an economic one (C.S.P.)<sup>27</sup> both subordinated to the Council of Ministries, which also gave the final agreement for the cities. However, starting with the Systematization Law (1974) the responsibility for approving not only the cities' systematization sketches, but also the systematization details concerning virtually every major intervention in the city, was assigned to the president of the Republic. And this was Nicolae Ceaușescu.

In the years following the Systematization Law, in the Party archives there are registered a multitude of observation notes sent by Ceaușescu's apparatus to all important cities in Romania. Pitești central area was criticized for not having proposed a 'special' enough architecture and was warned to keep the demolitions under control,<sup>28</sup> Sibiu housing proposals were criticized on economical grounds and compared unfavorably to the old city, and Brăila was asked to find another site for the House of Culture than the civic center, while forewarned that it will not receive funds for this item until the restoration of the theatre will not be complete.<sup>29</sup> In 1977, based on a session with Ceaușescu from December 1976, again Pitești will be warned for not having included traditional elements in its proposals for expanding the city center, Brăila will be advised to group more collective housing in the civic center area and, like Pitești, to use 'special'<sup>30</sup> architecture, while Sibiu seems to have been ignored for the moment.<sup>31</sup>

Still in 1976, there are approved by the State Council (presided by Ceaușescu) all the systematization sketches for the departmental capitals and a copy of the synthesized drawings was kept in its archives.<sup>32</sup> Some

of them even contain detailed proposals for the civic centers. Brăila is one of the few proposing a revitalization of the historic core together with a detailed plan for the civic center (with the House of Culture still in an unacceptable position). All cities have an area on the masterplan marked as “civic center” or “central area”.

The Pitești masterplan contours of the civic center area do not indicate a particular ideology other than the one of growth. There are two expected growth stages in the following two five year plans, 1975-1980 and 1980-1985, very much in accordance with the expected growth of the entire city.

In contrast with Pitești, Brăila defines a strange L-shaped civic center, including the neo-classical square, the proposed civic one, but also a traditional axis of prestige from Brăila’s past, the so-called Royal Path (Calea Regală), the centered access into the old square. The Royal Path and the old square are included in the same category as the civic center possibly with the intention to promote their restoration and revitalization. This strategy paid off, money was allocated to this purpose, but, ironically enough, the 1986 earthquake will occur right when two old buildings were in a very fragile stage of the consolidation process. They had to be rebuilt from scratch.

A similar stance with Brăila is adopted by Sibiu. The masterplan defined civic center integrates both the old three squares system and the area surrounding the new House of Culture, though its contours enclose a somewhat less extravagant shape. This could have been also a strategy of promoting the restoration of the promenade uniting the old squares with the expected-to-develop civic center.

Packing together the two centers could have represented, for both Brăila and Sibiu cases, a response to a political pressure or a form of self-censoring. The city had to appear as a harmoniously developed organism with no qualitative differentiation between the old and the new. However, it could have been just a fashionable way of self-representation by the local political body. By law, the systematization plans submitted for approval were appropriated by the departmental administrations and usually the name and signature of the architect were covered. Moreover, other cities’ plans allowed a differentiation between the historic core and the new center.

These three components of the civic center creating process’ political dimension, the Soviet-block wide competition with the bourgeois and medieval past in a politically assumed elite-type of urban arena, the required

integration within the political space of an ideological (and idealist) vision on cultural dynamic, as well as the centralization and concentration of the decision making process into a single person's hands in the case of Romania, they all together could seem to have weaved an inescapable system of constraints for the architects involved in the process.

It would be a mistake, though, to envisage the communist power structure as a perfectly coordinated mechanism having clearly defined goals. There was an entire apparatus and an entire entourage with various degrees of influence. Exploiting the soft points, finding the interstices of the power mechanism became a primary goal for the architects. It is true as well that while the control exerted on the departmental capitals was tight, it was not even by far to be compared with the approval of each detail and stage of the building process as it will later happen with the Bucharest administrative center.

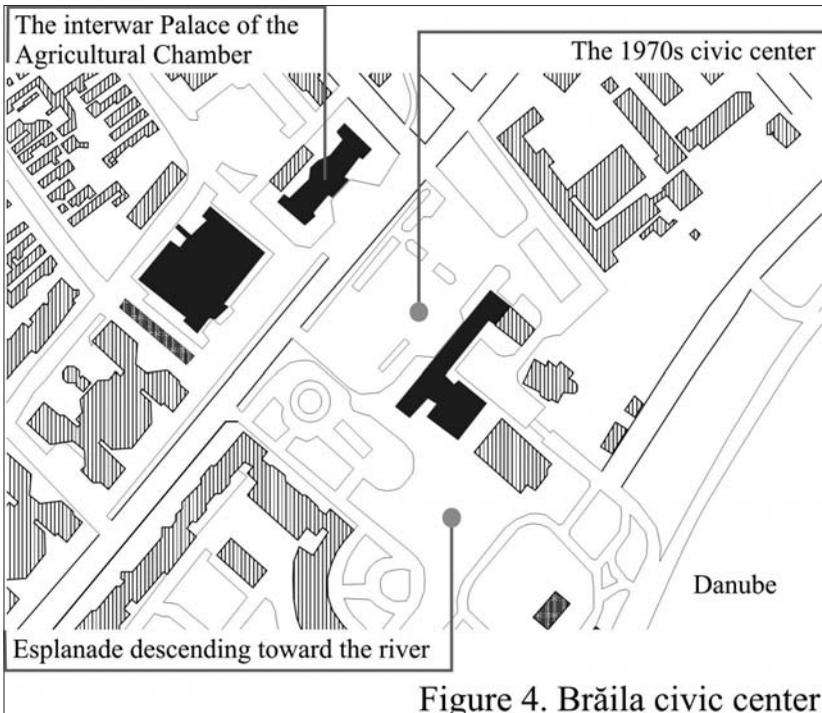


Figure 4. Brăila civic center

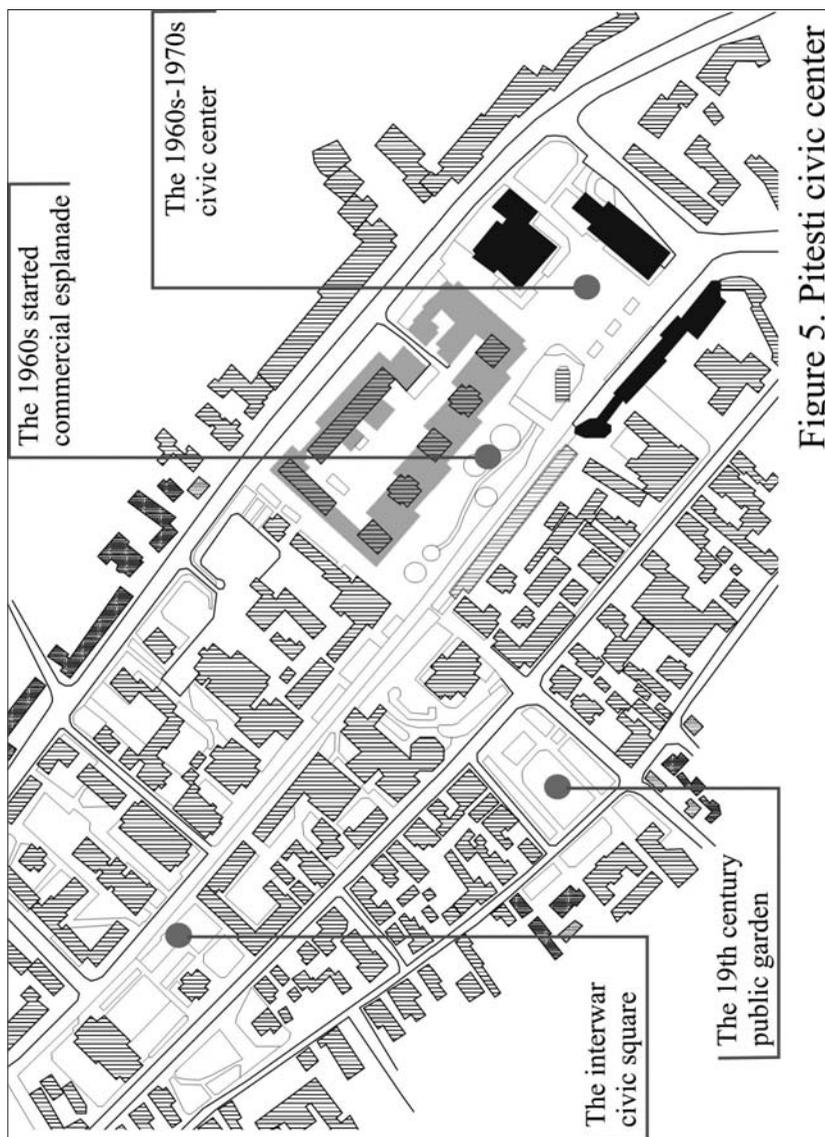


Figure 5. Pitești civic center

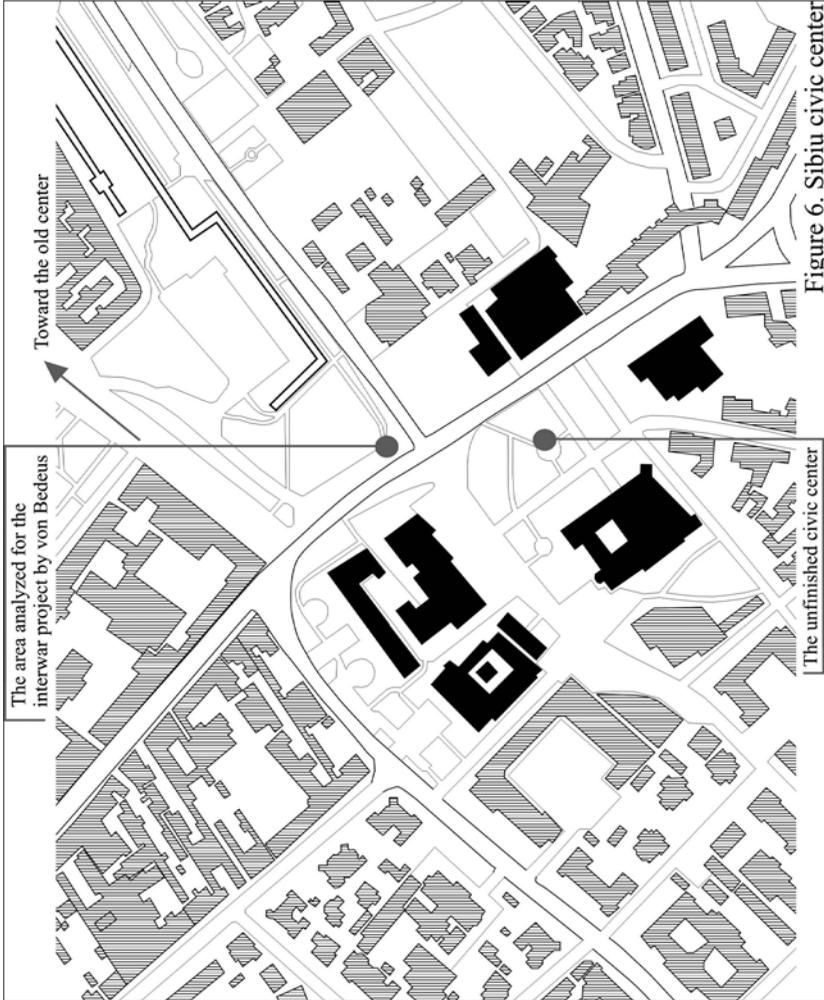


Figure 6. Sibiu civic center

Apparently, the initial scheme for Pitești passed only because the author, Cezar Lăzărescu, was still able to inspire trust to Nicolae Ceaușescu and thus the composition of collective housing in the initial center could retain some degree of variety.<sup>33</sup> According to local remembrance, Brăila got its systematization sketch approved also because it followed the delegation of Iași which made a good impression. The prime secretary of Iași (the future president of post-revolutionary Romania, Ion Iliescu) accompanied Ceaușescu in his following meetings and, while maintaining a casual attitude, lent a helping hand to other cities' delegations waiting in line.<sup>34</sup> Sibiu seems to have been particularly harshly treated during these meetings.<sup>35</sup> The design center director takes credit for attempting to deal with Ceaușescu's anger by claiming that their model was double in scale relative to the others and therefore the proposals were not a waste of public funds but just larger representations of usual-size investments.

While such stories have their degree of uncertainty, as selective memory comes into place and as there are very little real means to verify them, still it bears great significance that all of them emphasize the personal factor. Automatically, interviewed architects seem to assume that they were working according to professional principles, which were either contradicting the political call for economies and for a relevant urban power narrative, or simply not understood. The gap between professionals and politicians had to be somehow bridged through a tactful way of dealing with the powerful ones or through finding benevolent and influential supporters. For the architects involved in such negotiations, freedom could have simply meant the ability to conduct the construction site according to their initial thoughts on the matter. Being able to do their job, with all the constraints it supposed, may have appeared to them as a form of autonomy.

Most architects wanted to build. The communist ethos suited their drive and even if they tried to retain a space of autonomous thinking, usually defined in esthetic terms and access to more sophisticated technologies and materials, their career objectives concurred to a large extent with the regime's initiatives. There is though another side of the profession to be explored. There were architects finding temporary niches of rebellion against the overly controlled and flattening development momentum. Architects involved in patrimony studying and preservation, architects refusing to work or proposing unrealizable visions. The interviewed Sibiu architects referred continuously to the Monuments' Committee of the city, very careful in assessing any proposal in the immediate vicinity of the

historic core. Apparently, their proposals could not meet the minimum legal distance requirements from the protected site and the committee refused to allow any exceptions.

Eugenia Greceanu wrote her *Ansamblul urban medieval Pitești* (1982) as an explicit protest against those architects considering the medieval townships of Moldova and Wallachia to be just larger villages and consequently unworthy to preserve. She even managed to convince some local politicians to reconsider their attitude toward the old city, unfortunately her efforts did not suffice (Greceanu, 2007). Before Greceanu, some local architects tried to argue similar points of view, but in vain.

A particular situation could be found in Pitești. A local architect, Nicolae Ernst, unanimously appreciated among his colleagues for his skills, found a niche of liberty in designing impossible projects for the city center expansion. He was proposing towers doubling the size of the existing buildings (already 3 times higher than the pre-war objects) and ample urban spaces with multilevel infrastructure. Although never built, his drawings for the center seem to have stricken a sensitive nerve of the local administration, which accepted them as feasible (or at least as valid inspiration sources) and kept them in their archives nicely folded in shiny green and blue cardboard covers. Ernst was by no means a singular occurrence in this liberty niche, plenty of architects finding an outlet in participating to international competitions or in publishing articles more and more disconnected from the real designs applied in the 1980s Romania (Zahariade, 2003).

An attention sign has to be placed, though, by such appreciations. People like Ernst and Greceanu found in their work ways of negotiating a public status as well as a professional space allowing their lifestyle and professional credo. Bohemian projects and firm stances for a different vision on the past make use, through their elitism, of attitudes rarely met in a communist regime. Because of their rarity, sometimes they get appreciated for themselves and not related to their context. However, ultimately, radical visions on civic centers produced results such as the Bucharest one, demonstrating perhaps that ‘impossible’ was not a suitable word for the communist voluntarism. Just as well, the refuge in valorizing the past produced approaches like Constantin Joja’s, very much inspired by the protochronist drift.<sup>36</sup> To oppose the communist system without actually strengthening its fundamentals required personal qualities that we hardly can understand today.

## Conclusions

The civic center program for large Romanian cities was promoted and controlled by the highest level political apparatus and included an obstinate, thorough, and homogenizing drive to leave the imprint of power into the built fabric. Paradoxically, this program began with a quasi-official recognition that the communist power cannot really transcend historical patterns established in the urban network by medieval and bourgeois development. The 1968 administrative reform, beyond representing an attempt to create a Soviet-inspired pyramidal structure of settlements as well as an evenly enough distributed urban structure interlocking rural areas, actually stood for a partial restoration of the pre-war administrative system.

If not for heavy industry and collective housing development, cities' historical patterns seem to have been important in conditioning this institutionalization of the official vision on urban life, but only to the extent that they corresponded to a stereotype of monumentality and civic pride. Both Sibiu and Brăila, because of their rich history, display a complex process of relating to the civic center development program, while cities like Pitești, less spectacular yet historically relevant, seem to have been trapped in an unstoppable momentum of rewriting the past imprint into a communist success story.

Architects were associated in various ways to this process of composing urban narratives. Along with these ways, they composed also their own visions of achieving a relative freedom.

Some professionals wanted to have a career, to build, to use the latest available technologies and what they considered as the most fashionable architectural idiom. For them, a relative liberty meant the possibility to negotiate the coexistence of their personal and professional aspirations with the standard political expectations (economy, official urban itinerary, cultural control). They, of course, accepted in their projects the consequences of the political voluntarism (a certain vision on development, a loose attitude in relationship to the built substance of the historic core, the preeminence of political items inside the urban composition). Even so, and the cases of Brăila and Pitești stand as proofs together with the unachieved project of Sibiu, these professionals were able to come up with coherent proposals, interesting or at least relevant spatial and historical relationships, while preserving a degree of complexity and flexibility. Their work allows a post-revolution positive re-appropriation of these spaces.

Some other architects, especially those involved in patrimonial studies, also understood their freedom in professional terms, but their contentions were directed toward both politicians and architects supporting the negligent economical development. While historical arguments cannot be entirely described in terms of opposition with the official discourse, still, such positions were much less likely to be supported by the regime. Moreover, post-factum questioning of policies' results, as in the case of Eugenia Greceanu and the Pitești civic center, were placing the discourse on patrimony and heritage in a clear confrontational stance. It is true as well that, as the case of Brăila proves, restoration projects could have been promoted in the same package with the reconstruction/insertion projects. And this was also a way to define a space of autonomous thinking, while avoiding a confrontational attitude. Sibiu's delay in constructing its civic center is rather exceptional, as it is also the value of its patrimony. Here, the impossibility to propose a competitive urban narrative by using the given means of the civic center seems to have combined with an uncompromising attitude of the monuments' committee. The confrontation may have been less political and more professional. The Sibiu civic center case provides evidence for an internal dynamic of the architectural profession in general, which, as long as the political pressure was manageable, was capable of maintaining a somewhat balanced attitude in the city development.

The bohemian lifestyle, very fashionable among architects cultivating the expressive side of their profession, was also capable to provide shelter for personal autonomy. However, this seems to have been the most vulnerable one, being allowed to exist only as long as the political pressure was either low or compensated. Nicolae Ernst, the author of impossible proposals for the Pitești city center expansion and notoriously reluctant to any form of disciplining, was perhaps able to maintain a good relationship with the local authorities only as long as his drawings for public spaces were recognized as valuable and his posters for local events appreciated. Moreover, this niche of personal freedom represented a highly individualistic solution and was sometimes preserved on the expense of co-workers.

Along with these active tactics for negotiating professional environments allowing personal initiative, autonomous thinking and forms of indiscipline, there should be noted also the possibility that some architects simply restrained themselves from being involved in such programs. For the case of Bucharest, Mircea Alifanti is noted to have refused participating to the administrative center competition (Zahariade, 2003), but for Brăila, Pitești and Sibiu such cases were not discovered so far.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> According to the approved guidelines of the administrative reform, entitled "Propuneri pentru sistematizarea rurală și administrativă a României", National Archives, CC of PCR fund, chancellery section, file 123/1967.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> Almost 60% of the urban growth between 1948 and 1968 was concentrated in 12 regional capitals plus Bucharest (Hamilton, 1979).
- <sup>4</sup> *Buletinul C.S.C.A.S.* 19 (1960) "Regulament privind elaborarea, avizarea și aprobarea documentațiilor tehnice pentru investiții și sistematizare" pp. 3-90.
- <sup>5</sup> Published in *Buletinul C.S.C.A.S.* 13-14 (1969) „Ordin nr. 220 din 27 mai 1969 Privind aprobarea unor Instrucțiuni tehnice, metodologice și de conținut pentru elaborarea studiilor de sistematizare a județelor și regiunilor funcționale, schițelor de sistematizare pentru municipii și orașe și a schițelor de sistematizare pentru comune și sate” pp. 51-80.
- <sup>6</sup> File 44/1968, fund CC of PCR, Chancellery section, ANR.
- <sup>7</sup> See note 5.
- <sup>8</sup> The State Committee for Constructions, Architecture and Systematization.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Asanarea' – term usually employed for marshlands.
- <sup>10</sup> *Buletinul C.S.C.A.S.* 6 (1967), "Ordin nr. 184 din 13 aprilie 1967 Privind aprobarea normativelor de conținut pentru studii de sistematizare teritorială și schițe de sistematizare” pp.12-55.
- <sup>11</sup> The most notable attempt belongs to G.M. Cantacuzino (1947).
- <sup>12</sup> According to the transcript of the Political Bureau meeting August 1950 (ANR, Fund CC of PCR Chancellery section file 53/1950) the desire of the Party to come within easy reach of the masses was debated as a possible argument of the presence of the 'raion' administration between the regional level and the city or village level.
- <sup>13</sup> See National Archives, Fund CC of PCR, Party Management Section, file 5/1954 – through an internal note there were requested 15-22 'raional' seats for the party and general repairs for another 11. In comparison, from the 8 new regional party seats requested by the local apparatus only 2 were approved and the rest delayed.
- <sup>14</sup> As soon as 1965 the Syndicates' Central Council requested industrial centers to be endowed with cultural houses (ANR, Fund CC of PCR, Chancellery section, folder 45/1965) and in parallel, the Central Committee considered appropriate to start allocating considerable funds for party seats in large cities (ANR, Fund CC of PCR, Chancellery section, folder 147/1965, 2 volumes).
- <sup>15</sup> Only in February 12<sup>th</sup> 1968 the Central Committee's Executive Committee was informed by Nicolae Ceaușescu about 4 new departments to be created (Brăila, Covasna, Mehedinți and Sălaj), increasing the total number from

35 to 39. ANR, fund CC of PCR, Chancellery section, folder 20/1968. The reform itself was enacted on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February.

16 In all interviews conducted with architects and city historians that lived through that period, the anniversary of the city appeared as a decisive argument next to the manifested embitterment that such an old city would have continued being overshadowed by Galați.

17 According to the DJAN Argeș, fund Primăria Pitești, folder 35/1933.

18 Not even the authors of the systematization sketches in the 1960s were not aware of any systematization plan being achieved during the war. There is a letters exchange between planners and the local administration in the immediate post-war period and here they seem willing to reconstitute the drawings and finish the job. However, these are the last recordings of their relationship (DJAN Argeș, fund Primăria Pitești, folder 19/1946).

19 As stated in the written part of the following systematization sketch from 1969. DJAN Argeș, Fund CJP, folder 35/1969.

20 In 1992, Pitești had 179337 people, which indicates a more than 6 times bigger population size than 1948. (Comisia Națională pentru Statistică, 1994).

21 See for that “Memoriul municipiului Sibiu referitor la revizuirea parcelărilor făcute în urma reformei agrare”, *Urbanismul* 4-5 (1928), pp. 5-8.

22 The defender of the project was Duiliu Marcu, who also presided the jury of the competition for the square and monument, and the opposition came mainly from Petre Antonescu. Both of them were members of the Superior Technical Council, an advisory body in the Ministry of Public Works and Communications.

23 Interviews were conducted with Ion Ene, author of the systematization sketches of Sibiu from mid 1970s until 1989, Adrian Manguica, who elaborated one scheme of development for the civic center, Adrian Niculiu, the head of the design center before 1989, and Constantin Voiciulescu, the head of the department of architecture from the design center.

24 A national association for handicraft services.

25 According to two interviews conducted with Costin Drăgan, the chief-architect of the department and Ionel Căndea, the departmental museum directory, both of them deeply familiar with recent history.

26 Buletin C.S.C.A.S 6-9 (1767) “Normativ de conținut pentru schița de sistematizare a orașelor și comunelor care sînt centre muncitorești sau stațiuni balneoclimaterice de interes republican” pp.18-38.

27 State Planning Committee.

28 Quite naturally, this observation came long after the built fabric of the central area was completely replaced.

29 ANR Fund CC of PCR, Economic section, folder 60/1975.

- 30 The Romanian word employed to describe how the architecture should be is “deosebită”, meaning both special, remarkable, but also varied. However, from the rest of the observations it can be deduced that “special” was a code-word for “inspired from traditions”, “decorated”.
- 31 ANR Fund CC of PCR, Economic section, folder 20/1977.
- 32 It seems like it represented a very important moment also for the central administration, since the corresponding updates of the systematization sketches following the 5 year intervals, are no longer kept in the archives.
- 33 Apparently, Ceaușescu was asking the rhythm of towers between the civic square and the public garden to be replaced with one single huge building. Interview with Radu Răuță, later the author of the systematization sketch of Pitești.
- 34 Interview Costel Drăgan – departmental chief architect for Brăila.
- 35 According to Liviu Niculiu, head of the design center from Sibiu, in the 1970s, Ceaușescu hit the Sibiu model with a wooden stick and blocked any explanatory attempt with “these are architects’ caprices” (*astea-s mofturi de-ale arhitecilor*).
- 36 For a more elaborate debate on Protochronism Boia, Lucian, (2005) and for Joja, Ioan, Augustin, (2000).

## ABREVIATIONS

ANR –Romanian National Archives

DJAN – Departmental Directorate of the National Archives

CJP – Fund Departmental Council Pitești

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