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DAVID CHIGHOLASHVILI  
LILIANA COROBICA  
ELNUR ISMAYILOV  
ALEXANDRU LESANU  
SERGIU MUSTEAȚĂ  
ELENA PAVLEEVA  
SERGEY RUMYANSEV  
NIKO TATULASHVILI

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New Europe College  
Str. Plantelor 21  
023971 Bucharest  
Romania

[www.nec.ro](http://www.nec.ro); e-mail: [nec@nec.ro](mailto:nec@nec.ro)  
Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10, Fax (+4) 021. 327.07.74



## **DAVID (DATA) CHIGHOLASHVILI**

Born in 1988, in Georgia

Ph.D. Candidate in Anthropology, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University,  
Georgia

Working title of thesis: *Changing Urban Identity: Visually Imagined  
Transformation of Tbilisi*

Member of GeoAIR – Contemporary Art Organization and Artists' Residency in  
Tbilisi, Georgia

Recipient of the Heinrich Boell Foundation (South Caucasus) Regional  
Scholarship; research name: *Future Image(s) of Tbilisi: Analyzing Tbilisi's  
Makeover through Pictorial Imaginations, 2013*

Open Society Foundation and the University of Edinburgh joint scholarship for  
MSc degree in Social Anthropology, The University of Edinburgh, 2011-2012

Presentations at conferences and seminars in Georgia, Moldova, UK, and Sweden

Projects in the fields of contemporary art, visual and urban anthropology

Fields of interests: visual and urban anthropology, ethnography, contemporary  
art, migration, foodways, public space, memory



# IMAGINING PUBLIC [SPACE]: SOCIALLY ENGAGED INTERVENTIONS AND TRANSFORMATION IN BUCHAREST<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This research explores the role of increasing creative urban interventions in and about the transformation of Bucharest. Various aspects of post-socialist public space are seen together as complexity, the starting point of placing interventions and their role in the city. Theoretical discussions about connections between anthropology and contemporary art practices illustrate how these notions extend to creations in other disciplines. The research of these discussions together with interventions in Bucharest, studied through ethnographic engagement, shows how public space, participation and Bucharest's makeover is imagined and contested by creative actors working in this direction.

**Keywords:** post-socialist city, public space, creative interventions, social engagement, participation, collaboration.

## Introduction

In previous years we have witnessed growing number of artistic interventions concerning public space in a lot of post-socialist urban centers, which are usually directed at including public in urban transformation processes. For few years now, I have been researching artistic creations in and about post-socialist cities, mostly Tbilisi, as well as participating in creation of some of similar projects myself. As I started researching the context of Bucharest, it was a surprise to see a big number of initiatives from various backgrounds, not only arts, which work actively with public space issues.

The study below discusses two major things. Firstly, I explore the character of socially engaged creative interventions and discourse

surrounding traffic between anthropological and art practices to see how it has expanded to other fields. Secondly, I analyze how interventions in Bucharest contest, imagine and engage socially with the transformation of the city.

The paper is constructed through ethnographic engagement with creative scene in Bucharest, including the attendance and participation in some of the workshops, events and interviews, especially with those dealing with urban topics creatively. To the projects discussed here I refer as “creative urban interventions”, in order to have umbrella term for such activities. This is not meant to undermine or avoid some key terms currently present in arts, but rather to see the expansion of socially engaged art practices and their role in urban realms.

Initially, I will discuss the general case of post-socialist urban changes and public space interventions in them. It will be followed by more theoretical discussion on participation and social engagement with two examples. Later, the presence of few recent projects in Bucharest will be analyzed for finding their role in its makeover.

## **Post-Socialist Urban Complexity and Responses of Interventions**

One of the first events that I attended in Bucharest concerning urban issues was the workshop called *Focus: Bucharest. A transforming city* organized by local NGO *Odaia Creativă / The Creative Room* in collaboration with LSE.<sup>2</sup> Next to visiting and local student workshops and urban explorations, meetings with several professionals dealing with Bucharest’s transformation took place. The last day was dedicated to nine organizations briefly presenting their works, mostly about urban projects and citizens’ involvement. There were some more initiatives I already knew who worked on similar issues and some that I discovered afterwards. Generally, majority of them are based on the idea that there are public space and participation issues in the transformation of cities after socialism and urban interventions should be directed towards reclaiming public space for citizens.

Cities in Eastern Europe are usually said to be stuck between the involuntary inheritances from the socialist past, while dealing with rapid development process brought by capitalism, hence, new establishments which often erase historic urban fabric. As Buden argues, nationalism naturally emerged after communism in respective countries, as the

response to the communist past, the unknown power.<sup>3</sup> It is also quite evidently manifested in respective urban areas by emphasizing “national urban elements” in the opposition of both, socialist remnants and new establishments.

Dmitrieva and Kliems propose that urban planning was intensively politicized during socialism and so was the understanding of art and after the transformation from one system to another, legacy of the previous regime is to be seen in the transformation of cities and the artistic reflections of these processes.<sup>4</sup> However, the idea of imagined public space does not solely arise in opposition to the socialist legacy, although it plays a big role here, but also opposes the rapid developments brought under capitalism. As Connerton proposes, modernity, under capitalist world, causes “cultural amnesia” and transforms cities by rapid urban changes and erases public spaces.<sup>5</sup>

Like this idea, most of the people who deal with urban interventions argue that current trends of urban development support the alienation of citizens, as opposed to the idea of common public making decisions on their urban living. Moreover, creative actors in post-socialist urban areas argue that on the one hand, the unwillingness of citizens to actively participate in transformation of their cities is due to the socialist legacy and on the other hand, new spaces that are produced do not allow dealing with these issues. Hence, the projects and interventions they produce are at some level dealing with both issues, in addition with emphasizing the erasure of traditional urban fabric in some cases, also present in Bucharest.

Particular cases within this category of cities offer different contexts, with some similarities and this generalization should also be looked through these particularities, however, general aspects should be addressed as well. Transformation is yet another key term in this discourse which can have several understandings. Being said to be “in transformation” all the time, post-socialist cities are in the state of constant transformation where tracing their current state becomes vague, if not impossible, especially considering that every society, hence, every city is always transforming.

Instead, I propose that the post-socialist state of these places, with the complexity addressed above should be seen as the wider context, the starting point for understanding current state of post-socialist cities’ transformation. This way it also becomes feasible to place artistic interventions in the context they address and see their role as not dealing with “transformation” that has been going on after socialism per se, but to

see how they reflect and constitute to the transformation that is happening to these cities.

Bucharest, which is characterized as the urban “*battle ground*” from 1989 is compared to patchwork without much professional policies of the city.<sup>6</sup> Like other post-socialist cities, it also carries mentioned symptomatic characteristics and becomes an important case study, as urban development processes before 1989 and afterwards was most intensively present here and it is proposed that control over public space by totalitarian regimes caused people appreciating indoor life and that urban development processes in post-communist areas continue supporting domination of private areas over public among citizens.<sup>7</sup>

The latter can also be applied to current situations in other places. However, this issue together with the challenges of post-socialist public sphere is the starting point for a lot of urban interventions not only in Bucharest, but in other post-socialist cities. When I was hearing about different projects from their authors in Bucharest, the scenario seemed similar - Bucharest could have easily been replaced by Tbilisi, or few other cities in Eastern Europe that I am familiar of. When studying these urban interventions in the context of a particular place, more contextual information becomes evident, although starting point usually remains the same: reclaiming public space for citizens.

As Darieva and Kaschuba propose a lot of research has been done on the macro-level addressing the change of cities to post-socialism while not much has been said about everyday life culture in the face of intensive changes.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, they argue that “*one would be mistaken, however, to see these developments solely associated with the structural change and linear transition from the totalitarian to the democratic society and a radical break with the past.*”<sup>9</sup> This idea can be seen alongside the complexity that characterizes general state of post-socialist cities mentioned above. However, this also means that the general context must be considered when analyzing each case.

While a lot has been already written about various aspects of post-socialist urban transformation and the notion of public space therein, mostly it has been argued that what is missing in these processes is citizen participation. We notice increasing number of cultural projects in Eastern European cities initiated and implemented by artists, initiatives and NGOs which are directed towards actions in public spaces for raising awareness of urban issues among dwellers.

A good example of public art activities and the aims they usually have can be seen in the project *Spațiul Public București | Public Art Bucharest 2007*, curated by Marius Babias and Sabine Hentzsch. In the description of the project we read:

...project represents a trans-disciplinary discourse on art, architecture, urban development, education, and youth culture, in society and the public sphere. *Spațiul Public București | Public Art Bucharest 2007* includes a series of artistic projects, public debates, and media interventions, and it aims at confronting the public with social developments, initiating discussions, and emphasizing the cultural contribution to the development of democracy. Influenced in Romania by both globalization and post-communism, public space is an indicator of the state of society and democracy, as well as of the social relations between the inhabitants of a city or country.<sup>10</sup>

Starting from the streets to public transportation, a lot of urban elements have been used for artistically thinking about various socio-cultural issues in Bucharest within the project. Babias, co-curator of the project mentions that with the project they wanted to show the importance of public sphere as this is where citizens should get involved to shape their city, while putting in question the state of democracy in Romania at that time and also address with the project the question of art's role in making public engagement stronger.<sup>11</sup> The project and its discussion presented here can also be seen as the post-socialist context in which a lot of urban interventions are developed in Bucharest, not solely from the artists' perspective.

In general, as Hammond argues, interventions ask the question of ownership and represent city's belonging to public, hence they elaborate on the problematic of civic sphere and propose changing and rethinking of the city.<sup>12</sup> Urban interventions become the manifestations of conflicts over public space in the city where such public does not exist intensively. Moreover, by their frequent existence, similar actions become important in seeing what they communicate and how they participate in the transformation of the cities:

The example of the post-socialist city shows once again that buildings as well as the artistic response to what is built are imaginative acts. Building is no less an act of imagination as is the reflection on what is built... All of this practices have to do with the human imagination, with the ability to

respond artistically and creatively to the world, to cities, and, in this case, to the transformation of cities after the end of socialism.<sup>13</sup>

It is also important to find out how artistic responses can reflect and participate in the transformation. This becomes particularly interesting in the context of Bucharest, where we witness so many initiatives and creative urban projects, aimed at informing and activating citizens, providing public space as such, where public opinion and free expression can exist.

With majority of the projects arising from the mentioned concerns, Bucharest becomes a “contested city” – urban anthropological image that implies a city where contestation exists over the control and imagination of cities.<sup>14</sup> There is evidential contestation on public space in Bucharest as the protest from civil society towards state-governed transformation, however, it becomes contested on another level as well, within the creative scene criticizing the methodology, engagement and representations, as well as mentioning possible side-effects of interventions. The NGO sector representatives mention that “*art projects about the city could be too artistic*”, while the art scene usually mentioned “*that is NGO work*”, or even sometimes some art projects were said to engage well with social topics, but having low artistic quality. This does not mean that there is no collaboration in different disciplines in Bucharest, the tendency seems to be quite the contrary, but the cross-sectoral discussions and harsh criticism exist nevertheless.

GAP (*Gazeta De Artă Politică*) argues that there is a chance that making creative projects in impoverished areas can bring interest of investors there, hence, support gentrification.<sup>15</sup> They even refer to a simple formula “*artistic activity + derelict industrial area = gentrification*”.<sup>16</sup> While this is not the issues to be addressed directly in this paper, it is important to see that the critical discourse within the creative scene exists on possible developments of such activities in the context of Bucharest.

Therefore, contestation of Bucharests’ makeover in this case becomes on the one hand, by control over public space in the post-socialist complexity and on the other hand, also by inner conflict regarding the quality of projects in these processes; nevertheless, this contestation describes the state of transformation and public space in today’s Bucharest by creative scene actors.

Post-socialist urban complexity becomes the context for creative interventions in Bucharest. These activities are becoming tools for transforming and contesting public spaces and imagine the creation of

public which will be in control of the city. Therefore, social engagement and participation turn to be important aspects in such creative interventions in urban realms. Accordingly, for seeing city's contested nature through creative interventions, we need to elaborate on theoretical notions of such practices first and then analyze few examples and their role in the makeover of Bucharest.

### **From Socially Engaged Art to Socially Engaged Urban Activities**

Projects in public space can be put in four categories: "Tidying-up projects", being functional; technical works of urban planning; "projects that collectivize", as actions of mental strategies having political values; "projects that invent", which do not follow specific types and have the possibility of risk and errors, having artistic value.<sup>17</sup> Creative interventions that exist in and about Bucharest, with their social character oppose the first two categories, while they fall somewhere in between the last two.

Despite the fact that collaboration is said to be one of the key aspects of such activities, usually it is art scene from where such initiatives come. However, when looking at projects which can be characterized as "creative participatory interventions" in contemporary Bucharest, it is a surprisingly emerging initiatives of architects and urban planners. Emergence of socially engaged activities can be seen from the discussions between artistic and anthropological endeavors and to see how concepts have extended to other creative activities, we need to first explore theoretical discussions.

Thompson argues that "*in recent years, we have seen increased growth in 'participatory art': art that requires some action on behalf of the viewer in order to complete the work*".<sup>18</sup> There can be various terms referring to similar practices from different perspectives, but my aim is not to discuss terminological differences. Instead I will use general term "socially engaged". This way it has the risk of methodological vagueness, but as we will see it is also characteristic of public space interventions in Bucharest.

I argue that the "ethnographic turn" discussion in contemporary art is key to see the characteristics behind the emergence of such activities, although not often elaborated in a lot of projects today; introducing this turn, Foster asked the question concerning "the artist as ethnographer" and argued about the envy that anthropologists and artists have towards each other.<sup>19</sup> Author proposes that the significance of anthropology in contemporary art is due to following:

First, anthropology is prized as the science of alterity; in this regard it is only second to psychoanalysis as a lingua franca in artistic practice and critical discourse alike. Second, it is the discipline that takes culture as its object, and it is this expended field of reference that postmodernist art and criticism have long sought to make their own. Third, ethnography is considered contextual, the rote demand for which contemporary artists share with many other practitioners today, some of whom aspire to fieldwork in the everyday. Fourth, anthropology is thought to arbitrate the interdisciplinary, another rote value in contemporary art and theory. Finally, fifth, it is the self-critique of anthropology that renders it so attractive, for this critical ethnography invites a reflexivity at the center even as it preserves a romanticism of the margins.<sup>20</sup>

Five aspects mentioned above are theoretically important in seeing the emergence of similar practices, and as socially engaged activities grow larger it becomes the frameworks for other projects. Foster somehow predicts that this “pseudoethnographic” approach can become “franchised” with the risk that *“the show becomes the spectacle where cultural capital collects”*.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to know the development of such activities and see their presence in the city.

Abovementioned discussion does not mean the superiority of anthropology, but rather can be seen as the quest for collaboration.<sup>22</sup> As Schneider and Wright, initiators of various discussions on the connections between art and anthropology argue, experimentation in both fields has existed rather separately.<sup>23</sup> However, attempts of collaboration are increasing.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in the last edition of collaborative works they discuss “ways of working” being vital in collaborative projects with different outcomes, meaning that next to anthropology’s critical engagement with contemporary art, it should also imply *“approaching creativity and meaning as something often emergent, rather than prefigured or planned”*.<sup>25</sup>

Likewise, the idea of fieldwork and ways of working are core parallels between the two disciplines, linking to contextuality mentioned above. It also intersects with another key term – “site-specificity” implying art rooted in the social context, addressing a particular problem while art object and visual aspects are not central, but the process becomes as such.<sup>26</sup> Usually the creative aspect of projects develops as one enters the context, which itself also becomes part of it, requiring reflexivity and openness.

The framework of prefigured projects within the funding structure might not always allow process-based openness, but the idea of the context and

social issues within are becoming key in other creative projects linking to these notions - *"We are not just interested in architecture, but more making it with people"* or *"we wanted to activate communities, so that they would claim public space for them"* or *"we want to make projects interactive and create the spaces for discussions"* – the pathos of these statements can be said to be underlying majority of initiatives that exist in Bucharest nowadays and deal with the city.

By placing these projects in particular settings, they are aimed at involving public, but what is implied in public for such projects in general? There are two sides of public proposed: *"first the naive or insensible public that enters the gallery space; and second the newly reflective and compassionate public that emerges after the exposure to the work of art."*<sup>27</sup> The divide from another perspective can be seen in art and architecture, wherein one side argues for the *"apolitical formalism, made of hyper-aesthetics for the sake of aesthetics"* and others, who leave this approach and engage with socio-economic issues.<sup>28</sup> The latter can be said a starting point of projects that have emerged with similar methodologies beyond strictly defined contemporary art boundaries.

Those projects that I got to know here usually mention that the work they do is "participatory", another key term under debate in contemporary art. Indeed it is one of the catchwords of today's creative scene in the West; hence, some of its key characteristics should be defined. Participatory art, which is also strongly linked with the "social turn" and collaboration in art is based on the assumption that artists are working with participants and communicating through them, deriving from the idea of "the self-sacrifice" that art goes beyond aesthetic domain and combines with social aspects.<sup>29</sup> In strictly defined terms, participatory art denies a passive spectator and *"suggests a new understanding of art without audiences, one in which everyone is a producer"*.<sup>30</sup> The medium in this case become transformed situations and people, who are participants and spectators, involved in the two-level communication otherwise not present in everyday life and support rethinking and imagining our relations to the world.<sup>31</sup>

However, even in here distinction with public's engagement is argued: there are projects which are created by artists requiring engagement in a wider sense and there are projects which are developed together with participants, through dialogues and processes.<sup>32</sup> At this point I want to discuss two projects from Bucharest, exemplifying these approaches in the explosion of "participatory" in the city. One of them being a rather

unique case, the other underlying predominant contemporary works discussed in this paper.

The first case is the community-based project in the Rahova-Uranus area by artist initiative called *Ofensiva Generozității / Generosity Offensive*.<sup>33</sup> This area is quite centrally located in the southwest of Bucharest. In this industrial area developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, properties went to the state ownership during the Communism and in recent decades evictions also took place, while attempts to its upgrading were made.<sup>34</sup> This area did not have a very positive image for other parts of the city as well.

The initiative of young artists went to this area for experimenting community-art, while such practices did not exist in Romania. They remained open to local voices in finding the ways of developing the project. Starting in 2006 with the *Sensitive Map* project, they wanted to discover linkage between the inhabitants of Rahova and their neighborhood with two main components of documentary video and local square transformation. Taking interdisciplinarity and collaborative aspects, the project developed with locals and they continued their work through different initiatives including *Mobile Urban Laboratory* as the space of creation and workshops, including famous “Biluna Jam Session”, children’s musical project, as well as establishing locally-based community cultural center *La Bomba*.<sup>35</sup>

Also, *Rahova Delivery* as part of the larger *Street Delivery* discussed later, was held in the neighborhood and a lot of people talk about the criticism that surrounded the project, mostly in relation with the risks for its gentrification mentioned earlier. Apart from the critique of the practice, the project description shows that it was quite open and process-based, for testing the notions of community art, as well as supporting community in bringing their voices.

Arguably, this is the pioneering project with its character in the Romanian context, if not one of the rare examples in post-socialist cities, where artists came to the chosen neighborhood with certain ideas and developed a project together with local community, while engaging in social problems surrounding them and representing the neighborhood in another way together with locals. One can also tell that the project is done by rather general methods of contemporary Western artistic practices, but the contextual presence of the project seems quite evident as well and it could be said to have participatory characteristics addressed above.

For the second example I discuss the intervention made in Bucharest by young collective called *Urban2020*. During the presentation of their

work, where I first got to know about this project, their representative quite openly discussed the unsuccessful case as community's dissatisfaction by the interventions they had made. Like a lot of others, this initiative of few young professionals came from the architecture and urban planning background, inspired by 'new architecture' with social dimensions, as there were also funds available in this direction.

As one of the project initiators described, their interest was mainly utilization of public space in former Communist neighborhoods and the research phase of the project was followed by the idea of interventions with outdoor furniture in the project *Bucharest Pop-up*. The aim was to make these places usable for neighbors and bring people together, as according to them there seems to be very individualistic approach to the spaces in common neighborhoods and communities depend on local administrations to take care of these spaces. The group announced the contest on making objects from used material and had some architects and artists who got involved. After facing the challenges with local administration, they changed locations and made interventions not in the original places identified, almost abandoned with the non-use, but instead in the neighborhood which already had some of basic outdoor furniture.

The surprise to project team came when the local community did not appreciate new, rather unknown objects that appeared in their neighborhood at night, even leaving the note asking for taking "this rubbish" away, as one of the project initiators described. Afterwards, they had to talk with locals and describe what these "strange" objects were and that they could have used it, which community later accepted and started using them.

The project scheme looks as follows: organizers come up with the idea of revitalizing public space in neighborhoods where they believe public space is not used, they do research, later decide to do physical interventions and involve more actors from the creative scene to make object. After negotiations and permits, they place them in the neighborhood which is rather critical to what is "popping up" and only after that they go and explain why it is there. Intervention is very temporal and locals, who according to project initiators are expecting everything from the outside, get yet another physical transformation from the outside, this time by young professionals. The methodology of this project can more or less be seen as the one which is utilized in a lot of projects in Bucharest, discussed here – projects are mostly developed by the creative actor, based in the city and then asking participation, which nevertheless could also foster

different understanding of the city, however, cannot be strictly defined as participatory.

“Participatory” in here does not imply development of projects with locals for whom the project is made, but rather intervening for them. They tend to be critical, reflections happen usually afterwards, not while developing the project, which links to the closed framework these projects are most likely to have. Creativity becomes the tool for protests and comes closer to the “Activist Art”, where:

Artists recognize that the process of shared dialogue can proceed most effectively if they function not as privileged outsiders, but as coparticipants who are intimately involved in the concerns of the community or constituency with which they work. This “community” may be defined by such factors as geographic location, commitment to a specific political issue or movement, or identity based on race, gender, sexuality or class.<sup>36</sup>

The idea of activist art can be seen parallel to general social engagement of art, as both offer creative intervention in specific context and try to create and represent environment where various social issues are being discussed, addressed in a way. Aspect of interdisciplinarity in this discourse, is usually mentioned, but nevertheless more collaboration is required in similar actions, especially when created with the agency of social change through artistic interventions. Collaboration does not anymore concern only artists and anthropologists, but different cultural actors, researchers, etc. with shared goals, however, it is usually the opposite. As Kester argues, to establish knowledge about social makeover and art’s role in it, together with elaborations of preceding theoretical concepts, it “*requires a process of both learning and un-learning via practice*”.<sup>37</sup>

The issue might not be the “learning”, as much as the “un-learning” side of the collaboration, that makes it sometimes so difficult to cross disciplinary boundaries, especially when such projects and the funding for them is based on competition. This causes further challenges of the practice, as reflections on the topics mostly happen within one particular field, as well as does not actively involve communities that are asked to participate. Theoretical discussion above show the emergence of such activities and their characteristics, however, criticism of the forms they utilize is beyond the direct scope of this paper. Creative interventions that exist outside the art scene with socially engaged aspect can be said to be taking some of key characteristics of “participatory” and socially-engaged

practices, as frameworks to work in, usually not taking theoretical notions into reflexive discussions. Being rather generally socially engaged and activist in their character, they have more political value of projects as acts of imagination having those “mental strategies” to inform citizens, while tackling with the artistic notions most of the time.

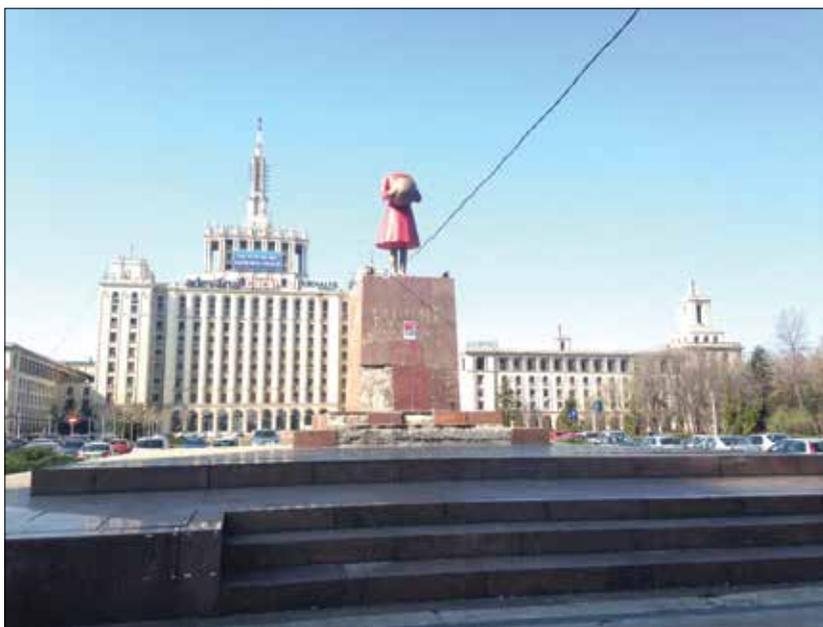
### **Urban Interventions – “Soon in Your City!”**

Regardless of their specific character, these interventions participate in the makeover of the city while dealing with this topic. As Ramoneda argues “*public space is the place of conflict and conflicts aren’t resolved but they metamorphose and are transformed*”.<sup>38</sup> Creative interventions in Bucharest are becoming contestations for imaginations and empowering critical cultural actors. For seeing this, I will discuss three examples I studied in Bucharest – one created from the art scene, the other one from the joint initiative of mostly existing types and the third one as a mix of activities around public space in Bucharest, where the dynamics of interventions unveil.

As one arrives in Bucharest from the airport, on the way they will pass the “Free Press Square”, with the massive building that can easily be identified as the socialist remnant. Having had Lenin’s statue in front, after the revolution, in 1990 it was removed publicly from this place and although the decision was made for instead putting up a new monument of “Wings” as referred, the new project is still not implemented.<sup>39</sup> The pedestal remained empty as in other countries that “got rid” of regime’s monuments and most of them gradually disappeared mostly with the emergence of “new” symbols instead. However, Bucharest is one of the exceptions as in 2014 the pedestal still stands in front of the building.

In 2009, Romanian artist Ioana Ciocan decided to work around the pedestal as “*due to its emptiness, visibility and historical importance, it seemed like a perfect place to run an art program for temporary public art*”.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, she was aiming at having local artists to exhibit there, who otherwise would not have the possibility of working in public space. Her attempt resulted in *Proiect 1990*, which started with her own project *Ciocan VS. Ulyanov* in 2010. Obtaining temporary rights for each project, as the high budget “Wings” were due to be put there every year, she managed to have 20 projects in total around the pedestal addressing different issues.<sup>41</sup>

The topics that projects surrounded were diverse. By the time I arrived in Bucharest, the pedestal was hosting 19<sup>th</sup> project, statue of a girl in a red dress without a head and instead holding a big golden ball in her hands. Later, after the discussion with the author, I got to know that it was dedicated to the campaign of “*Salvați Roșia Montană!* / *Save Rosia Montana*” against the gold mining company’s mega investment in Romania, which is said to be the biggest public protest and movement in Romania’s recent history. The newspapers that were covering legs and hands of the statue became understandable then, as they were the ones about the ongoing issue.



*Proiect 1990*

It is right to argue that “iconoclasm” of post-socialist statues can be seen as an easy way of getting rid of unwanted past, but instead this action prolongs the memory of the former regime, rather than makes us forget it.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, if we argue that a more successful example in rethinking the past is changing the agency of such places,<sup>43</sup> *Proiect 1990* can be said to be successful with its goals. But we also need to see social

engagement aspect it has, as well as the purpose of its creation, relating to other interventions in Bucharest.

Generally criticizing the lack of social engagement and public existence of art in Romania, as well as Bucharest's makeover in a way that it is not functional to its citizens, Ioana mentioned that she was happy that the project got media coverage, as she wanted to also let wider public know that different kind of public art can exist.

Deriving from its goals, it was predominantly art scene involved in making each project around the pedestal and it had the public dimension of creating something and bringing it to the citizens to perceive it. Even though it did not have strictly speaking "participatory" aims, it still asked for the critical, yet passive engagement of the public in rethinking recent history through what happened in that public space. From the aims of the project we can see that together with the social issues it addressed, it also wanted making opportunities for artists to work in public space and address the issue of critical socially engaged public art.

The latter links to the idea of other creative projects in public space of Bucharest – they ask for critical public and engagement, but projects come from creative scene, representing transformation-related conflicts and utilizing public space with creative activism. With this character they also come close to the notion of "eventwork",<sup>44</sup> which incorporates at least four aspects: critical research, participatory art, networking strategies and self-organized collaboration; being "contemporary social movement", this term implies the combinations of "Art, theory, media and politics into a mobile force that oversteps the limits of any professional sphere or disciplinary field..."<sup>45</sup>

This term interestingly links to another temporary intervention that I attended to study. The event called *Urban\_Dream\_Scapes* was developed in the end of April 2014 by Bucharest-based *Komunitas Association*, a group of young researchers in urban anthropology, in collaboration with their Estonian partners *Linnalabor* and the support of another Bucharest-based group of architects called *studioBASAR*, renowned for their social architectural interventions. Official description of the event says:

The theme is urban development through active involvement of young European citizens having the aim to reactivate public urban spaces and build a sense of community around them. The project wants to bring together young people from 2 very different cultural and historical evolution

of the urban environment from EU extremities (north and east), and through empirical observations and teamwork, to bring a contribution to coherent urban planning with a strong social approach. The activities will involve urban walks, a creative workshop for building a temporary installation in the public space and will end with a community event in Carol Park from Bucharest, where the participants will have a direct contact with the local community, promoting volunteering and active European citizenship.<sup>46</sup>

The project was funded by the European Commission's *Youth in Action* Programme. One can easily characterize the language of the description as that of NGO terminology, which usually has been mentioned with suspicion by art scene representatives in Bucharest.

The project resulted in one day intervention in Carol Park (*Parcul Carol*) of Bucharest, which was argued to have the manifestation of political and state ideas in every period of Romanian history from the previous century. There is a significant diversity of symbols in the park, where central hill is represented by tall monument, grave of the Unknown Soldier and the mausoleum.

In the project, initially the discussion about Bucharest's transformation and the development of the park took place, where the history of this park was discussed, as well as generally the issue of green spaces in Bucharest was addressed. Theoretically the questions of "what is a park?" was asked and we left to explore the park with the understanding that it is a green space in the city, intervention in itself that should oppose the notion of regulations and allow "wilderness" in the highly controlled urban setting. With its rather "sacred" understanding and monument status, Carol Park was said to be the manifestation of power, rather than the everyday usage for citizens.

Walks in this and neighboring Youth Park (*Parcul Tineretului*) took place as to see the differences between more ideologised and relatively free parks. Carol Park was discussed to be one of the most controlled public spaces in Bucharest. Moreover, the fact that walking and sitting on the grass in the parks was only allowed few years ago in Bucharest, organizers believed that it is not yet in the culture of the visitors of the park, hence, decided to make interventions of making park more friendly where people would utilize green areas, rather than solely walk on pavements and designated areas.

When one walks in beautiful parks of Bucharest, it is noticeable that areas made specifically for walking and sitting are more utilized, than green

landscapes. In some areas, like on Piața Unirii one can also notice the sign mentioning that accessing areas with grass is allowed. In Carol Park we also witness a lot of signs, regulating what one can do when visiting it. The regulations become stricter the closer visitor goes to the hill and the memorial, where one of the signs calls it “a sacred area”, saying that it is not a playground and should not be accessed with bicycles, scooters, etc. which is due to the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Project participants explored the environment, saw the green area by the water where they wanted to do an intervention and headed back to the workshop place. After group works and discussions, few ideas were chosen for the intervention – alternative signs to be put on the green area leading to the hill, next to the stairs telling visitors that this areas can also be utilized; wooden platforms for making picnic on green areas; ordinary swings on random trees in the park.

After few days of working on the material in the workshop area, objects for the intervention were created and taken to the park to have a community event, invite and educate visiting public in using green areas of the city. Event did not go as it was planned, organizers were not able to put objects and intervene in the green area where initially intended, as they were prohibited to do so. Even though they had permission for the temporary intervention, turned out they lacked that special permit for intervening in green landscapes of the park. Instead, they put together all the objects on the asphalted walking area next to it and activities took place around it. Major activity still surrounded drawing and other fun activities for children, as well as a map of that part of Bucharest where people were invited to indentify and map different areas and aspects, which organizers could address with future interventions. Simple swings that were hanging on trees were quite popular both for children and adults. The area where “picnic” could have been held was mostly used by people involved in the project and few people who stopped by the event, mentioned that it was important to have such happenings in different areas, as there should be more entertainment activities in the city.



*Urban\_Dream\_Scapes* event

Even though the event did not go exactly the way it was planned due to mentioned reason, a skeptic to such practices could ask – but could they not bring some cheap furniture and have same kind of activities for children? – Perhaps, yes. But we need to look at this kind of activities in their making. Said to be participatory, its temporal character was also acknowledged and importance was based on the participation of other actors engaging with public through intervention and showing the possibility of transforming the space through cheap, or used material. European partners’ dimension only highlights the significance of participation of civil society actors across countries, carrying the risk of having similar frameworks and remaining closed processes.

All characteristics of eventwork are present here – they start with some prior research of the problem or site, it is based on the network of different actors. Participation is taken as educating public in a general understanding and self-organized groups thinking what else could be done, where and how can public space be transformed based on what ideas they had before and sometimes what public being there proposed. Event exists for the sake of imagining what could be further and what civil society can do about it, about an expandable public space which is not there, manifested in the last example which brings it all together.

In 2014 it was already the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of *Street Delivery*,<sup>47</sup> an annual urban event that takes place in Bucharest, Timișoara and Iași organized by Fundația Cărturești and Architects' Chamber of Romania. In Bucharest the idea of the event is to block Verona Street during few days for the cars and make it accessible for pedestrians to see other ideas and creations that could exist. Started as *Art Delivery* in 2006, the name later changed to *Street Delivery* as according to one of the organizers there's more than art happening there; because it is where social networks develop within the city oriented towards the development of driving facilities, as opposed to pedestrian areas and the big idea is to have annual national public space weekend in June. This event becomes an eventwork, an arena for activism and civil society engagement with the city, while trying to work with young professionals, mostly architects and city planners, who are more interested in making city for people and not just buildings.

This year it took place during June 13-15, Verona Street was blocked for the cars and an urban festival was held there: from the beginning of the street, from Magheru Boulevard area was starting to be crowded, the statue of the girl in the red dress holding a golden ball, from *Proiect 1990* was standing on the pedestal made by the pallets, surrounded by relatively smaller garden gnomes "discussing" various issues, created by landscape designers, walking on the street one could notice stands similar to an open air expo, where different initiatives were presenting their projects in an interactive way, selling some of their products, having educational urban activities for children, even tango for adults, some craft making, information about social movements, city biking, etc. ended with the stage for concerts.



*Street Delivery 2014*

Festival composed of different sections – architecture, arts, music and even sports which was added this year to another space not far, in the parking lot next to Athenaeum, for which organizers did not get permit and had to buy all the parking tickets (5400 in total) for three days. Guided tours of the neighborhood and the festival were also available during which guides said few times “this is an event by the civil society for the civil society” and invited me (only person on the first tour) to the specially constructed discussion area made of pallets opposite the street, as the first time extension of the festival from Verona Street. Extension of the festival was always aimed but did not happen until this year, this is probably why the description of the event lists three cities where it takes place and says “soon in your city!”.<sup>48</sup>

The nature of the festival is to present and empower initiatives dealing with transforming urban space for citizens, predominantly happening in Bucharest and the festival happens exactly for the reason of giving platform to different initiatives and by showing what they do and what can be done, hence, wider public is invited to know about this and imagine that they could also get involved in making similar initiatives in their neighborhoods. However, having the public which is to accept the product and participate this way, which looks at these activities as an elements of fun, opposes to bigger ideas this kind of initiatives are bringing.

*Street Delivery* also composed of other activities such as workshop (*Becoming Local: The Atomising Society and Public Space. The Case of Post-Socialist Territories*)<sup>49</sup> on urban issues in Bucharest and involvement of young professionals in them. On the last day of the workshop which I attended, projects were presented based on few days of fieldwork, thought in the similar manner characteristic to current creative interventions. Participants worked around the University Square and Verona Street in thinking about the ways of creatively transforming these areas, where ideas concerned “testing of space” which predominantly came again from the organizers and participants, though aimed at activating public. While discussing Verona Street and its development apart from *Street Delivery*, the position of the Architects’ Chamber, among others, was that it is a pilot project, which should support the emergence of other projects.

*Street Delivery* can be seen as that eventwork in Bucharest which unites vastly existing urban interventions as civil society engagements, as well as a lot of them emerge from there. Deriving from the notions under debate in contemporary art, the festival also utilizes some concepts, however, mostly remaining with the political value of projects in public space with collectivizing people who would like to work around same ideas. Bucharest becomes a “contested city” where civil society is emerging

with interventions as conflicts with how it is changing and could be changed. With their characters, these eventworks at this point intervene for not emerging wider critical public, but more actors in creative scene, more networking and collaboration as to imagine what else can be done for “passive” wider public. In other words, creativity becomes the tool of activism contesting the transformation of Bucharest and moreover, gets involved in this transformation by temporary interventions and mobilization of civil society for possible makeover of the city.

### **Towards the conclusion**

As I went on the other side of the street from *Street Delivery*, on the constructed place of discussions and screenings, there was a discussion about interventions in Bucharest, speakers and public were almost the same I had met during the research, some of active participants in these processes, discussing what they had done and imagining what else could be done in public space. Although the participatory methodology of these projects can be critically discussed, I think they still are part of transforming and contesting Bucharest.

I have started the discussion by the general condition of post-socialist cities in Eastern Europe, where several characteristics are usually arbitrarily argued in relation to public space and proposed looking at this situation in whole, as a post-socialist context for starting analysis of happenings within them. Discussions around the ethnographic turn, social engagement, collaboration and participatory notions in contemporary art usually referred in urban interventions, have shown us that some of the characteristics are present in projects outside the discipline, however, in an altered form. While addressing particular issues and spaces, they call for participation but from a passive spectator, as opposed to developing projects with them.

Moreover, frequent turn of discussed notions into mere frameworks for project development has shown that these interventions have more political and activism value by being imaginative acts of possible transformation, while openness, reflexivity and collaboration are crucial for their artistic aspects, often being mixed in their aims. However, discussion of particular examples and theoretical elaborations showed us that initiatives from different perspectives are present in the transformation of Bucharest very actively through temporary projects and become rather eventworks which utilize creative tools to mobilize more and more actors to participate in and contest challenging makeover of Bucharest, usually the case in Eastern European cities nowadays.

## NOTES

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