

## Reviewing George Matei Cantacuzino

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This account aims to provide a non-exhaustive review of the Romanian critical literature on George Matei Cantacuzino's life-long activity (the architect will be further referred to as GMC). As important GMC's figure is for the development of the Romanian architecture scene at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as incomplete the series of critical written material focusing on his activity is. However, a good reason for this is the policy of exclusion of the former intellectual elite during the communist period. The architect's career was detoured, him being a subject of these events. Thus, the attitude of praise and empathy present in almost all related articles, speeches or monographs may be explained, as well as the lack of criticism in scholarly literature.

A diachronic overview of several Romanian publications written about GMC should evidently point out that as time passes, the selected articles and books gather more complexity and become more and more impartial. This happens in such a way that it becomes possible to grasp the background mechanisms defining his work as an architect and artist, as a writer and as a professor as well. GMC's work revolves around a most complex and diverse set of cultural references that include personages like Andrea Palladio, Michel de Montaigne, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Charles de Ligne, Jules Laforgue, Marcel Proust, Henri Bergson, André Gide, Paul Valéry, Lucien Fabre, Matila Ghyka, Constantin Brâncuși, Mihail Sebastian, Georges Gromort, Auguste Perret, Le Corbusier, Henri Focillon, Jean Cocteau, and so on. As such his work acted as a vehicle of continuity: between east and west, modernity and tradition, classical spirit and modernist dogma. Discovering these links and relating them to his literary and architectural activity is mandatory for the emphasis of his influence upon Romanian culture.

The two-episode series of articles written by Radu Patrulius for *Arhitectura* in 1975,<sup>1</sup> fifteen years after GMC's passing, is the first of the publications I shall mention in this paper. The article is of great importance as it tries to depict the architect's personality from the insights of a former student (this is probably why it became a source for most of the future analytical publications on this matter, but also because it is seemingly the only one of its kind). The beginning of his discourse revives some of the key moments with his professor, focusing on GMC's teaching method and relationship with his students. However, after this short inquiry, the article follows a delighting biographical sketch of the architect, focusing further on his activity both as a publicist, man of letters, and as an artist, architect and painter; the blend of an enthusiastic point of view and respect towards a former teacher has its effect on the reader and surely achieves its firstly stated goal: to bring into focus something valuable from the near past that might be of use in present development. But as much as this article helps to determine GMC's importance in the context of Romanian modernity, it cannot be regarded as a critical work, remaining a mere descriptive, biographical essay, as its author indeed claimed.

An essential article which followed Patrulius' was Augustin Ioan's "Despre o estetică a reconstrucției" [On the aesthetics of reconstruction] written in 2006, having the same title as one of GMC's published essays.<sup>2</sup> But before any further discussion of this article, it should be noted here the long period which passed between the two works: Patrulius' series of articles and Augustin Ioan's homonymous reference. This period is divided only by Lăcrămioara Chihai's

1 Radu Patrulius, "George Matei Cantacuzino 1899 – 1960 (I),(II)", *Arhitectura* (1975): 57-62, 53-60.

2 Augustin Ioan, "Despre o estetică a reconstrucției" [On the aesthetics of reconstruction], Atelier LiterNet, 28.06.2006 (URL :<http://atelier.liternet.ro/articol/3543/Augustin-ioan/Despre-o-estetica-a-reconstrucției.html>, access date 20.08.2014)

announcement in the 5th issue of *Biblos* in 1997 regarding the collection of 99 watercolours that GMC donated to the Central Library from Iași.<sup>3</sup> The article focuses more on his activity as a painter and on the period he spent in Moldova, after his confinement.

Augustin Ioan's article is a review of GMC's *Despre o estetică a reconstrucției* [On the aesthetics of reconstruction], written from an interesting perspective: A. Ioan discusses in terms of the present value of the architect's theory for Romania, after the 1989 revolutionary episode. He also bemoans the fact that Romanian history knows only an unfortunate series of political detours and a constant look back to discover estranged relatives who, in another parallel chronology might have been a source of cultural evolution and becoming.

The period between 1975 and 2007 was marked by some important events related to the architect's legacy: a couple of painting exhibitions of some of GMC's aquarelles and sketches and the celebration of his centenary. The first exhibition was set up in 1990 on the occasion of the UAR's centenary.<sup>4</sup> The second one is perhaps of a greater importance. Being mounted in 2007, firstly at Carturesti Library in Bucharest (then moved to Cluj and Timișoara), it was a dialogic approach to GMC and his granddaughter's paintings named "Legături de sânge – O expoziție-dialog între arhitectul George Matei Cantacuzino și nepoata sa Ilinca Cantacuzino" [In the blood – An exhibition-dialogue between the architect George Matei Cantacuzino and his granddaughter Ilinca Cantacuzino]. Furthermore, it was followed by a discussion held by Romanian architects such as Șerban Sturdza, Alexandru Beldiman and Mariana Celac, with the participation of Șerban Cantacuzino, the architect's son. The exhibition was reviewed in *Convorbiri literare* (2007) in an article by Virgiliu Onofrei: "G.M. Cantacuzino – în dialog peste timp" [G.M. Cantacuzino – a dialogue across time].<sup>5</sup> However, this essay focuses mainly on GMC's legacy. This becomes more of a *leitmotif* used instead of any criticism. Although his legacy remains unchallenged, its constant iteration does not add any novelty to its critical analysis.

However, the centenary celebration might rise much more interest among this series of events, not necessarily because of its content (as significant as it might have been), but merely because one can hardly find any references to document what one may consider as being of considerable relevance. The lack of reviews or publications connected to it stands as a marker of general indifference towards this particular Romanian figure, and comes as a disappointment. Nevertheless, one may find a reference in later GMC monographs<sup>6</sup> of a paper written by Ana Maria Zahariade and defended as part of this event. Even if the article does not appear to be published later, it requires significant attention.<sup>7</sup>

"Recitindu-l pe George Matei Cantacuzino" [Rereading George Matei Cantacuzino] may be the first critical overview of GMC's published literary work, a critical view of GMC's critical views as one may prefer referring to, which raises a number of relevant questions for the subsequent body of analytical work. First of all, what struck me as a very simple observation (though a very effective one) is an immediate analysis of the language used by the architect in his writings. It is always lacking professional terms, turning the discourse into an easy-flowing mellow speech which, paradoxically, hardly deprives it of any qualities, but enhances it instead. Secondly, the main idea followed through the paper is GMC's unique position among Romanian architects,

3 Lăcrămioara Chihaița, "99 de acuarele de G.M. Cantacuzino în colecțiile Bibliotecii Centrale Universitare din Iași" [99 Watercolours from the Collection of the Central University Library in Iași], *Biblos* 5 (1997), 8-10. (URL :<https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=http://www.bcu-iasi.ro/biblos/biblos5/99.pdf> )

4 Virgiliu Onofrei, "G.M. Cantacuzino – în dialog peste timp" [G.M. Cantacuzino – A Dialogue across Time], *Convorbiri literare* 147 (2008), (URL: <http://convorbiri-literare.dntis.ro/ONOFREImar8.html>, acces date 20.08.2014)

5 Onofrei, "G.M. Cantacuzino – în dialog peste timp", [G.M. Cantacuzino – A Dialogue across Time], *Convorbiri literare* 147(2008), accessed August 20, 2014, <http://convorbiri-literare.dntis.ro/ONOFREImar8.html>.

6 Mirela Duculescu, *G.M. Cantacuzino – Arhitectura ca tema a gândirii* [G.M. Cantacuzino – Architecture as a Subject of Thought] (Bucharest: Simetria, 2010), 22.

7 My acknowledgements to Professor Ana Maria Zahariade who was so kind as to lend me the article from her personal archive.

giving an analytical response to the cultural contexts of his days by subduing to neither the “progressive”, nor the “culturalist” trends. The author traces this defining characteristic throughout several of the architect’s writings. Hence the significance of this essay as a decoding key to be further expanded.

Mirela Duculescu wrote two articles in different issues of *Arhitectura* and *Arhitect*, which also appeared as titles in the monograph *G.M. Cantacuzino – Architecture as a Subject of Thought* which will be discussed in the following paragraphs;<sup>8</sup> clearly their importance increases when included in the bigger work, not when taken separately.

The issue of Mirela Duculescu’s *G.M. Cantacuzino – Arhitectura ca tema a gândirii* [G.M. Cantacuzino – Architecture as a Subject of Thought] in 2010 is thus the next significant moment that shall be discussed below.<sup>9</sup> The book follows an interesting path in establishing how GMC’s work ranges him among other fellow Romanian contemporary architects. Although the author has not aimed at providing an exhaustive analysis of what the architect’s efforts consist of, she channels her search so as to find out whether GMC belongs to the generalized interwar versatility/experimentalism in style<sup>10</sup> that characterized most of the Romanian architects, or he would stand as a particular case which deserves a separate approach. The theme that appears essential in her book is the way GMC understood to mediate between avant-garde, modernist influences, Romanian architecture and tradition, and the classical spirit which contributed to his education as an architect. The basis for this inquiry is the architect’s lifelong writing itself, comprising editorial work, *Scrisori către Simon* [Letters to Simon], and GMC’s open letter to Marcel Janco.<sup>11</sup> The discourse becomes a text analysis conducted carefully through GMC’s literary work, and follows it closely. In this case the disadvantage of this approach is, paradoxically, the lack of perspective that follows. External references in GMC’s work have to be emphasized in order to prove the assumption that he really has to be interpreted as a separate instance, as a unique figure in Romanian interwar generation of architects. This may be linked to Ana Maria Zahariade’s observation upon GMC’s choice of that kind of language that hides all cultural theoretical references in his discourse. Even if this particular choice does not point directly to the external context, key figures or theories contemporary with GMC, an analysis of his work ought to unravel them.

The book has a dualistic approach: theoretical and practical dimensions of his work compose a parallel discourse. Thus, if the first chapters analyse his writings and describe his architectural theory, the last one brings to the fore a series of GMC’s designs and actual buildings, each one of them being accompanied by comments made by the Mirela Duculescu. The ten-year long effort put in this book marks an important moment in the understanding of the architect’s activity.

Perhaps the most complete study that has been written until recently is still, after four years from its completion, Dan Teodorovici’s dissertation paper *G. M. Cantacuzino (1899 – 1960): Dialogik zwischen Tradition und Moderne*<sup>12</sup> finished in 2010, which was published later in January 2014 in Germany under the title *George Matei Cantacuzino a Hybrid Modernist*.<sup>13</sup> Being a double cultural

8 Mirela Duculescu, “G.M. Cantacuzino – un chevalier seul”, *Arhitect Design* 12 (2000), 58-63 și “Scurtă introducere în opera lui G.M. Cantacuzino (1899 – 1960)” [Short Introduction to the Work of G.M. Cantacuzino (1899 – 1960)] *Arhitectura* 1 (2011): 106-111.

9 Duculescu, *G.M. Cantacuzino – Arhitectura ca tema a gândirii*.

10 *Ibid.*, 30-31.

11 G. M. Cantacuzino, “Scrisoare adresată lui Marcel Iancu” [Letter to Marcel Janco], *Contimporanul* 96-98 (1931): 9-10.

12 Dan Teodorovici, “G. M. Cantacuzino (1899 - 1960): Dialogik zwischen Tradition und Moderne” [G. M. Cantacuzino (1899 - 1960): Dialogic between Tradition and Modernity], (PhD diss., 2010), URL :[https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=http://elib.uni-stuttgart.de/opus/volltexte/2010/5813/pdf/teodorovici\\_dissertation\\_2010\\_16\\_mb.pdf](https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=http://elib.uni-stuttgart.de/opus/volltexte/2010/5813/pdf/teodorovici_dissertation_2010_16_mb.pdf), accessed on 20.08.2014.

13 Dan Teodorovici, *George Matei Cantacuzino a Hybrid Modernist* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 2014).

project, this paper is also accompanied by a homonymous itinerant exhibition. The event first took place in Stuttgart, and was on display in London until 29th of August.<sup>14</sup>

The exhibition comprises original issues of GMC's writings, several sketches and aquarelles, a 3D model of his Bellona Hotel and a "tripartite chronological display of architectural works, quotations and contexts," as described in the announcement available on the website of Romanian Cultural Institute in London. Surprisingly, all its elements did not seem to integrate, however, in a much bigger picture, just by simply occupying the space of a single room at the entrance of the Institute.

As encouraging as this event may be, given the fact that it is the first exhibition of a Romanian architect mounted outside the country, my opinion is that the means used to stage it scarcely show all the effort put into the study of GMC's activity. Be it a cause of economic constraints, a lack of network means or some other agenda than that of purely highlighting an alarmingly unrenowned and unacknowledged architect, the overall image of the event slightly adds to a more comprehensive glimpse of GMC's remarkable personality.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, Dan Teodorovici's monograph shows a different perspective from what one can witness at the complementary exhibition. What differentiates Dan Teodorovici's analytical process from previous publications is mainly a complex point of view, which traces the source of GMC's theoretical inclinations and tries to inscribe them into a European cultural context. Therefore, H. Bergson appears to be the essential key of interpretation to be used regarding the architect's *visionary* architectural theory. What is more, the author draws a parallel between Gilles Deleuze's method of study applied on Bergson's oeuvre and GMC's potential interpretation. This explains the way the architect saw the two main directions present in Romanian architecture at that time: modernism and *avant-garde*, juxtaposed with a constant struggle for designing a traditional national style. In his theory there was not any conflict to mediate, the two being specific moments which influenced one another in a diachronic development.

What I think that is more important in this case is that the critical discourse does not separate the theoretical analysis of his written work from an inquiry of some of the buildings designed by the architect. These two elements continually intertwine and make room for new layers of perception. Even if the book does not aim to become an extensive study of his architecture, this adds complexity to the discourse. Reading it, one can clearly see how specific buildings turn to be his theory projected in architecture.

Another important work on the subject of GMC's theoretical approach and how it can be traced in his architecture is Ada Hajdu's article "George Matei Cantacuzino și modernismul mediteranean" [George Matei Cantacuzino and the Mediterranean modernism] published in *Di suo' maniera e di suo' aria. Studii în onoarea Ancăi Oroveanu* [Di suo' maniera e di suo' aria. Studies in the honour of Anca Oroveanu].<sup>16</sup> The advantage is that Ada Hajdu's work makes use of both of the monographic studies mentioned before: *George Matei Cantacuzino a Hybrid Modernist* and *G.M. Cantacuzino – Architecture as a Subject of Thought*. It discusses in new terms how the architect is seen to represent national architecture; the author inscribes him in a series of similar regionally acknowledged but European unrenowned architects like Josep Coderch, Aris Konstantinidis, Adalberto Libera, Dimitri Pikionis, Sedad Eldem or Josep Lluís Sert, suggesting a re-assessment of the relationship between modernism and tradition. The author also implies that the assimilation of GMC's theory as an *avant-la-lettre* critical regionalism is not necessarily appropriate, or at least that this should be further nuanced. This particular attitude should be

14 URL: <http://www.icr-london.co.uk/article/architecture-and-memory-g-m-cantacuzino-a-hybrid-modernist-696.html>, accessed on 20.08.2014.

15 See also Pamela Buxton, "Zest for life - Romanian architect and polymath George Matei Cantacuzino worked against the odds to achieve variously and prolifically" (URL: <http://www.ribaj.com/culture/zest-for-life>, access date 20.08.2014)

16 Ada Hajdu, "George Matei Cantacuzino și modernismul mediteranean" [George Matei Cantacuzino and the Mediterranean modernism] in *Di suo' maniera e di suo' aria. Studii în onoarea Ancăi Oroveanu* [Di suo' maniera e di suo' aria. Studies in the honour of Anca Oroveanu], ed. Ruxandra Demetrescu et al. (Bucharest: UnArte, 2012), 118-129.

acknowledged as a common one towards modernism which becomes a regional, Mediterranean phenomenon, implying that GMC's merit was merely to disseminate it nation-wide. Perhaps the most important observation regarding Ada Hajdu's analysis remains her constant comparison and references between the architect's theory and his mentor's, professor Umbdenstock at the Ecole de Beaux Arts.

The villas from Eforie Nord become the object of research in this paper, the discourse focusing mainly on this segment of GMC's architecture. The author draws a parallel between vernacular architecture and an ancestral harmony that governs interwar architecture, these villas including. Thereby Ada Hajdu retraces the roots of modernism back to vernacular architecture; hence this regional architecture viewed in European context becomes another face of the pan-European modernist phenomenon.

In my opinion, the documented and skillfully defended discourse of Ada Hajdu's essay shows exactly how an ampler perspective, which exceeds the borders of our local Romanian architecture and cultural manifestations, can highlight in what degree GMC influenced local culture by acting both as an extrinsic factor of local change and as part of a greater regional movement.

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