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Bucharest Between Istanbul and Sarajevo Radical Reconstruction as Anti-nostalgic Treatment

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Models. We are searching for models of reconstruction. Analogies, allegories, utopias. Bucharest continues to wallow, vandalized, in a state of severe waste, which the city itself cannot overpass, just as it cannot expect real help from those who caused it to implode. Among these benefactors, the „political class“ that emerged after 1989 and the architects who served it are the most to blame. The former underwent a superficial reshuffling: they either started to do business or simply dropped the inverted comas, only to exchange them for different, equally pejorative ones. The latter, too, put on some make-up: those who actually worked for the „civic“ projects of redrawing the city in a totalitarian key have grown old, but will not yield one inch of their „rightness“. Head architect Anca Petrescu is still doing successful business and gives nonchalant interviews. Many of the architects of the time (there were hundreds of them!) still keep drafts of the House of the Republic in their suitcases, as testimony to their ability to serve parvenu tastes. Having worked there is no shame, and what's more, it's assumed in a cheerful and even nostalgic spirit, as a „grand projet“ of a lifetime. There was no suspension of architect diplomas in 1990 – the country would have been deprived of her valuable architects. After all, who is to judge us? „My colleagues, the in-

tellectuals,“ as someone who truly faced condemnation believed, and whispered, terrified? But who is – to recall the Christian parable – so clean as to throw the stone first? The House of the Republic, never really put on trial, has become the House of Parliament, and therefore preserved its prestige as the Absolute Edifice of the country. The „Bucharest 2000“ International Contest of Urbanism (1995-1996) not only sanctioned this statute, but even did it with pomp and such a distinguished international participation that one finds oneself unable now to contradict, for instance, a Kenneth Frampton (President of the jury) and tell him that, besides its grotesque size, there is nothing admirable about this open-air grotto. One cannot, unless one wants to become a misfit, contradict the new „aristocracy“ – be it cultural or politic. The latter has so intimately acquiesced in the results of the contest, that it will deliberately arrest any attempt at developing the area in viable economic terms, simply because the „urbanistic“ solution the winner architect, Meinhard von Gerkan, found does not answer these criteria, and therefore is not, and simply cannot be, sellable to the big, potential investors able to save the area.

Mr. Adrian Năstase, President of the House of Deputies then, and Prime-minister now, after having moved the House of Deputies from its

historical seat on Mitropoliei Hill to the House of the Republic, threatened the jury of „Bucharest 2000“ to oppose his veto in case the solutions of the contest were to menace in any way the „House“, which, too, became „his“ in no time. Obviously, the jury was eager to comply, the taboo permeated the theme of the contest, and the solutions conformed to the theme. Or, in 2001, the first move taken by the Public Works of his Government (the Secretary of State had been the director of the 1995-1996 contest) was to suspend the whole process of institutionalizing the Bucharest 2000 Agency for Development – the economic instrument meant to draw investments into the project – as well as the ordinance that defined the town area to be developed in accordance with this project. Why did he do that? It has remained a mystery to this day, when I am writing this article (august 2001). The history of this city has a devious way of defending the zones of desert, the zones of irrationality that its own heads and the heads of the country generate from time to time within its space. The „central“ area remains an urban black hole. And it will stay so as long as those who want to maintain control over it will not entirely possess it as well.

Also, the House of the Republic has been breeding by scissiparity. We are witnesses to a boom: Bucharest is practically invaded by its charming sons: it takes only a tour (but you cannot get off the car, the hounds threaten to tear you apart and the bodyguards to shoot you dead if you at least try to take a picture) through areas like Zoo/Pipera/Iancu Nicolae or even Băneasa, on the north side of the city, or anywhere around the Snagov Lake, to grasp the dimensions of the drama. The aborted morons of the central project for a „new civic center“ are now object of the West’s dazzled admiration for what is called – by a name that wrongly sets ethnic boundaries – „Gypsy architecture“. The July 2001 issue of *Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, for instance, publishes an impressively long (as compared to the usual brevity encouraged by the

journal) cover-up by Mariana Celac on the said phenomenon, which speaks of both the author’s and the editor’s fascination with it.

The pseudo-monumental style of architecture – of complicate, because bastard, extraction – which has assailed Romania after 1989 is equally the product of instantaneous globalization and of the lack of any concern for educating young people in school in the domain of architecture and monuments. Given the absence of any term for comparison, this lack makes it possible for such a malign edifice as the House of the Republic to pass for the acme of architecture and an arbiter of taste. Yet, if there is one thing that can be safely stated as to such a geometrically unstable phenomenon, it’s that it is NOT an exclusively Rroma product. The example of the Certeze village (Oaş county), built up by Romanian emigrants on the Paris-Romania route is revealing. That indignation which swells up only when it comes to the villages of the Rroma ethnic groups is, I believe, part of the same incapacity of assuming things, which managed to play down the Turkish term *meydane* as well. It is always the „Other“, the stranger, and, if possible, the stranger who is our „inferior“, who is to blame altogether for our errors. The public and vehement demand that the president of the Romanian Academy passed at a conference of the Architects’ Society (1999), for studying ways of counteracting (why not exterminating?) the „venom called Gypsy architecture“ is, I believe, a telling instance of the same attitude.

In Romania, a „*maidan*“ (vacant ground) is the name some people use for that piece of bare, residual, often derelict land, left over after a *mahala* (slum) has drawn a space for itself along such lines as will forever elude western understanding of urbanism. I believe that our inability to assume our errors or our incapacity to have a common administration of a public space are largely proved by this Turkish word we have adopted as an umbrella term for all the „civic spaces“ we fail – the only ones we have. I find this linguistic withdrawal from, and therefore

dismissal of, our failures characteristic of the way we, as a people, think the space of dwelling together. Moreover, the common sincere belief is that *maidan* necessarily has a pejorative „field“ reference, sometimes denoting a piece of downright urbanistic trash. Elaborate theories are put forward to demonstrate that the degraded meaning of the word is not our doing, but Istanbul's fault. It is precisely against this pejorative appropriation of the Turkish term that this text will argue, since nowhere else but here *meydane* has come to mean something bad. In the Turkish language, it means square, agora or commercial fair. So, let us not find excuses for our incapacity to articulate public spaces by advancing toponymic expedients of the cheapest sort.

„Little Paris“

When we speak of the City of Lights, we are so moved to tears of admiration that we tend to turn a blind eye on the empirical reality of its illegitimate child, who can only rebut the comparison, so dear to the dreamers. I do not deny that, at the end of the too long 19th century, the will would have been to draw up a Bucharest *à la française*: architects of all degrees of competence came from there to find shelter and work here. They disfigured, by way of „reconstruction“, age-long monasteries. They brushed off inns (caravanserais) in order to make room for the small palaces and boulevards *à la manière de* Napoleon III and Hausmann. Certainly the CEC building is a worthy piece in comparison with the wretched freak that is now bossing around¹; yet, except the glass dome, it can pride itself on nothing else. And even if the intention did exist one hundred years ago, the only ambition of the 20th century was to sabotage the model. The Neo-Romanian style was anti-eclectic, too little given to the *beaux-arts*, and therefore, anti-Parisian. The inter-war period, in its modernizing passion, came with the *block-haus* and the Ford industry buildings, with the „Moorish-Flo-

rentine architecture“ (or „Romanian architecture of Spanish denomination“, as the times called it, with a sophisticated anti-Semitic taste for derision). The only French flavor there ever came with the short episode of late Corbusierianism of the '70s, which gave us the Intercontinental Hotel and the National Theatre House. But next came the demolishing era that raised the edifices of that thing called „our Versailles“ (the House of the People), where one had better avoid comparisons with the Hausmann style, if only for fear of sounding ridiculous. The project presented at the UAR contest (1991), which suggested a „grand pyramid of little Paris“ that would cover/bury in glass the House of the Republic, is already the dead service of the Parisian model as far as Bucharest is concerned. To put it bluntly, there is no „little Paris“ (any more) and there is no predictable future for it, no matter the solutions for (desired) development, or (actual) stagnation. The Parisian model has exhausted both its sources of inspiration and the reservoir of involuntary humor that the comparison with Romanian reality on either bank of Dîmbovița has too easily fuelled for so many decades now. We have now to find another model. What will that be?

Istanbul vs. Sforzinda

The model of Constantinople-Istanbul – as a model with entirely negative connotations, which would be responsible for Bucharest's slackness – is a construct of our collective imaginary, promoted particularly by those who have never been in Istanbul, yet know Paris by heart. If I were to say here that the ideal – which, because an ideal, will never be attained as long as we live – for Bucharest would be to reach at least the standard of today's Istanbul, all those people who are blinded today by the (now aberrant) term of „little Paris“ would probably feel instantaneously offended.² The preferred stance, therefore, which goes against all empirical data of yesterday and particularly of the present day, is to

believe in an improbable ideal foundation of the town, rather than to acknowledge the fact that the Bucharest urban landscape feeds on an undecidable form of urbanism, that of the Byzantine, and eventually Turkish, „City“. Here is an example to the point: the bilingual volume entitled *București, un oraș între Orient și Occident (Bucharest, a City Between Orient and Occident)*, the doctoral thesis of late researcher Dana Harhoiu, recently published in a second edition (2001) by Simetria Publishing House. The book, which I reviewed when it was first published (and I'm afraid I was the only one who noticed more than the attractive graphical presentation), tries not only to give an account of the state of urbanistic research on Bucharest, but, most importantly, to promote a new understanding of the capital's development. I will not dwell here on the impressive and well-structured amount of information the author used, nor will I insist on the scientific quality of the images: maps, period documents, photographs of different historical stages of monuments that still exist or of others that have been engulfed by the mess around. This has been done, more or less skillfully, by the reviewers who preceded me, in the *Arhitext* journal, for instance. (Incidentally, I would make a note of the quasi-total lack of serious commentaries on books of architecture in Romanian mass media. The art critics will not take such books into consideration, God knows why, and among the architects, unfortunately, there are no serious reviewers who know how to write and do not engage in personal arguments with the authors...)

What I intend to discuss here is precisely the viability of the central thesis of the book, which is also its innovating contribution. The author proposes the hypothesis of a Bucharest-ideal city, organized around such geometrical principles that derive from sacred fundamentals. The hypothesis is three-fold: 1) The sacred seats of Bucharest would be disposed in a radial concentric fashion around an *omphalos*, in our case the Old St. George Church; 2) this „navel of the

city“ is the angle point of a matrix composed of Old St. George / Mihai Vodă monastery / the Patriarchal Seat / Radu Vodă monastery. The axis uniting the Patriarchal Seat and Old St. George would be the bisector of the angle formed by Mihai Vodă-*omphalos*-Radu Vodă and would be continued by the most important commercial road that begins in Moldavia and goes all the way down to the southern border of Wallachia – Calea Moșilor; 3) generally speaking, Bucharest would have been founded according to an ideal pattern, just like Filarete's: a „mandalic“ pattern, a circle circumscribing two squares at a 45 degrees angle from one another.

Were it true (but the author does not support it with sufficiently convincing evidence), the theory of Bucharest's ideal geometry would have, besides a number of serious researchers, who would be interested to debate, continue and systematize it, at least two types of unwanted „supporters“: those obsessed with synchronicity, who – while up-turning the complex of the small culture into a sort of ideological-nationalist exhibitionism – will use it as yet another proof of our European „connection“; and, on the other hand, those too easily fascinated by all sorts of esoteric mystification, who will have Bucharest pass as *the latest* ideal Jerusalem descended on the banks of Dîmbovița and the House of the Republic as the expression of the Temple.

I'm afraid that, methodologically speaking, tempting as it might be, Dana Harhoiu's new and fascinating theory will not stand if subjected to serious scrutiny. It combines aspects of the sacred space, as it is interpreted by the phenomenology of architecture (Eliade, Heidegger, Norberg-Schulz) – that *axis mundi*, for instance, that would supposedly pass through Old St. George – with morphologic analyses of the urban structure. The concentric circles identified by the author leave aside quite a number of other sacred seats, which proves that such a rigorous pattern is actually untenable. The identification of the corners of the two squares, on the model of Filarete, is hardly sustainable in Bucharest's case.

Băniștii Church is not exactly in the northern corner, neither is Radu Vodă where it „is supposed“ to be, nor the St. Apostles, while in the north-western and north-eastern corners there is nothing at all.

It may be that any number of the churches of old Bucharest (and there is plenty of them) can be shown to follow all sorts of more or less ideal geometrical patterns we deem significant; which is not to say that this means anything, other than a feel of the game. This is why the author's interpretation seems to have been completed *a posteriori*: first the patterns, then the attempt to find a justification. Otherwise, the sole argument in favor of the comparison with Filarete would be (and this is a paraphrase) that a Latin translation of his treatise was found at Matei Corvin's court, and another copy in Russia. The author concludes, in a too venturesome statement, that „these ideas were largely circulated over the whole Europe, and therefore in the Eastern-European space as well.“ Is not the argument too easily explained, especially when we deal with an epoch that witnessed a far more restrained circulation of books than there is today? And how does the hypothetical presence of a book in a princely library relate with the „real-life“ situation of the masons' guilds?

Certainly, any pre-established founding plan of a city presupposes an incipient geometrical pattern of a more or less ideal (i.e. Platonic) or sacred nature. Such geometrical patterns are manifest in the make of certain cities that were founded as castrums: at the center of such cities there still survive both the *cardo* and the *decumanus* – the rectangular system of axes of the cities in the Roman Empire. Even in the case of cities that knew a „spontaneous“ or „organic“ growth – although these are terms that can hardly be said to describe the development of a city – there is a primary set of structuring geometrical principles.

One should not, therefore, unthinkingly dismiss any intention to identify such rigorous patterns that would underlie the organization of the

urban space, even when it comes to such an unnerving case as that of Bucharest. I will not rule out the possibility that future rigorous studies, based on documents that remain to be discovered, may confirm one or another of the aspects suggested in Dana Harhoiu's book, or that new working hypotheses may well appear. But for the time being, Bucharest's rigorous geometry is just a fancy dream – an undoubtedly daring, engaging and therefore stimulating dream, as they all are; but a dream that we are bound to abandon the moment we close the shiny book and go out into the reality of the city. I'm afraid that there is only an *unreal* (which is to say perplexing) and surrealist dimension to this city, rather than an *ideal* one – no matter how much we might wish there weren't.

The other side of the coin, which comes in handy at this point of the discussion, is the Istanbul *counter-model*. The autochthonous *maidan* is, both in Dana Harhoiu's book and in a number of more recent studies³, a sub-product of the „spontaneous“, „organic“ growth (no one dares to call it by its proper name: „chaotic“) of the city. Given its lack of fortifications (due to its status of a vassal to the Ottoman Empire), Bucharest was deprived of that firm limit conducive to a tight interior urban structure, as was the case with the Central and West-European medieval cities. Instead, the city is organized around parishes and guild churches⁴; it incorporates *maidane* and successive strata that violently made room for themselves while destroying the preceding ones, etc; as such, the city is more preoccupied with its *molecular*, rather than *molar*, structure. The whole is sacrificed or neglected, while major interventions on the details are preferred. None of the projects aiming at introducing *overall* urban coherence into the city was ever truly successful. The most frequently invoked motif is the Hegelian „ruse of history“, or more exactly, the too short constructive respites between any two moments of massive destruction.

Neither Dana Harhoiu's book nor other stud-

ies in urbanism that use the term in the pejorative sense we have criticized earlier, take the *maidan* as a sub-product of an irrational and chaotic development typical of the city of Bucharest as well as of other cities in the extra-Carpathian area. Rather, the usual comparisons with the city of Istanbul are meant to transfer on the latter the responsibility of what is taken as an abandonment of the enlightened logic of (West-)European urbanism. The acromegalic growth of the city margins is present both here and there. The *sprawling* phenomenon is equally uncontrollable here as there, and, as far as I could see while traveling to Ankara among the hundreds of Istanbul's marginal „townlets“, there is no „qualitative“ difference between them and, say, the Bucharest upper-class ghetto called Zoo/Pipera/Iancu Nicolae. My belief, though, is that, even if the comparison between the marginal areas of both cities is tenable up to a point, a comparison of the two centers is undoubtedly to Bucharest's disadvantage, and that is not the fault of Istanbul.

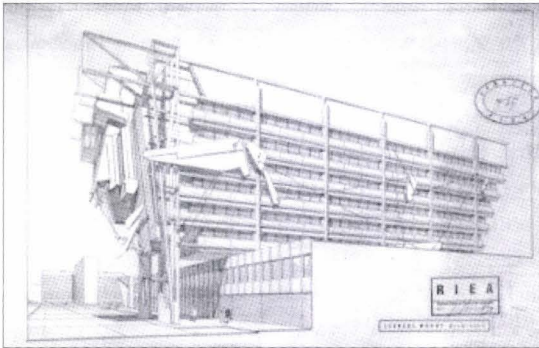
Bucharest lacks those urban markets, the *open public spaces* dedicated to such shared „functions“ as meeting, negotiation and exchange. If there is really such thing as the Bucharest *maidane* – with all their autochthonous connotation of residual spaces, which the Turkish original does not sustain – then they exist right at the center of the city. The focus on edifices in the detriment of urban texture is still something we marvel at. The blind walls, for instance, are the secondary effect of such false attention paid to details against the whole. With the probable exception of the Piazza of the Palace Hall, which imposed some degree of control over the surrounding urban space (as a result of demolitions and additions, to the detriment of the former Royal Palace), the random presence of regulating principles elsewhere is rather indicative of some aborted future intention than of projects turned into actual reality. The Victoria Palace is what ever got to be built of the regular piazza designed by Duiliu Marcu.

Today it looks like the central piece of the place; in the initial project, though, it was only one among a number of frontal buildings⁵.

To maintain that this is an immediate effect of Istanbul's „non-modern“ urbanism seems to me a dubious way of avoiding the crux of the matter: our own responsibility in the decisions we make about the city. The urban look of the city as we know it today is largely a *post-Ottoman* product. The residual spaces are a result of the clash between the (non-assimilated) post-Enlightenment urbanist model and the „organic“ reality of the town. The main routes of today's city were sliced by boyar courts and only rarely retrace the lines of some antic or medieval urban structure. All eventual adjustments have tried to „straighten“, „regularize“, „bring to a logical shape“, or „modernize“ the town. The unabashed cut of the Victoria Socialismului („Victory of Socialism“) Boulevard does not unite pre-existent points of the urban texture, but some brand-new points, around which a new town would have eventually organized itself. It is a clear illustration of this area of conflict between the „texture“ of the city and its aggressive submission to geometrical patterns. In close proximity to all these areas of conflict, a whole lot of derelict, empty spaces spring up – all the „junk space“ that comes as a product of urbanistic violence.

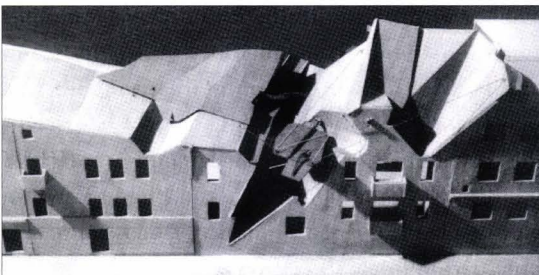
Sarajevo: scars and crusts

Strangely enough, there are radical ways of engaging in a dialogue with the residual spaces born out of violence in the East-European post-modern city. As far as the Romanian architects are concerned, they appear not to be even interested in having a look at such proposals as that made by Lebbeus Woods for Sarajevo and Havana. For one can hardly conceive of a more striking resemblance than between the post-1989 Bucharest, particularly the area around the House of the Republic, and the post-civil war Sarajevo. This being the case, I take the „radical



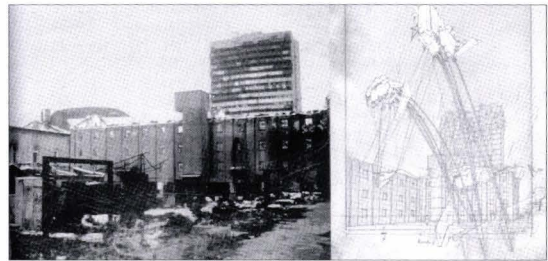
construction“ Lebbeus Woods proposed for Sarajevo as a painful lesson, yet one which we should bleed to learn. I try to imagine the „Bucharest 2000“ contest having to deal with such a proposal, and some „meta-institute“ playing down/up the House of the Republic, a taboo object at the time, thanks to Mr. Adrian Năstase.

What architect Lebbeus Woods suggests in his projects is that we should not only assume, on a personal note, the drama of the violent destruction of the city – both the drama and the city are ours – but that we should continue, on a necessarily masochistic note, to learn and assume the truth. In other words, Woods would not try to repair, restore, and cover with crusts the wounds and scars of a city vandalized by the folly of its lords and the rapture of us – fools and cowards who let them play with the space of our lives. On the contrary, he would exhibit them, and turn them into the main character of the urban space. Wherever there is a virus of destruction, he would let it run its course, both on the facades and in the spaces separated by the facades: the public and the private. The probable outcome would be some spatial mutants, but



they are the offspring of our gestures, therefore we should adopt them like we would a handicapped child who is not in the least to blame for its own failure, but who, by his mere hideous presence, will forever remind us of our inescapable guilt.

But this is only the first generation – the child of primal, devastating violence. But he will breed in his turn: the mutants of the second generation are an already aggressive species that moves dynamically on. They either take possession of the derelict facades of their „grandfathers“ or, like Woods’ „meta-institutes“, climb up on their „stilts“ and step over them, leaving – like in a children’s crusade – the place of the natal disaster. Dis-figured, diseased, aberrant, the new symbiotic organisms – host and virus become one – or cyborgs will point to the long-term consequences of our present acts. Do you



not feel that this urban metaphor proposed by Woods already describes today’s adolescents, the second or third generation who grew up in the communist ghettos?

What lies behind Woods’ projects is not only a radical construction, but also a radical deconstruction. The virus invoked in Mark Wigley’s deconstructivist manifesto finds in the all-infected post-communist space the proper work field. The project for Sarajevo is a dramatic method of making people think, a remarkable intellectual construction. On comparison, it makes von Gerkhan’s „Bucharest 2000“ winner project – which goes in the opposite direction both in terms of depth and actualization – look ridiculous. What in Woods is introspection and critical

discourse, a branding and cathartic surgery for the collective psyche, dwindles into petty bourgeois conformism and cheap opera in von Gerkhan⁶. And do not make the mistake to imagine that the cathedrals of consumerism von Gerkhan saw rising around a House of the Republic that remains intact and continues as the center of ultimate state power are more feasible than Woods' „meta-institutes“. The former are economically unavailing, and no sane investor will come to put in the money for the fantastic buildings imagined by von Gerkhan and appraised by the „Bucharest 2000“ jury and the people who've taken a fancy to this model. The latter are, frankly speaking, an eye sore, although some of the deconstructivist works seem, in the long run, rather picturesque than truly critical or subversive. The two proposals for cyborg-buildings in Sarajevo seem to me quite modest, if we are to compare them with the war ruins they once were. Still, even if equally unlikely to become reality, the Sarajevo-Woods model is one of intellectual altitude, whereas the Bucharest-von Gerkhan model is one of incredi-

ble platitude. To conclude, I will maintain the following: realistically speaking, Bucharest is closer to Istanbul than to Paris, but not for the reasons invoked by „experts“ lost in reverie. Paris and Istanbul are not – either positively or negatively – the cities we still believe they are.

As an anti-nostalgic treatment, there are three types of possible cure: 1) study visits to contemporary Istanbul, a live, developing city with a coherent personality and well-preserved monuments of a value which we, living in the province of the province of any empire that ever chose to toss us in or out, cannot even dream of; 2) detoxification visits to Paris, in order to realize that this dusty town on Dîmbovița's banks does not even come close to the African or Magrebian ghettos surrounding the City of Lights, not to speak of its center; 3) a serious study of the post-traumatic approach on urban violence taken up by Lebbeus Woods. He is the only one who, probably unconcerned with Bucharest, offers us a plausible investigation of the long-term moral and urban consequences of our collective acts in the, alas, so recent past...

Text translated by Sorana Corneanu

Notes

1. The Bancorex building, raised between 1995-1997, was designed as the shell of a pearl oyster (Bancorex: the biggest state bank at the time); but when the construction was completed, the fake oyster imploded and the empty shell remained. The vacuity of the project is not only hard to administer today, but also essentially anti-urban.

2. I have already tried this, when I proposed the model of the American Main Street for the central roads of Romania's capital, using the approach and

arguments advanced by Robert Venturi in his 1996 book, where he stated: „Main Street is almost alright.“ The nuance „almost“ introduced into the imposed perfection of the Venturian model, a nuance to which – after my own substantial American experience – I subscribe, is something we lack. We will not accept anything approximate and partial. But why then do all our attempts to acclimatize a model look strikingly like the straw copies of the planes and ships that some cargo-cultic tribe chanced to lye eyes on?

3. See Ioana Tudora, „Maidanul ca alternativă. Spontaneitate versus planificare“ („The *maidan* as an alternative. Spontaneity vs. planning“), in Ciprian Mihali, 2001, pp. 123-133.

4. See the study dedicated by Sanda Voiculescu (1997) to this molecular type of articulating the medieval city of Bucharest around the parish.

5. The successive additions of the '80s and the urbanism contest of the early '90s not only left the cut of the piazza unsolved, but they introduced edified

and virtual elements able to disturb the place (the overbuilding of the southern flank with edifices of an excessive height as compared to the context, the expected emergence of a number of problematic „towers“ on one side of the Victoria Palace and along the rim bordering on the Titulescu Blvd).

6. For instance, von Gerkan's suggestion that Piața Unirii be transformed into a lake is downright ludicrous: the Bucharest subway gets damp and wet with every rain drop – there's no need of a huge water platform on top of it...

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