

# MARTOR



---

Title: "The Material Culture of the Postsocialist City. A Success/Failure Perspective"

Author: Șerban Văetiși

How to cite this article: Văetiși, Șerban. 2011. "The Material Culture of the Postsocialist City. A Success/Failure Perspective". *Martor* 16: 81-95.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-16-2011/>

---

*Martor* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review) is a peer-reviewed academic journal established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. *Martor* review is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Its aim is to provide, as widely as possible, a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for scientific, educational and (in)formational goals. Any use aside from these purposes and without mentioning the source of the article(s) is prohibited and will be considered an infringement of copyright.

*Martor* (Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain) est un journal académique en système *peer-review* fondé en 1996, qui se concentre sur l'anthropologie visuelle et culturelle, l'ethnologie, la muséologie et sur le dialogue entre ces disciplines. La revue *Martor* est publiée par le Musée du Paysan Roumain. Son aspiration est de généraliser l'accès vers un riche contenu au plus haut niveau du point de vue académique et éditorial pour des objectifs scientifiques, éducatifs et informationnels. Toute utilisation au-delà de ces buts et sans mentionner la source des articles est interdite et sera considérée une violation des droits de l'auteur.

*Martor* is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.

# The Material Culture of the Postsocialist City. A Success/Failure Perspective



**Șerban Văetiși**

*Șerban Văetiși is a PhD Lecturer at the Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj, Romania.*

## ABSTRACT

The article deals with how one's success or failure is constructed and appears in relation with the material objects and the materiality of the postsocialist city. It focuses on the Romanian city of Cluj and illustrates how new urban objects become significant elements in understanding social, economic, aesthetic and symbolic success. The analysis puts forward the notion of material change as being useful to understanding postsocialist transformations, while postulating the idea that by studying this material culture (in/of the new objects, spaces, functions and relationships in the postsocialist city) we are able to gain a good picture of and insight into these transformations. This is viewed in both a methodological and theoretical sense regarding both the general development of urban localities and the people living in Romanian cities today, with their actual or perceived, relative and erratic successes and failures. Finally, the city itself is investigated, with its success stories and failures, seen through a theorized dual 'success/failure' approach in terms of material processes and forms, as well as its appearance, perception and uses.

## KEYWORDS

postsocialist city, material culture, urban transformation, Cluj-Napoca, success/failure



## I. Urban materialities: the objects, structures and changes of the postsocialist city

*“The look of things and the way they work are inextricably bound together, and in no place more so than cities.  
—Jane Jacobs*

**W**hen I first visited a newly opened shopping mall in Cluj some three years ago, I was impressed by the brightness, cleanliness and freshness everywhere, the happy customers who were shopping or simply wandering around, and the comfort and safety that the huge store and its parking lot provided. It was clearly a big achievement and success story for the city, its inhabitants and visitors. A Western atmosphere pervaded.

This is surely an experience people in many postsocialist countries have had over the past two decades. However, this experience is not sufficient for us to understand postsocialist transformations, even if this same experience is critical to it. And the material culture exhibited at these malls requires a more subtle interpretation than is provided by the pure imagery of or fascination with shop windows and the fancy products they contain. There are many other experiences relating to the construction of suburban malls and spending one's money and time there; and there are many other material objects related to the recent developments in postsocialist cities that need to be assessed.

There already exists a significant corpus of studies and research on the postsocialist city, and some of these have considered such developments as being visible in the crea-

tion of (more or less) impressive businesses, structures, or new urban areas and amenities (such as shopping malls, new residential districts, high-rise buildings, parking lots, renewed public space, refurbished parks and new urban furniture) that represent economic, social, aesthetic and symbolic success. At the same time, many buildings located in central areas, residential neighborhoods or

former industrial districts are continuing to deteriorate, many starting to resemble urban blight; businesses in the city are failing on a weekly basis; many public space areas and monuments look truly dilapidated; and the shoddy and deteriorated materials that create many urban areas transmit an image of poorly maintained and abandoned spaces.

1. Mall scene
2. Derelict building in the city center.



It turns out that there is good reason to study these *urban materialities* after socialism – not only because the postsocialist city is a space of dramatic change, but also because it can provide relevant *images* and *insights* about the way in which postsocialist transformations tend to occur, with their good and bad sides.

In this article I consider the changing material culture of cities as a relevant aspect of understanding broader phenomena, from the aesthetic to the social, of the urban transformations of postsocialist cities. New forms, new buildings, new materials, new colors etc. denote new properties, new institutions, new relationships, new concerns. These need to be described and deciphered in order to be integrated (for example, with the *old* city's objects and formations) and properly understood in terms of the current economic, social, cultural and political changes.

The *postsocialist city* has mostly been studied in comparison with the *socialist* (and in some cases *pre-modern*) city (as a contrasting political-economic regime, as transition, and development) and the *Western capital-*

*ist city* (as a theoretical model in terms of its functioning, politics and culture) (see for example Andrusz, Harloe and Szelenyi, 1996; Tsenkova and Nedović-Budić, 2006; Stanilov, 2007). Both kinds of studies have sought to address the processes, transformations, differences, etc., while interpreting the distinctive patterns of ideologizing, developing and using the city. I argue here that we can research a good part of these features and produce further interpretations in terms of *the material culture of the postsocialist city*. The new urban objects and spaces, together with the new relationships and attitudes they instill in people, constitute a remarkably informative and visual corpus of data that the majority of postsocialist cities exhibit. They reflect, among other things, success and failure in a striking and direct, yet subtle and complex way.

I will dwell here less on the economic and political aspects of postsocialist urban transformation and more on the visual and material elements that ultimately form, illustrate and produce these transformations. This approach is not only descriptive, but also interrogative,

and provides some methodological and theoretical advantages, as I will exemplify further.

I will therefore focus on *urban forms and formations* in the sense of the relational and processual materialization of urban settings and life (notably theorized in the case of postsocialist Central East European cities by Stanilov in 2007). That is, the very spaces and objects (from the urban tissue to street objects, such as monuments, cars, benches, barriers etc., and from public space to various types of structures and buildings), with their spatial appropriation and functionality, as active elements of structuring social relations and change. I further suggest that through this approach we are able to critically understand not only the quality of the built environment or urban space (in terms of architecture and urbanism), but also the new inequalities and segregations produced through these new forms and formations in a social, economic, symbolic and cultural sense.

Literally, the materiality of the city refers to “the physical things, objects, and structures that give urban space its shape and substance: those things encountered and used in myriad ways as part of the everyday lives of urban dwellers” (Latham *et al.*, 2009, p. 62). However, materialities do not simply mean ‘matter’, since the physical stuff of the city has a rich symbolic value and relentlessly affects political and socio-economic relationships. Nevertheless, materiality is visible and tangible, and highly approachable, and therefore useful for understanding experiences with

and within the city, as an inventory of significant material objects, as a transformative space or as a coherent whole.

We can trace a long history of attempts to reflect on urban space through materiality. The material form of architectural styles and patterns of building construction has been interpreted, in the archeological and anthropological traditions, as evidence of the presence and diffusion of cultural practices. This was followed by studies of historical materialism and the commodification of the urban (Harvey, 2001), and of the imbalanced material infrastructure of urban culture and political economy (Zukin, 1995; Graham, 2010). One particular means of approaching the materiality of cities is to question the practices involving the use of urban objects (such as consumption) and the direct experience with urban material things (such as particular rituals in the city) (Attfield, 2000; Miller, 2005). As regards the questions researchers on urban materiality have formulated over the last decade, two major directions of interests became prominent: how materialities reveal unequal and contested forms of urban capitalism, political ecology and security; and how a focus on everyday material geographies reveals the urban condition as practice, community, and power (Latham and McCormack, 2004; Jacobs and Smith, 2008; Graham, 2010). “At the heart of such studies is the argument that materiality is an active participant in how the experiences of urban space is made meaningful” (Latham *et al.*, 2009, p. 62).



3, Suburbanization as rupture and meaningful isolation.

4. Suburbanization as privatization and meaningful (mis)use.

Ultimately these analyses lead us toward an understanding of the very idea of *living in the city* (surrounded by these objects, continuously relating to them, and as an agency of its materiality), as suggested, for example, by Judit Bodnár in her ethnography on the changing material culture of the postsocialist city of Budapest: this is not only about transformations or replacements, renovations or creations of *objects* with their colors, shapes, places and spatializations in the city, but about a meaningful “metamorphosis of urban life” (Bodnár, 2001).

Even if we might think that the city center, with its ‘exciting life’, provides the best example for this material study, a highly illustrative example in postsocialism is in fact given by the formation of a new *suburban lifestyle* as a significant and relevant metamorphosis of urban life. This is largely based on the “conquering” of outer-city areas through appropriation (privatization), rupture (isolation) and a completely different use (misuse) of the urban space, as reflected through the overt disinterest in the neighboring surroundings, proper infrastructure, or participation in urban life.



## II. Lessons from the postsocialist suburban dream

*“While the market has diversified individual choices in terms of the available types of dwellings, work environments, shopping and leisure opportunities, many neighborhoods have witnessed the closure of community facilities and the disappearance of playgrounds and open spaces. Many of the new suburban developments lack basic public services.*  
—Kiril Stanilov

Suburban housing development in postsocialist Romanian cities has been described as a process that shares some characteristics with suburbanization in Western cities (as a specific urban phenomenon), while exhibiting some particular (postsocialist, Romanian,

local) features. These specificities were attributed to either the distinctive movements of the population, services and industries (see, for example, Benedek and Bagoly, 2005, on the example of Târgu Mureș) or to local urban settlements, practices and identities (see Petrovici and Troc, 2010, on the example of Cluj). Generally, the *socialist city* has been characterized as a compact city, having very limited if no suburbs, low social segregation and a high level of central control in terms of planning and infrastructure (Musil, 1980; Kostinsky, 2001; Stanilov, 2007). Consequently, *postsocialist* urban processes (including suburbanization and the creation of segregations and inequalities through urban developments while providing poor urban infrastructure and integration) are particularly relevant for both understanding postsocialist societies and as a contribution to general urban theory. Although we can identify a great variety of features in the postsocialist suburban phenomenon, from real estate business interests to ‘suburban aspiration’, and the reconfigurations of a city’s spatial layout to the re-distribution of public services, there are certain key elements that can provide a comprehensive image of these new suburbs, and these are inevitably related to the material culture of living in these new urban settlements.

When I recently visited the new *Bună Ziua* (“Good Day”) suburb in Cluj, I was at first distressed by the lack of sidewalks. I was walking along the highway, on a narrow dusty shoulder, reflecting on what a miserable experience it must be to have to reach one’s home on foot. The entire suburban area was made up of around six compact communities located on either side of the highway, with some scattered (and a few isolated) houses flanking the secondary routes; there was also a supermarket, a restaurant, a large hotel, some office buildings, and many empty tracts of land awaiting new development. My distress was tempered by my first impression on entering what was a nicely landscaped community with approximately 150 residential units. Located in the middle of a sloping open field, I found a well maintained area alongside a narrow road that still lacked a

sidewalk, but which had lateral, perpendicular roads running toward each flat or house. Car access was controlled by barriers, allowing access only to drivers who lived in or were visiting the semi-detached, four-storey houses situated on either side of the road.

I suffered a second bout of distress on witnessing an incident when leaving this small suburban housing complex. At the exit of the main road there were around six taxis waiting for customers (there is no public transportation connecting the community to the city) and taking up almost half of the road.

A shiny black SUV that was accelerating out of one of the side lanes was unexpectedly blocked by a less impressive looking and slower oncoming car. The young driver of the black SUV immediately thrust his head out of the window and began shouting threats and insults. The man in the smaller vehicle did not seem overly alarmed at this, and quickly got out of his car and began retaliating with insults and threats, all under the inquisitive gaze of the taxi drivers. A fight between the two residents seemed inevitable, but was eventually avoided.



5, Landscaped grounds and blocked roads in the *Bună Ziua* suburb.

6. Romanian suburban dream (*Câmpului*).

People living in these new suburbs continue to be nervous and irritated, replicating these kinds of common Romanian traffic scenes in their otherwise quiet, first-class neighborhoods. This is the result of frustrations and unfulfilled expectations, but also the new statuses and identities the suburban dwellers endeavor to prove or construct in their daily experiences and interactions. These sentiments, attitudes and processes are clearly related to the material aspects of their lives (as expressed through their material success or possession/display of status objects) as well as with their materialization through urban setting objects (suburban layout, buildings, roads, vehicles, other members of the suburban community, outside visitors).

There are many other significant features aspects of suburban living. *Bună Ziua* is not a generic or a specific suburb among postsocialist cities, Romanian cities or even in Cluj... Among the areas of Cluj we are describing

as 'suburbs', *Bună Ziua* is distinctly different from those of *Câmpului* or *Florești*, with the latter two also differing from one another. This is obviously a result of their distinctive backgrounds and conditions and the processes of their different formations over the last two decades, which need to be described and interpreted. And this is visible/possible in their materiality, and, moreover, in their critical materiality. Because, if we were to take suburbanization as "the expansion of cities on to adjoining green field sites" (Kostinsky, 2001, p. 464) then we would have no impediments in calling these areas 'suburbs'. But, if we were to continue the same definition by saying, for example, 'following an urban design based on urban planning decisions, concerted development, proper infrastructure, coherent architecture and socio-economic balance', then we would have a problem in accurately calling these areas 'suburbs' and this process 'suburban development'. This may naturally

appear to be a strict characterization or even a utopian view, since suburbs differ everywhere, first and foremost in terms of their theoretical model. The Western-type suburb (the theoretical example of suburban housing development) varies from one region to another, from one country to another, with the American suburban model probably the most referenced, and British and French suburban growth differing considerably. Again, this provides a good methodological argument, because the various types, functionalities, aesthetics, etc. are visible in their materiality, which is suited to a material culture study approach that also pays much attention to the different cultures in which these processes occur.

*Bună Ziua* certainly resembles the most American suburb (although many elements are missing), firstly because it is located in an area on the edge of the city with no previous street layout, but also because it uses a relatively unitary housing design. *Câmpului* and *Florești*, on the other hand, are more like prolongations of peripheral neighborhood areas along an access route (*Câmpului* Street) and toward incorporating the nearest locality (*Florești* commune) by occupying undeveloped tracts of land – generally former pasture land and agricultural fields. These latter two areas have a very chaotic street layout, very poor infrastructure and a disorienting variety of houses in terms of shape, height, color, alignment, grouping, density and architecture.

All three areas were developed during the real estate boom that took place roughly between 2004 and 2009, albeit some houses al-

ready began to be built there immediately after 1990. Given the successive periods in which these tracts of land were purchased and building regulations that were unclear, lacking or abused by influential businessmen and politicians, an individual (even ego-centric) and erratic arrangement of land prevails that lacks any unitary vision of the built environment and has poor access roads, poor waste management and poor public services. As a result, we can observe areas with a very high density of built structures, with a corresponding detrimental effect on the privacy of those living there and the amount of sunlight available to them, mixed with large stretches of land occupied by mansions with large rear gardens surrounded by opaque fences. Most part of the energy and resources used in the construction process, not to mention actually living in these buildings (both detached and semi-detached houses, as well as small blocks of flats), were consumed in a sort of competition: the larger, more ‘groomed’, more colorful one’s house, and the more expensive the details and decorative materials, the better. Interest in common facilities, such as infrastructure, parks or public spaces, was essentially absent. This had some almost absurd consequences, including individual sewage disposal and septic systems in the absence of (and lack of interest in building) a public system that could be connected to the existing city system (e.g. in the *Câmpului* suburb); the lack (after 20 years) of proper access routes, some of which consist of narrow, unpaved streets that are still used by builders’ trucks, look like country roads, and

7, High-density development, incoherent urbanism, ugly architecture, and poor infrastructure in *Câmpului*.



8. Gated community in *Florești*.



are covered in dust and mud, making it difficult for residents to keep their cars and shoes clean (*Câmpului* and *Florești*); the preference for gates, tall fences and even gated communities (*Florești* and *Bună Ziua*) in order to mark the more coveted ‘territories’; or the straightforward rejection of municipality proposals to improve their living conditions (such as the refusal of proprietors in the *Bună Ziua* suburb to concede a small strip of land on edge of their property so that a sidewalk along the highway could be built from public funds).

As we can see from these examples and many others, we find a strong preference for (marked) individuality and individualism in understanding residence and living conditions in postsocialism; a lifestyle clearly oriented toward competition and the desire to have something more/better/expensive/coveted; and, ultimately, a highly contradic-

tory understanding of *success*, evident on at least two levels: the discrepancies between the nice (improved) interiors and the ugly (neglected) exteriors of many of these dwellings, and the incongruity between the idea of success (subjectively understood in terms of having moved into one of these new suburbs, into one’s own apartment or house) and the failure of these housing developments (at the level of the city, in terms of urbanism, architecture, infrastructure and social relations).<sup>1</sup> This is in fact not as paradoxical as it seems if we take into consideration various cultural specificities of these people, how they related to previous experiences of living in collective blocks of flats during socialism in an economy characterized by shortage and uniformity, and how they envisioned their high living standards or ‘dream house’ in relation to personal expectations and later disillusionments.

1) The project behind the Romanian participation in the 12<sup>th</sup> International Architecture Biennale in Venice, called *Superbia*, analyzed many of the aspects commented on here. The catalog (Aldea et al., 2010) which ▶



9, From grey to colorful; from cold to warm. A ‘communist’ block of flats undergoing refurbishment and thermal insulation.

10. Appropriated space in a working-class neighborhood. Materials that reflect success: metal fences, wild flowers, chrome railings, tiled stairs, thermopane glass, self-adhesive window signs.

Methodologically and theoretically speaking, the materiality and the material culture of these suburbs provides us with a very clear understanding of how these suburban houses and their surroundings actually look, function, differ, and are used in practice and involved in a series of other materialities or discourses, starting from very basic knowledge. For example, much recent research and debate on these new postsocialist suburbs asked whether they can be properly called suburbs, bearing in mind the Western models, as already discussed, but also the significant disfunctionalities that define them. Some preferred to call them pe-

ripheries or simply residential developments, avoiding recognition of their suburban character. Others invoked more specific phrases, from the neutral ‘housing districts’ to the ‘post-socialist neighborhood’, or from ‘colonization’ of the outer edge of the city to ‘urban satellites’ – each stressing a particular aspect of the formation and utilization of these areas: e.g. the migration process, reaffirmed individualism, escape from the communist block/district, a particular cult of the natural and the rustic, the privatization of space, etc., or a combination thereof. These various different names clearly illustrate a *contradictory understanding of ‘success’* (frequently accom-

1) ▶ accompanied the exhibition brought together anthropological and visual research that is useful for a further understanding of the issues considered here, including the opinions of the new suburban dwellers. In support of my argument I would mostly note the way in which materially this personal success story/overall urban failure was ▶



1) ► visualized. In this sense, the metaphor of the foam, translating the “spontaneous, inventive but also chaotic, individualistic and materialist features of these urban satellites” resembling the “individualized cells spilled in a spontaneous way” (*ibid.*, p. 17, see also <http://www.foo00000am.com>) is certainly very suggestive and visual.



panied by a number of features that actually define them as ‘failures’, at least in terms of urbanism and architecture), while opening up a discussion of what needs to be investigated in order to evaluate these materializations of success/failure.

I will develop and exemplify this approach at the intersection of *visual studies*, *material culture studies*, *cultural anthropology* and *urban studies* in the next section by addressing the issue of success/failure in the postsocialist city in more detail.

### III. Success/failure and the postsocialist city

“Compared with socialist cities, which had more or less planned economic and administrative profiles as part of a grand schema for the state’s allocation of resources and functions, each post-socialist city now has to compete with all other cities for inward capital investment, consumers and tourists. [...] Other aspects of the post-socialist city may be described as epi-phenomenal: monuments, museums and place names fall into this category. Their study can serve as a guide to understanding deeper processes, one of which is the ‘mallification’ of the post-socialist city.  
—Gregory Andrusz

The idea of *success* is conceptualized in many writings on postsocialist change already found in the general discourses on ‘transition’, which is frequently understood as a ‘success story’ to be emulated leading towards capitalism and democracy. Thus “the success of the transition process in the region” is seen in relation to democratization, decentralization and the market economy, including the idea of transforming the former socialist cities into global economic and political competitors/partners of global capital (Hamilton et al., 2005; Tsenkova, 2006). In a similar sense, ‘development’ is mostly interpreted as ‘success’, since constructing

something new, higher and cleaner, with better construction materials and amenities for economically/politically/socially successful businesses, institutions or people is, in its simplest form, understood as success. Nevertheless, much research on postsocialist cities has shown that cities and societies actually undergo a critical economic, social and cultural change that negatively affects millions of people. For example, economic restructuring followed by unemployment has improved the relative situation of a few, while worsening the condition of many. Or, on another level, many historical buildings remained in a state of disrepair because of restrictive property and restitution laws that obstructed the implementation of public projects out of individual interests. At the same time, the overall appearance, structure and functioning of many cities suggests a lack of proper investment and bad management. Generally, we can admit that many urban problems of the postsocialist city (from poor infrastructure to social issues) are more suggestive of failure, although significantly more success stories are reported than was the case before the 1990s. But these are more personal or subjective perceptions of success than labels applicable to an entire housing complex, street, neighborhood or city. I would therefore firstly suggest that it is the *personal, subjective* perception of success that prevails in postsocialist cities and that in many cases this is either *hidden* from view, as in the case of the “nice interiors” people create in disrespect for the exterior place and space, or is relentlessly *exhibited* by showing off fancy possessions, such as luxury cars, branded clothing, expensive accessories, and the latest gadgets. There are, however, some semi-private intermediary spaces where we can find expressions of a personal yet public sense of success, such as the “trimmed spaces” (Mihăilescu, 2011) people create in their immediate surroundings (the small garden plot adjacent to their apartment blocks, balconies, hall entrances, backyards, nearby abandoned open spaces) with the purpose of creating a sense of order, identity, even resistance and appropriation (in this respect these practices are surprisingly similar

to graffiti). And this is a way in which people who are not all that successful (poor retired people, the unemployed, neighbors who

spend the day hanging around in the street or around the block) express their belonging to a community and ultimately to the city.



11. Postsocialist housing architecture: free standing, neglectful of its surroundings, expressing success through aggressive colors, shapes and materials.

12. Ironies of postsocialist success: youth fashion, latest trends, clever discounts – all brought together on the facades of the old, unfashionable, unsellable communist blocks of flats.

In attempting to systematize the sources and dimensions of success in the postsocialist city, I would say that some of these are conceptualized in terms of ‘satisfaction’, ‘comfort’, ‘happiness’, ‘gratification’, these being the primary illustrative terms invoked by those who have achieved something or perceive an achievement in their lives: a new house, a new car, the possibility to purchase coveted products, the ability to improve their home. Another category refers to ‘professional recognition’, ‘prestige’, ‘symbolic superiority’ in terms of ‘financial/economic success’, including the possibility and/or ability to control resources, manipulate others, be ‘all-important’, loved or a key person in various positions or affairs. As we can see, according to these categorizations, ‘success’ is not only personal, subjective and irregularly performed; it is also relative to the various positions found in a complex set of relationships. And these structurations, embodiments and relationships of ‘success’ are highly visible at the level of urban life and urban material culture and its transformations.

In this sense, living in a postsocialist suburb may be considered a big success by residents who recently moved there, but, at the same time, a significant failure in terms of urbanism, architecture, infrastructure and social life. For a new resident, for example, to live in a top-rated gated community is a symbol of prestige, whereas for the general social

relations of the city it is a critical urban issue, expressing isolation, segregation, lack of interest and participation, symbolic and actual distance from the city’s life and affairs, and an absence from its public culture.

Thus, I would say that the ‘paradigm of success’ in interpreting urban life and urban culture is effectively useless, since ‘success’ is almost always accompanied by a form of ‘failure’ due to its relative, but also subjective, irregular manifestation and inconstant character and expression. In time, or after some negative experiences of their new suburban lifestyle, these same residents may perceive their decision to move to the new suburbs as being less successful (precisely because of the poor infrastructure, limited social life, isolation, etc.), even if they do not wish to admit it. As we can see, *success* is relative and unstable in a more complex way.

Accordingly, we need to understand that it is not only ‘success’ that is subject to change but also the materiality (and the material culture and physical objects) that act as its vehicle and appear as its very expression. As a real estate developer in the new suburb of *Florești* explained to me: “I built this playground only to attract customers, to show that this is a welcoming place for their children, a well-maintained place... but after selling all the vacant apartments I plan to raze the playground and build a new block on the site. (C.B.)”

13. Transitory success in the suburbs: playground in Florești awaiting demolition.



14. Casual success in the city center: various bodily relationships with the bank and financial buildings.



That success is relative, erratic and subjective may sound like a truism (after all, even the sentiment of adaptation to city life can be considered by some a success, which is clearly subjective). Nevertheless, as in the case of adaptation, there are some objective, observable and materialized elements and aspects. In this sense, despite being relative, ‘success’ and ‘failure’ are comprehensive (particularly because they are also material) and even ‘structural’, as will I now explain. Firstly, even though ‘success’ and ‘failure’ are subjective categories, they are materialized in settings, buildings, construction materials, various objects and embodiments, etc., while the abovementioned inconsistencies, dualities or confusions can in fact be seen as continuing less abstract dualities, such as, for example, those analyzed by Ioana Tudora (Tudora, 2009: 58 *et passim*) in the case of houses in Bucharest: *old/new, ugly/beautiful, small/big, dirty/clean*, and even *different/alike* (*id.*, p. 63). In this analysis the ‘aesthetic confusions’ (i.e. considering a house ugly only because it is small or poorly maintained, etc.) are clearly imbedded in the subjective and relative structure of *failure/success*.

Secondly, and in light of the analysis so far, I prefer to adopt the conjoint perspective of ‘failure/success’ or ‘failure?/success?’ instead of talking about ‘success’ or ‘failure’, not only because of the indecision and ambivalence in judging and interpreting many situations, but also because of the utility of this ‘paradigm’ when interpreting various postsocialist urban expressions.

The ‘mallification’ and the ‘touristifica-

tion’ of the postsocialist city referred to by Gregory Andrusz in the above motto (Andrusz, 2006, pp. 87–88) constitute not only two processes through which postsocialist urban transformations can be assessed, but also two perspectives that can further illustrate this success/failure approach. I will now look at the ‘consumerist’ aspect of success in postsocialism, followed, in the concluding section, by the ‘touristic’ aspect.

The construction of large shopping malls on the outskirts of cities is clearly related not just to suburbanization, but also to a new attitude and behavior that became characteristic of both suburban dwellers and the rest of the city’s dwellers, especially the young: namely the internalization of a consumerist perspective on their urban lives and urban identities. Thus, ‘success’ was increasingly interpreted in terms of the possibility to purchase, possess and show off the products advertised and made available by the new malls, from clothing to cars, while a successful urban identity was understood as a consumer keeping up with the latest products and fashionable brands. Noticeably, many people react to this behavior and these identities by refusing (or claiming to refuse) to behave in this way and even resisting consumerism through forms of alternative consumption, including, for example, choosing (no less fashionable) ‘casual’, vintage or do-it-yourself clothing and accessories. Again, this is a good illustration of the subjective, relative and contradictory characteristics of success as discussed above, since these latter cases are also examples of success among particular urbanite identities.



Yet consumer goods are not isolated objects in the city, because this form of appropriation and resistance is ultimately directed towards recommended/contested spaces, while particular and symbolic places, marked areas or emblematic public objects (such as parks, monuments, institutions, bars, street corners, etc.) or transit zones are frequented or avoided in the sense of consuming urban spaces as a form of identity, status, prestige, etc. As we can see, this distinction can be seen as continu-

ing the structural distinctions of bad/good, ugly/beautiful, gross/cool, failure/success analyzed above in a more subtle way and in a far broader sense than the obvious materiality of the houses and suburban/urban living. In fact, cars, clothing, accessories, places, signs and markings, even bodies are no less meaningful objects of material culture than houses, since they represent a significant part of daily urban life and elements that define urban spatializations, relationships, imagery and values.



15. Pedestrians experiencing difficulty finding their way and place in an increasingly narrow urban agglomeration of cars, buildings, businesses and signs in a working-class neighborhood.

16. Urban scene in the city center. Human bodies, cars, buildings, avenues, activities as interchanging actors and scenes of getting by in the city.

*Consumption* appears to be an unambiguous factor in this representation, since it is clearly expressed at the crossroads of purchasing rituals and material use (in a more or less abstract sense, from consuming spaces to utilizing city resources) and perceived and symbolic success. Nevertheless, consumption forms part of a more complex framework of economic, socio-psychological and cultural-historical determinants that clarify many characteristic processes of the postsocialist city.

Recently, a new discount 'family store' was built, in the *Mănăştur* neighborhood in Cluj, that replaced a bar right in front of a bus station where people used to meet, talk and have a drink, especially on their way home from work. In a neighborhood once famous for its industrial worker residents, deindustrialization and economic restructuring meant fewer workers were going home by bus, and fewer and fewer people using the bar, so much so that in recent years it became der-

elict and was eventually demolished. Since the bar was a place of socialization for the community, its demolition was highly symbolic moment in terms of the destruction of a particular way of life, identity and sociability in the neighborhood. As I was able to observe, this moment was replicated through dozens of other closures and refurbishments, especially in the period 2005–2010, with many small bars on street corners being shut down, razed or renovated. These were either replaced by fancy, expensive restaurants that were not welcoming to or affordable by former customers and regular drinkers, or were transformed into new businesses, as in the case of the *Familia* discount store.

From a social point of view, this process of spatial and symbolic reconfiguration (something which affected many neighborhoods in postsocialist Romania) had a negative impact in terms of the regular meetings and sharing of opinions that created a sense of vicinity and community. From the point

of view of actual/perceived success in respect of the former workers, other residents in the neighborhood, and the urban environment, there are various interpretations that describe the subjective and relative dimensions of success and, ultimately, the failure/success paradigm of interpreting the result of these social, economic, cultural, architectural and urbanistic transformations. Is this a matter of excluding an undesirable category because they ceased to be good consumers, or is it about renovating a deteriorated structure

and ugly street corner? Is the construction of a discount store with a huge shop window filled with a chaotic array of stuffed animals, cheap gadgets, kids clothes, plastic vessels and low-priced garments really an example of success in the city? Many other similar examples serve to illustrate the same failure/success duality deeply interconnected with the subjective and relative sentiments people have about their success and the general impression created by the postsocialist cities among its observers.

17. Failure?/Success?: The *Familia* discount store in the Mănăștur district replaced a popular bar.



18. Failure?/Success?: *Magazin Hong Kong* recently appeared between two historical buildings in the city center.



One final logical element that can be invoked in this analysis is *the city itself* as a complex materiality where many other materialities, from construction materials to colors and spatial arrangements to the flow of human bodies, act as challenging and changing forces. An urban layout is surely something more durable and precise than fluctuating fashions or subjective preferences. All the same, it is involved in the same discourse of failure and success, and this is precisely because of its materiality.

We can undoubtedly ask whether a particular construction is an expression of success, no matter how subjective or relative, etc., and how this construction appears as a successful element in the overall configuration of the urban scene. Or, on a different level, how an urban object, represented by a (successful) structure, somewhere in the urban space, contributes to the success of the urban image, functionality and integration. However, the multifaceted interactions with

the urban design, local histories and other material objects around it generate a more complex response.



#### IV. Conclusions: postsocialist urban material culture and the success/failure paradigm

*“Urban theory will progress only by revisiting debates about the distinctive and excessive materiality of cities.  
—Phil Hubbard*

I proposed to take a closer look not only at how one’s success or failure is constructed in relation to the materiality and the material objects of the postsocialist city, but also at how this construction is a matter of a complicated, unstable, subjective, relative relationship. In this sense, I discussed some

theoretical and interpretive insights as to the way in which ‘success’ appears at the level of a diverse array of material objects through an analysis based on a conjoint perspective of ‘success/failure’. Let me conclude in this last section by discussing the way the *postsocialist urban materialities* provide the very subject of this perspective.

As many commentators of postsocialist transformation have noted, the big successes of the period can be observed in the successful businesses, institutions, firms and type of buildings everyone can see. For some authors, the *fast food outlets* and the *commercial banks* were the most successful businesses

post 1990 (Pascariu, 1998). To this we might add, from the same categories (consumption and finance), the small convenience stores on street corners (the *ABC store*, the *Chinese store*, the *discount store* like *Familia* in the Mănăştur neighborhood) and the *casa de amanet* (pawnshop). Other authors consider *churches* the most successful buildings of the postsocialist neighborhood, as an expression of the ‘parochial community’ that describes the postsocialist society at large (Mihali, 2009, p. 169) but also a series of mixed interests articulated together by the state, the church and the political elite in the formation of private, symbolic and political capital.



19. A successful postsocialist institution: a church under construction in a working-class neighborhood.

20. Successful ad-hoc ‘privatization’: metal fences erected by neighbors to guide/restrict access.

Significantly, it is these same ‘successful businesses’, represented by commercial, financial and religious buildings, that, in the view of these authors, negatively affect the creation and existence of *public space* and *good urbanism*, a phenomenon characterized by architectural kitsch, unfit and unfinished buildings that invade public space and green areas, block pedestrian access and produce segregation, intolerance, parochialism and unaesthetic hybridization – privatizing and controlling, prohibiting and inhibiting. Actually, many public areas, initially intended as parks, playgrounds and squares, for example, were taken over during the past 20 years by such private interests as vending stalls, gas stations, improvised garages, parking lots and parochial precincts, creating the effect of miniature enclavizations (frequently characterized by prohibition signs or metal fences).

It turns out it is not only in the new suburbs that one finds fragmentation and segregation, but also in the former working-class neighborhoods (and even city centers) that are undergoing a process of privatization and misappropriation. This is very material and visual, and provides information about functionalities, processes, appropriations, illegal acts, unaesthetic and unethical solutions, strategies and developments. Clearly, these urban materialities are expressions and embodiments of success for some, while for others they are critical examples of failure, malfunction and unattractiveness. In addition, there are surprisingly many similarities between the forms of success one finds in the suburbs and the city center, as well as between the urban problems one finds in the city center and the working-class neighborhoods.

Urban failures (revealed through their

materialities) go hand in hand with other forms of breakdown in terms of the broader urban life of a city, such as an inability to renovate and preserve historical buildings and infrastructure in the city center, to re-convert former industrial districts and factories or to integrate slums and streets inhabited by the poor. Of course, these are general

urban problems many cities in the world are confronted with today, but I merely mean to stress their local and material dimension as seen from the point of view of the success/failure paradigm and draw a conclusion about how the city as a whole can therefore be seen as a *successful* or *failed city* in respect of these kinds of issues.

21. Renovation works in the historical center (Unirii Square)



22. Tourist restaurant and handicraft souvenirs in the city center



“Successful cities” in the former socialist bloc are frequently perceived in a very superficial, economic sense, namely as municipalities successful at attracting capital through investment, tourists and development projects. In many of these cases, the successful renovation of historical buildings in the city center is seen as being beneficial for tourists and investors, who are expected to appreciate the city, visit it, consume there or open a business. As a consequence, these urban renewal programs are frequently implemented with the aim of making the center more attractive, not necessary for its inhabitants, but for outside visitors (and potential investors). This aforementioned ‘touristification’ of the city is evident in the forms and materialities of the city center, which predominantly fulfils the roles of ‘representative’ buildings, monuments, places, etc., and less the actual functions and utilities they have for the people actually *living* in the city. This idea (and strategy) of a successful city as a place attractive to tourists is best illustrated by the recent preoccupation of the Romanian government with attracting foreign capital to cities through cultural tourism. Following the same logic,

a number of Romanian cities, including Cluj, entered the competition to be awarded the title of the European Capital of Culture in 2020 (when a Romanian city will be designated this status). But with so much interest in ‘culture’ and ‘representativeness’ in the city’s historic center, many other aspects may be overlooked, especially in the less central areas and in terms of ‘less important’ materialities and socio-cultural categories.

In the end, it is the city itself that will be judged as being a success or failure in respect of such issues – generally neglected when we talk about personal success – as housing, public transportation, new developments, heritage preservation, inter-ethnic tensions, public services, green areas, and architecture, etc. As shown in this article, however, in many cases the success stories (from individual economic successes to successful urban projects) and urban failures (from urban decay to bad urbanism) are inseparable or are part of a dual characteristic of the same reality. And this is not only *reflected* in the material forms and processes of the postsocialist cities: it also *reflects* how people living there are affected and perceive their lives in the city.

## Bibliography

- Aldea, Silviu et al.: *Superbia* (Catalog al Pavilionului Național al României, a 12-a Bială Internațională de Arhitectură, Veneția/Romanian National Pavilion, 12th International Architecture Biennale, Venice), Institutul Cultural Român, 2010.
- Andrusz Gregory, Michale Harloe, Ivan Szelenyi, eds.: *Cities after Socialism. Urban and Regional Change and Conflict in Post-Socialist Societies*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1996.
- Andrusz, Gregory: 'Wall and Mall: A Metaphor for Metamorphosis', in Sasha Tsenkova, Zorica Nedović-Budić, eds., *The Urban Mosaic of Post-Socialist Europe. Space, Institutions, and Policy*, Physica-Verlag, Heidelberg, 2006, pp. 71–90.
- Attfield, Judy: *Wild Things. The Material Culture of Everyday Life*, Berg, 2000.
- Benedek Jozsef; Bagoly Peter: 'Procesul de suburbanizare din România. Studiu de caz, zona suburbană a municipiului Târgu Mureș', *Studia UBB, Geographia* no. 1, 2005, pp. 118–126.
- Bodnár, Judit: *Fin de Millenaire Budapest. Metamorphoses of Urban Life*, University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- Graham, Stephen: *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism*, London, Verso, 2010.
- Hamilton F.E. Ian, Kaliopa Dimitrovska Andrews, and Nataša Pichler-Milanović, eds.: *The Transformation of Cities in Central and Eastern Europe: Towards Globalization*, United Nations University, 2005
- Harvey, David: *The Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*, New York, Routledge, 2001.
- Kostinskiy, Grigoriy: 'Post-Socialist Cities in Flux' in Ronan Paddison, ed., *Handbook of Urban Studies*, Sage, London, 2001, pp. 451–465.
- Latham, Alan, Derek McCormack: 'Moving Cities: Rethinking the Materialities of Urban Geographies', in *Progress in Human Geography*, December 2004, vol. 28, no. 6, pp. 701–724.
- Latham, Alan, Derek McCormack, Kim Mcnamara, Donald McNeill: *Key Concepts in Urban Geography*, London and New York, Sage, 2009.
- Mihali, Ciprian: 'În chip trecător locuiește omul. Pentru o geofilosofie', in Augustin Ioan; Ciprian Mihali: *Dublu tratat de urbanologie*, Idea Design&print, Cluj, 2009, pp. 161–171.
- Mihăilescu, Vintilă: 'Spații îngrijite', in *Urbanismul*, no. 11, 2011, pp. 54–56.
- Miller, Daniel, ed.: *Materiality*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2005.
- Musil, J.: *Urbanization in Socialist Countries*, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 1980.
- Pascariu, Gabriel: 'Agresiunea asupra spațiului public', in *Arhitex Design*, no. 7, 1998, pp. 8–9.
- Petrovici, Norbert; Gabriel Troc: 'Cartierul postsocialist. Studiu de caz asupra zonei rezidențiale din comuna Florești', paper delivered at the *New Cultures. New Anthropologies Conference* (the 7th National Conference of the Romanian Society of Cultural Anthropology), Bucharest, 24–26 September 2010.
- Stanilov, Kiril, ed.: *The Post-Socialist City. Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after Socialism*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2007
- Tsenkova, Sasha: 'Beyond Transitions: Understanding Urban Change in Post-Socialist Cities', in Sasha Tsenkova, Zorica Nedović-Budić, eds., *The Urban Mosaic of Post-Socialist Europe. Space, Institutions, and Policy*, Physica-Verlag, Heidelberg, 2006, pp. 21–51.
- Tsenkova, Sasha, Zorica Nedović-Budić, eds., *The Urban Mosaic of Post-Socialist Europe. Space, Institutions, and Policy*, Physica-Verlag, Heidelberg, 2006
- Tudora, Ioana: 'Case frumoase/case urâte în peisajul bucureștean', in Vintilă Mihăilescu, coord, *Etnografii urbane. Cotidianul văzut de aproape*, Polirom, Iași, 2009a, pp. 51–64.
- Zukin, Sharon: *The Culture of Cities*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1995.

