



**Locuirea între proiect
și decizie politică.
România 1954-1966**

Miruna Stroe

S I M E T R I A

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Housing, between Design and Political Decision-making.

Romania, 1954-66

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Post-war Europe responded to the general housing crisis by consolidating mass production of buildings in both capitalist and socialist-driven economies. Although originating in Western architectural culture, collective housing quickly became a symbol of socialist society and a tool for constructing new kinds of communities. Today, in almost every Romanian town, the same blocks of flats dominate the urban landscape. The childhood stories of an entire generation took place in these scanty spaces, looking outdoor through the same identical windows that were industrially produced and seeing the same identical type-projects that were circulated in the Soviet Bloc.

Dwelling during the communist regime proves to be one of the most important lived memories for most of the Romanian people. This is something that one can relate to in subjective terms and, of course, something that strongly influenced one's perception of space and idea of home. Moreover, the way in which apartments were designed and experienced during this most prolific construction period of the regime, and the huge impact they continue to have on a big segment of the Romanian population, constitute both an important and a very emotional contemporary topic. However, at the time of their construction as well as today, people knew very little about the spaces they live in. From this point of view, the main quality of this volume is to shed an objective light on this important, but insufficiently discussed subject. Dwelling is a matter that not only concerns architects, administrations or state governments, but the inhabitants, who need to better understand the mechanisms that lead to the building of their homes.

The volume is also a critical review of the interaction between housing production and governmental strategies during communist times, underlining the main political moments and their specificities within the Soviet Bloc. The coherent and solid research conducted by Miruna Stroe brings forward unpublished documents from the Archives of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, placing them in the general context and rewriting the 1954-1966 segment of Romania's architectural history. Prefacing Miruna Stroe's book, Professor Zahariade's foreword positions this research in the broader field of recent historiography and marks out how politics and the profession interconnect at the normative and institutional level. This space of interaction is one of a "double translation"¹ of the message and it brings a fascinating and new perspective on the topic.²

The book is structured following the key historical and political moments, clearly delineating for each of them the architectural and urban consequences: the unofficial post-1954 de-Stalinization associated with a critical assessment of the principles of Socialist Realism and of the Soviet models, then the 1958 political turning point that liberalized the repressive policies and authorized an "unnamed modernism" close to the International Style³ and, finally, the mid-1960s, that witness the

1 Miruna Stroe, *Locuirea între proiect și decizie politică. România 1954-1966 [Housing, between Design and Political Decision-making. Romania, 1954-66]* (Bucharest: ed. Simetria, 2015), 150.

2 Ana Maria Zahariade, "Prefață. Descifrări în palier intermediar" ["Foreword. Interpretations in an intermediary level"], in Stroe, *Housing*, 11.

3 The author significantly calls it "the unnamed modernism", using this memorable wording to underline the regime's censorship and the discrete architectural change, Stroe, *Housing*, 92.

consolidation of Ceaușescu's power and prefigured a desynchronization of Romanian architecture as to the Western context. Considering this interval, if 1954 is clearly a strong temporal limit, represented by Khrushchev's speech, the choice of the year 1966 as an end point for the research seems at first less convincing. Yet, the author explains that temporal limits are fluid precisely because of the complicated mechanisms of interaction between the normative and professional levels, over a period that, as the introduction reveals, is plagued by "the permanent provisionality of architecture".⁴

The author deliberately chooses methods of investigation that reduce the risk of subjectivity often involved in the critical assessment of this contested period – and this is one of the merits of the volume: "The way I found to make it possible to preserve the objectivity of this study was, far from being intuitive, deeper research into the mechanisms that determined the architectural solution in the period in question, namely political and consequently legislative factors".⁵ Cautiously, the author avoids generalizations and simplifications and chooses to scientifically present the facts in their complicated and tortuous appearance, at times using rhetorical questions instead of conclusions.⁶ This strategy comes with certain risks: sticking to the academic approach, the research remains a bit scholarly and arid. The simplification of the academic language and some overviews of the historical situation would have helped the non-architect public to participate more fully in the account of this "adventure".

Indicative of both the application of type-projects throughout the country and the capability of the regime to pursue a better life for their citizens, the housing program dominated the architectural practice of the period. The ensuing homogeneous housing stock illustrated the consistency of architectural politics countrywide, characterized by functionalism, mass production, and prefabrication. The analysis of collective housing implied a constant zooming out — zooming in perspective, from the level of the dwelling unit to the city, in order to provide the most comprehensive image: it thus offers the reader a general picture of the transformation of the Romanian cities during the 1960s.

As the author underlines, the production performance was evaluated in quantitative terms. The sensorial, formal or social aspects of architecture had no measurable value, and therefore had little relevance to the design decisions, except maybe for a few one-off projects, more important from the point of view of the political authority. From this perspective, the text could have been enriched by a more experiential approach of the phenomenon of dwelling production of the period.

Analyzing a segment of the collective housing history under communism also implied scrutinizing the transformation of the life of the profession, its conditionings and its limitations, but also its successes. As Professor Zahariade puts it, "[...] although it deals only with one architectural program, housing [...], a great part of what Miruna Stroe describes has a larger validity for architecture under communism. The author aims at writing a history of reasons and of the people who produced these forms: I would call it *une histoire raisonnée* of housing design".⁷ From this perspective, another quality of this research is that it includes paper architecture into the general history of architecture during communism. In fact, in order to convey the real attitudes and desires of architects, information about the competitions and the non-built projects are extremely helpful. Intelligently blending primary and secondary sources for documentation, the author accurately describes the novel position of the architects, emphasizing the lack of professional freedom and the decline of the architect's social status under the communist regime. The political preference for typified, standardized, and mass-produced buildings left the architects little room for autonomy, creativity and specificity in design. The challenge that the architects faced within these limitations is finely depicted in the book. Under the anonymity of the designs, the state-run design institutes often hid an absence of architectural input. On the other hand, the restricted palette of building elements and spaces could be at times creatively used, as it happened with professor Alifanti's theoretical reflection and proposals.

4 Zahariade, "Foreword", 13.

5 Stroe, *Housing*, 14.

6 *Ibid.*, 39.

7 *Ibid.*, 10.

The author reveals and details the ways in which certain Western ideas were successfully reflected in the Romanian architectural theory and practice. The disparities with Western architecture diminish after 1958 and, to make this point, the author singles out the few moments when local ideas became attune with international ones: Professor Peter Derer's discourse on urban planning in accord with Christopher Alexander's theories;⁸ the critical text published by Professor Mihail Caffé,⁹ containing some ideas similar to Kenneth Frampton's critical regionalism;¹⁰ the main design principles applied in Western architecture and urban planning, also followed in Romania (the Athens Charter, Clarence Perry's theory on the neighborhood unit etc.). Deepening this research, a comparison with the situation in the other Soviet bloc countries may help to further the understanding of the "socio-spatial solutions" developed under communism in the 1960s Romania.

The images, tables, graphics and especially the excerpts from the National Archives are also highlights of the book, making it more appealing to the general public, consolidating the understanding of the hard facts and allowing other formats of reading and understanding. Hence, the subject presents a great interest for an academic researcher coming from other disciplines such as economy, politics, sociology, visual arts, etc. The suggestive visual material (original plans, sections and photographs) enhances the argument of the text. Perhaps the investigation is focused too much on the *Arhitectura* collection of articles and on its images,¹¹ extracted from the archives of the Union of Architects of Romania. However, this may be explained by the fact that *Arhitectura* was the most important publication of the profession in the communist period.¹²

The black and white atmosphere of the book, associated with the epoch's expressions found in the numerous quotes immediately immerses the reader into the past. There is a permanent contrast between the arid professional jargon, used in the period, and the contemporary language and interpretations. This constant juggling between then and now gives both the measure of the author's objectivity and a certain truthfulness to the epoch's historiography. Miruna Stroe plays the role of the dispassionate, but tenacious detective that registers meaningful voices coming from different domains and times: the interpretation of historical documents, the memories of the then-active professionals, the annexes where the most relevant political meetings are transcribed, etc.

Miruna Stroe brilliantly represents the "new wave" of researchers of Romania's recent and controversial history, as it is stressed by cultural figures such as Ana Maria Zahariade, Vintilă Mihăilescu or Alexandru Beldiman. Her argumentation is sharp, clear, and balanced, her voice is calm and composed, her tone reveals no accusations, lamentations or frustrations. These are encouraging in the hysterical climate of the post-communist world. At a different level, the book may have a distressing impact precisely because they call on the reader to judge for himself and to draw the uneasy conclusions on collective housing built in the 1960s Romania. What was it like to live in these spaces? What is it like today? To what extent did their design change lives? This story needs a follow-up. Or several.

Editors' note

In 2016, this book has received the Best Book of Architecture Prize, awarded by the Chamber of Architects of Romania, and the Best Book of Architecture Prize, awarded by the Union of Architects of Romania at the National Biennale of Architecture.

8 Ibid., 123.

9 Ibid., 60.

10 Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance", in *Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).

11 *Arhitectura R.P.R.* [*Architecture in the People's Republic of Romania*], subsequently *Arhitectura*, is the Union of Architects of Romania's magazine.

12 In this sense, it is worth mentioning that Miruna Stroe was part of a larger research team that organized, edited, and disseminated the photographic archive of the Union of Architects of Romania's (UAR). The research project was coordinated by Ana Maria Zahariade and Irina Tulbure-Moldovan.