

MARTOR



Title: *The “Socialist Modernism” Platform: Online Archives and Knowledge Production in Central and Eastern Europe*

Author: Maria Cristache

How to cite this article:

Cristache, Maria. 2019. “The ‘Socialist Modernism’ Platform: Online Archives and Knowledge Production in Central and Eastern Europe.” *Martor* 24: 57-68.

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

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-24-2019/>

Martor (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Journal) 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 Journal* is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Interdisciplinary and international in scope, it provides a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for academic and non-academic readership. 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:

CEEOL, EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Anthropological Index Online (AIO), MLA International Bibliography.

This issue of *Martor* has been published with the financial support of the National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN Romania).



II. Archives: the Purposes of Remembering, the Purposes of Forgetting



The “Socialist Modernism” Platform: Online Archives and Knowledge Production in Central and Eastern Europe

Maria Cristache

*Justus Liebig University, Giessen, Germany
mariacristache@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

In this article I explore the relationship between online archives and the process of knowledge production by looking at visual representations of modernist architecture. I focus on the project “Socialist Modernism,” developed by the Bureau for Art and Urban Research (B.A.C.U.) with the purpose of collecting photos of buildings erected in Central and Eastern Europe. The goal is to determine what this project reveals about the built environment in socialism and its post-socialist transformation. For this purpose, I look at the content produced and disseminated by the project team through a visual studies methodological approach. Namely, I am interested in how the images are received, used, and (re)interpreted in visual studies.

I discuss the case study of the Romanița Collective Housing Tower from Chișinău with the aid of theories of landscape, space, and architecture as a form of knowledge. This entails analyzing the content generated by B.A.C.U., the pictures themselves and the ways in which the public reacts to the material circulated. In addition to the visual and textual forms of knowledge produced by B.A.C.U., the viewers place these images into a wider context, reinterpret their significance, and sometimes contest the claims made by the project team. Based on these observations, this new type of archive seems to be shaped by the interaction between different actors, such as users of digital content, professional groups, and the state.

KEYWORDS

Architecture, knowledge, images, online archives, visual research methodology.



Introduction

The “Socialist Modernism” platform¹ has been developed by the Art and Urban Research Bureau (B.A.C.U.)² for the documentation and protection of the architectural patrimony of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The project team collects pictures of buildings erected between 1955 and 1989/1991 in order to monitor their status, and plans to elaborate regulations that will help preserve these buildings (“Socialist Modernism. About” n.d.). Besides the practical focus of this initiative on the conservation and rehabilitation of the built environment, the project has the potential to shed light on several aspects that are relevant for research on socialism and

post-socialism, such as the role of the socialist states in shaping the urban and cultural landscape, and how this landscape changed after 1989/1991 due to privatization and decentralization.

This paper uses “Socialist Modernism” as a starting point for discussing the link between visual representations of modernist architecture and the process of knowledge production. The main objective is to determine what this online archive can reveal about the built environment in socialism and its post-socialist transformation. This task is approached as a methodological exercise in visual studies that entails reflecting on the benefits and challenges of using this source in research. An important component of this approach is the focus on how images are circulated, used, received, and (re)interpreted.

1) <http://socialistmodernism.com/>

2) In Romanian: *Biroul pentru Artă și Cercetare Urbană.*

These initial observations and concerns are part of a larger project that aims to understand images as a source of knowledge at the intersection between visual studies, critical history of architecture, and sociological studies focused on architecture and the built environment. Several visual culture studies point to the merits of interdisciplinarity. For example, understanding the changing ways in which images are produced, stored, and shared requires an interdisciplinary approach to visual culture, using insights and practices from other fields and contexts, such as digital culture, art, and pop culture (Favero 2014: 166-167). In addition, issues raised by the lack of an academic discourse about visuality in architecture and the underrepresented study of architecture as a field of cultural production can be addressed through a critical interdisciplinary approach (Emerling and Gardner 2016: 1-4; Stierli 2016: 311-312).

This interdisciplinary approach can be consolidated through several conceptual and methodological avenues. One way is to connect sociological and anthropological perspectives on knowledge production with the research of historians and cultural geographers on changes in the built environment in post-socialist cities. This can be further linked with the methodology of visual studies that approaches images as active creators of knowledge, and not as mere forms of “visual note taking” (Pink 2003: 190) to be analyzed.

Instead of approaching this archive as the “true” or objective representation of the built environment in CEE, I engage critically with its material by reflecting on its production, content, and reception. For this reason, my analysis of the case encompasses the pictures, the accompanying texts, and the responses from the public. This allows me to follow the process of knowledge production by the project team, the content of the images, and the ways in which this content is received by a broader audience. This will also be an opportunity to advance some preliminary claims concerning the ways in which images are made meaningful by the

viewers (Pink 2003: 186).

In the following pages, I connect concepts and ideas from the study of place, social space, and cultural landscapes with research on architecture as a field for cultural production and social relations. In the fourth section, I provide contextual information about the online archive and activity of B.A.C.U. followed by a presentation of methodological considerations from visual studies. I apply this theoretical and methodological framework to the case study of the Romanița Collective Housing Tower from Chișinău, Republic of Moldova by looking at the content from the “Socialist Modernism” website, the images themselves, and the reactions of the audience. I conclude with reflections on the need to engage critically with the archive and on its potential to contribute to general fields of study. While this is a preliminary analysis focused on only one building, it is a starting point for analyzing the knowledge produced by visual material and for addressing the issues raised by visual research methods.



Relational landscapes and spaces

The urban landscape and its buildings are material expressions of the ways of thinking, the experiences and values found in specific socio-cultural contexts (Czepczyński 2008: 2-3). Researching the landscape and architecture of CEE has the potential to shed light on social, economic, and cultural transformations in post-socialism. Historians and cultural geographers have been conducting research on this topic, engaging especially with questions concerning the changing cultural landscape of cities in post-socialism (Diener and Hagen 2013; Czepczyński 2008; Murzyn 2008; Light 2000).

This article posits that the visual material from the online archive depicting architectural objects can be interpreted in a more nuanced way through anthropological and



historical perspectives on relational landscape and place as an event. This entails analyzing “the cultural landscape as an *entity reflecting relationships*” (Czepczyński 2008: 2) and places as containers of things, experiences, histories, languages, and thoughts (Casey 1996: 24).

Making sense of these photographs in a larger context—defined not only by the producers, but also by the audience—requires paying attention to various segments of the general public: the residents or users of the building, the inhabitants of the city, and the viewers of the digital content. An emphasis on the experiences and practices of those who directly interact with the buildings depicted in the pictures would lead to interesting observations about how the built environment is shaped by and gains meaning from its inhabitants (Ingold 2000; Casey 1996). This direction of inquiry is beyond the scope of this article that focuses on how the archival material is received and (re)interpreted by the online viewers. However, it opens up the discussion about the importance of connecting the online images with the materiality of the buildings as a way of de-centering the digital (Pink *et al.* 2016: 28) in order to understand the role of these images in people’s lives.

Another important aspect highlighted by research on landscape and place is the complex relation between political, social and cultural processes that shape the built environment of each society. In line with this, Drazin (2005) analyzes the development of modernist architecture in socialist urban Romania by rejecting the notions of opposition or struggle between the household and the state. Instead, he approaches it as a set of complex processes resulting from the interaction between the state, the professionals, and the people (Drazin 2005: 195-196; 216).

Lefebvre’s reflections on the dialectical relationship between spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces (1991: 39) reinforce this point. Through their work, architects and representatives of the state shaped the con-

ceived space (or representations of space), that is “conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers” (Lefebvre 1991: 38). The residents of modernist buildings constitute representational space, “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols” (Lefebvre 1991: 39). The same author claims that anthropologists, ethnologists and psychoanalysts should describe these spaces in parallel with “representations of space which coexist, concord or interfere with them” and with social practice (Lefebvre 1991: 41).

These observations about the complex relation between producers and users of space and architecture provide a starting point for the analysis of the visual material produced and circulated by the “Socialist Modernism” initiative. They can help integrate the visual material into studies focused on broader issues pertaining to the built environment, for example by emphasizing that the quality of life maintained in a building is not limited to economic aspects, but the result of multiple political, social, and cultural factors.

Architecture and knowledge production

The general question of the relation between architecture and knowledge production at the core of this discussion is approached here by focusing on the sources of knowledge and the interaction between different agents and media that generate knowledge. It is important to zoom in on the topic of sources of knowledge since the empirical part of this article is based on a relatively new source of information³ that has an impact on understanding the production of landscape and the development of architecture in CEE.

The first step in consolidating this conceptual framework is to think of architecture as a particular form of knowledge in and of itself, the result of cultural, social and philosophical demands that developed in time. Architecture as knowledge is also linked to conflicts about how the discipline is defined and how open it is (or not) to “social, spatial,



3) “Socialist Modernism” and the other comparable archives and projects have been developed in the 2010s.

conceptual concerns” (Tschumi 1996: 152, 154). However, the manner in which knowledge is understood when talking about architecture has not been addressed enough. In response to this, Cunningham proposes a critical reflection on what the modern status of architecture as an institution entails and a discussion of architectural knowledge, in which critical knowledge is in itself a form of intervention, a reflection on the broader social contradictions that determine and constrain practice (Cunningham 2007: 32-33).

One way of approaching architecture as a form of knowledge is to think of how it functions as a form of cultural production and as an “arena” for social relations and practices. Jones raises several questions concerning the conceptual development of sociology of architecture, which entails analyzing “architecture as a form of cultural production and the social contexts in which it is embedded/ from which it emerges” (2016: 465). For example, he suggests combining observations about the aesthetic and semiotic components of architecture with political and economic approaches of the same topic (Jones 2009: 2520). This would facilitate empirical research on “the role of architecture in the embedding of economic projects into distinct social formations” (Jones 2009: 2532).

Furthermore, according to Jones, research that connects architecture with broad concepts, such as modernity, identity, and culture needs to be refined by paying attention to “the embedded practices through which architecture becomes culturally meaningful in a specific context” (Jones 2016: 468). Delitz takes this argument further in her discussion of architectural modes of collective existence by pointing to the constitutive and transformative power of architecture: “Architectures establish specific relationships between social beings and also between human beings and the earth, thereby mediating human territorialism. Every architectural space, every architectural disposition, enables, encourages, or discourages various movements, perceptions, feelings and other human responses” (2018: 2).

The visual representations of modernist architecture found in the online archive give the viewers a window into the changing social and cultural meaning of those buildings from socialism until today. However, the archive alone is not the only “true” or legitimate source of knowledge about (post)socialist landscapes. The general public viewing and reacting to these images on social media is part of this process as well, underscoring the broader socio-cultural relevance of the built environment.



“Socialist Modernism” project

The number of similar online sources focused on modernist and/or brutalist architecture has increased in the past few years. These emerged in different forms, from large, systematized online projects to Facebook discussion groups where the members share pictures and discuss more freely, similar to a community of practice. Comparable projects with online archives, maps, and social media presence are Spomenik Database,⁴ gathering pictures of World War II monuments built in Yugoslavia, and #SOS-BRUTALISM,⁵ collecting images of brutalist buildings from all over the world and aiming to safeguard those that are in danger. There are also other sources available on Facebook⁶ and Instagram⁷ where information is shared more informally, and the type of visual material is more diverse, including pictures taken recently and old images from archives or magazines.

My ongoing research project, which serves as a framework for the discussion in this paper, will focus on a wider range of such sources, as well as on data collected from offline sites located in different cities. However, the platform Socialist Modernism is a useful starting point and a key source overall for several reasons. It is a more comprehensive and systematized collection that includes an online archive with over 500

4) <https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/>

5) <http://www.sosbrutalism.org/cms/15802395>

6) The Brutalist Appreciation Society, Brutal Tours&Friends, Utilitarian Architecture, BRUT.

7) brutgroup.com

pictures of buildings from 28 countries, 12 extensive case studies, and a strong social media presence.⁸ In addition, the fact that the project explicitly focuses on architecture originating in the socialist period in CEE allows me to explore directly the links between architecture (namely its practice, design, and profession) and the socialist past.

B.A.C.U. is a non-profit officially founded in 2014, and it consists of a team of architects, artists and curators from Romania and Republic of Moldova, with “Socialist Modernism” being one of their main projects.⁹ The first phase of their project entails building a database or online archive with photos taken in the present by the team and their collaborators, but depicting buildings from the period of socialist modernism in Central and Eastern Europe. They are also centralizing these images in an interactive map and accept contributions from architects, urban planners, artists, activists, historians, and the general public (“B.A.C.U. About” n.d.; “Socialist Modernism. About” n.d.).

For the second phase the team plans to take specific measures to restore, rehabilitate and renovate the buildings that are in ruin, to propose a legislative program, and to educate the local authorities and the inhabitants about how to protect these buildings (“B.A.C.U. About” n.d.; “Socialist Modernism. About” n.d.). B.A.C.U. association recognizes the historical and architectural value of these buildings and is critical towards the ways in which authorities and architects have been treating this heritage of socialism (Popescu 2014: para. 7). The fact that a lot of these buildings are in a state of degradation and in danger of being demolished and replaced has been the main motivation for the foundation of B.A.C.U. (#diez 2014: para. 4).

From the information provided on the website and in some newspaper articles, it seems that B.A.C.U. defines architectural modernism as a time period in which features of Western architecture reached Central and Eastern Europe and influenced the local style. The general features of modern-

ist architecture—such as form follows function, the use of mass produced materials, an industrial aesthetic, simplicity and clearly defined shapes—are visible in the urban landscape of former socialist countries, but they intersect with representative local elements (Popescu 2014: para. 3-6). This understanding of modernism is reminiscent of discourses from other former Soviet and socialist states—such as Lithuania, as discussed by Drémaitė (2013), and Hungary, as discussed by Molnár (2005). In these cases, modernism in architecture was seen as a turning point in the Baltic political reform (Drémaitė 2013: 82) and as cultural link to the Western European professional discourse, making it seem free from the socialist ideology (Molnár 2005: 115-116).

The project website already has an archive with images of buildings from Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine. The images are accompanied by explanatory texts about the architectural composition, historical context, and current state of the buildings. Pictures from these and other former socialist countries are also shared on various social media platforms, with information about the name, address, year of construction, and name of the architect. The discussion in the remainder of the article is based on one of these case studies from the archive, the Romanița Collective Housing Tower. I look at the website content, the pictures, and the reactions of those following this project.



Methodological reflections on visual analysis

The building I have chosen for this case study is situated in Chișinău, Republic of Moldova, and it was designed and built between 1978 and 1986. It is a 77 meters high tower that includes 16 residential floors, four floors of rooms for utilities, the last two upper levels—that have not been

8) The project has approximately 76,000 followers on Facebook only, and it also has dedicated Instagram and Twitter accounts.

9) They are also developing the platform „SochHeritage” that has the more practical goal of achieving recognition and protection for socialist architecture and art works seen as cultural landmarks and historic monuments (<http://socheritage.com/>). In addition, the activity of the association is expanded into more informal Facebook groups, such as: Socialist Realism (focused on the period 1933-1955) and Defense Architecture (architecture linked with war and the consolidation of rule in certain territories).

completed—and the ground floor, where there used to be commercial spaces. It is clear from its name that the main role of the building is to offer collective housing. During the Soviet era the residents had the rooms assigned by the state and had access to the communal areas on each floor. Currently, most of the building is privately owned with the exception of the technical facilities and the last two upper floors (“Socialist Modernism. Archive” n.d.).

I decided to choose this case study not only because of the abundance of material (text and photos) provided in the archive of the Socialist Modernism website, but also because several pictures of this building have been often shared on the social media accounts of the project. The building seems to be a strong illustration of the essence and aim of this project, given that its photographic representations have been used in its promotion, for example, when asking for contributions to the interactive map or when raising funds. For the purpose of this case study, I limited my analysis to the 32 pictures shared on the Facebook page of the project and to the comments posted by users on these pictures.¹⁰

The methodological approach I use in this article is based on debates from the interdisciplinary field of visual studies that place images at its center, as more than illustrations of textual arguments (Elkins 2013: 1). On a more abstract level, this requires a general reflection on how images guide the field of visual studies by setting the terms of the discussion, determining and directing the interests and arguments of the viewers (Elkins 2013: 28). This means that visual studies scholars should refrain from attempting to explain and fully control the pictures (Elkins 2013: 29, 59), and instead pay attention to “how images already work as arguments, resisting, speeding, slowing, affirming, contradicting, and sometimes partly ruining the arguments that surround them” (Elkins 2013: 26).

This does not mean that the arguments in visual studies publications should be

driven by images alone and omit the text. Researchers in this field often “see word and image as one indivisible unit of analysis” (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001: 7). However, it does require reflection on the after effect of including these images in our writing:

after we are startled, bemused, entranced, and possibly persuaded by what we find in visual objects, we then write about them, and in our writing those objects become passive: they serve as reminders, examples, and illustrations of things we end up arguing in the texts that surround them (Elkins 2013: 29).

On a more concrete level, this entails pinpointing the types of images we work with and the position of the producers and users of these images in our analysis. Van Leeuwen and Jewitt distinguish between image as record of reality, providing, for example, factual information, and image as construct, showing how its creator (re)constructs reality (2001: 4-5). Oftentimes, images have elements of both record and construct, which leads to the need to analyze them using several methods in order to be sensitive to both components (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001: 5).

Furthermore, depending on the perspective of the study and the type of pictures analyzed, the creators and the viewers of images can be included or involved in the analysis in different ways. A study that interprets images within a context of social practices might underline the diminished difference between the producers and viewers of images (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001: 8). The case of the residential building discussed in the following section is approached in a similar way, by linking the perspective of the archive with that of the viewers of the digital content.

My analysis of the Romanița building is also based on approaches from visual studies that pay attention to the changing meaning of images in today’s context (Favero 2014: 167). Favero looks at the practices generated by or in parallel to the increasing production and distribution of images and notices that these

10) The analysis is based on the 32 pictures and 48 comments posted between February 2014 and August 2018.

practices are “more attentive to context, relations and materiality, and hence to the world surrounding the frame” (Favero 2014: 167). Pink also reflects on how scholars from various fields, such as cultural studies, cultural geography and anthropology, have been approaching the interpretation of visual material. These recent approaches point to the need to take into consideration: “(a) the context in which the image was produced; (b) the content of the image; (c) the contexts in, and subjectivities through, which images are viewed; and (d) the materiality and agency of images” (Pink 2003: 187).

While I delineate between similar areas in my case study—namely the knowledge produced by B.A.C.U., the content and form of the images, and the reactions of the public—I interpret these areas together in order to understand the knowledge produced by this source as a whole. Similarly, Pink underlines the importance of looking at the intersections between these areas of visual interpretation in order to understand “the relationship among people, discourses and objects” (Pink 2003: 187).



The *Romanița* Collective Housing Tower

The most visible level of knowledge generated by the project team is the factual information contained by the images and the accompanying text about the building, namely the address, location in the city, name of the architect and the engineer, as well as technical details, such as height, number of levels, techniques of design and space division. A part of the factual information (name, address, year of construction, and name of the architect) is also found in the captions for the photos shared on Facebook.

However, a closer look at the knowledge produced by the source as a whole (B.A.C.U., the images and the audience) reveals a more complex relation between the sources of knowledge that can be approached through

the methodology of visual studies discussed earlier. The images are constructs of the archive creators, but they also guide and direct the viewers who in their turn (re)interpret them in various ways.

One prominent dimension is that of material degradation and decay, especially visible in the balconies of the building that have been closed or altered in other ways by some of the residents after 1990. The text available on the website conveys this aspect in material and technical terms, by emphasizing the bad quality of the construction materials and the (possible) effects of closing the balconies on the structure of the main building. Otherwise the text is rather ambiguous in tone, pointing to the illegality of the interventions, but not placing responsibility explicitly on one group of actors. For example, the author states that the alterations “were not authorized,” which could be interpreted as the fault of the state for not regulating the activity, but also of the residents for acting on their own.

The first photograph analyzed here is a close up of the residential floors and the balconies (Photograph 1), showing the current state of the building and thus supporting the argument of the gradual decline of the housing tower. According to Jewitt and Oyama, the focus of the images “creates a meaning potential” (2001: 135). This doesn’t mean that by identifying the point of view we can objectively say what the image “is about.” It is rather a tool that allows image producers and viewers to create different types of meaning

Photograph 1: Since 1990, the balconies of the building have been closed or altered in other ways by the residents. © B.A.C.U. photo department /2016.





Photograph 2: Wide shot emphasizing the aesthetic and architectural value of the building integrated in the urban landscape. © B.A.C.U. photo department/2016.

(Jewitt and Oyama 2001: 135). In terms of point of view, Photograph 1 depicts the balconies at eye level and from the front, making them salient elements in the photo and symbolically confronting the viewers with the present state of degradation of the building.

The audience's response to this picture acknowledges, for the most part, the degradation and decay. At the same time, the comments problematize these issues affecting the built environment and point to further questions concerning this transformation of Romanița in connection with the socio-economic context of post-socialism. This exchange of comments illustrates this aspect:

Comment 1: Beautiful tower but vandalized by the people living in it...

Reply 1: not only by the people... lack of maintenance...

Reply 2: Reply: The people are responsible for the maintenance of the place they live in, though. At least certainly so when they have been passed on private ownership of these apartments, which usually is the case with these apartment blocs [*sic*] in Eastern Europe.

However, what happened to the balconies of Romanița has to be approached as more than a wrong decision in architectural and aesthetic terms. For instance, analyzing these material components can be useful for interpreting the housing tower as a framing device or medium for something outside and beyond

architecture, thus contributing to the generation of meaning (Stierli 2016: 313-314). The balcony appears similar to other types of apertures (windows, galleries, thresholds, loggias) that allow looking beyond the building, at the landscape, cityscape, public squares, and so on (Stierli 2016: 314).

During socialism, the architects and engineers that created the housing tower framed, through their actions, a surrounding landscape that was turning into a new livelihood and that was “deeply invested with economics, power, and politics” (Stierli 2016: 314). In turn, the actions of the residents, here closing their balconies after 1990 when they became owners of their apartments, shape the post-socialist urban landscape indicating changes in their economic aspirations and in the ways in which people relate to components of their material surroundings: the city as a whole, the shared residential space, and the private space of the home.

A second dimension identified in this case study is the appreciation and interest in preserving this building because of its architectural value. The text from the website archive describes the building as architectural patrimony through phrases like:

In terms of structural engineering, the building is an important achievement of 70s-80s—all the living units on all 16 levels are designed and built in console, thus enhancing the slender image of the building—a rare shape for that time (“Socialist Modernism. Archive” n.d.: para. 1).

Modernist architecture was embraced, for the most part, by professionals during socialism especially since it came after the Stalinist period, in which another architectural style, socialist in content and national in form, was imposed. In Hungary, for example, modernist architecture “came to be seen as the antithesis of totalitarian architecture, and its preservation seemed to stand for the defiance of direct political control over architecture” (Molnár 2005: 119).

Czepczyński (2008) and Ingerpuu (2018)

also discuss a recent revival of the appreciation and interest in protecting socialist modernist architecture expressed by experts and research institutions working on architecture and architectural history. These specialists oppose the destruction of modernist architecture and the plans to modify certain buildings that stand as achievements of architects from the “recent past” (Czepczyński 2008: 134).

The aesthetic and architectural value of the building and the importance of preserving it are also conveyed by the content of the images, especially by the wide shots that show how the architectural object is integrated in the urban landscape. The second photo analyzed has the building in its centre, presenting it as what holds the “marginal” elements of the picture together (Jewitt and Oyama 2001: 149), namely the objects, nature and people depicted in the photo (Photograph 2).

In addition, other pictures from this category place emphasis on the architectural features of the building, such as the shape, the structure, the last two levels, and the height. Some of the more aestheticized photos of the housing tower, for example, the black and white pictures¹¹ taken from the distance and showing the building in the mist, seem to work as some sort of advertisement for the project in general (Photos 3, 4, 5).

A large number of the comments analyzed here are appreciative of the architectural composition of the building. Some of them compare it with other objects, like a rocket or a cigar, while a few others reinterpret this aestheticized representation of the building. The comment: “This one is a perfect pic [*sic*] for the cover of an album made by a Communistic Black Metal band!” is an example of the subjectivity through which an image is viewed (Pink 2003: 187). These three photos in particular seem to determine and direct the interest of the viewers who, through their comments, reinforce this aestheticized representation.

The last and perhaps most important dimension of the Romanița Collective Hous-



Photograph 3: Aestheticization of modernist architecture through black and white photos. © B.A.C.U. photo department/2016.



Photograph 4: Aestheticization of modernist architecture through black and white photos. © B.A.C.U. photo department /2016.



Photograph 5: Aestheticization of modernist architecture through black and white photos. © B.A.C.U. photo department/2016.

ing Tower case is the potential of this source to “speak” about the wider social and cultural aspects pertaining to urban change and housing in particular. The text written by the project team includes some general information on the historical context of the Soviet period by mentioning the state regulations on architecture and residence. This quote that details the specificities of collective housing during that time includes some information about the context:

Going back to the time of USSR, we find all architectural design controlled by political authorities’ directives. For that reason, each person had an area of 6 square meters assigned in the concept phase of the project. The principle of the housing unit/housing



Photograph 6: Current state of the building illustrated through a picture of the former commercial spaces on the ground floor. © B.A.C.U. photo department/2016.

cell was applied, consisting of two rooms assigned to each two people, with a hall and a bathroom. Communal kitchens, recreation rooms and technical areas were provided on each residential floor.

This type of compartmenting represents the reality of the socialist period, when experts had to comply with the imposed rules of the living spaces, without being able to make any changes without approval from authorities (“Socialist Modernism. Archive” n.d.: para. 2).

The text also includes information on the socio-economic context of the post-1990 period, when the apartments became private property, the commercial spaces on the ground floor were vandalized, and the residents made alterations to the apartments in order to deal with the lack of space.

The last picture analyzed in this case study places the building in a socio-economic context, for example, by providing a close-up of the ground floor spaces that are no longer in use (Photograph 6). By focusing the visual representation only on these former commercial spaces and leaving aside the rest of the building, this picture takes the viewer away from the previous emphasis on the aesthetic and architectural qualities of the building. It opens up a different discussion about the effects of decentralization and privatization on the post-socialist city by focusing on a space that looks like it was abandoned by the state.

However, when it comes to the contex-

tual dimension of the Romanița residential building, this last photograph alone and the accompanying text from the archive are not enough for building a nuanced discussion of the social, economic, and cultural context. The content generated by the project team focuses on polarizations, such as experts vs. state and residents vs. state, for example, when discussing the political control on the architectural professional practice during socialism or the changing ways in which residents have been experiencing the lack of space in the building.

Lefebvre looks at the social production of space through a conceptual triad characterized by a dialectical relationship between the perceived, the conceived, and the lived. He rejects dualisms because they “boil down to oppositions, contrasts or antagonisms” and have unwanted effects, such as “echoes, repercussions, mirror effects” (Lefebvre 1991: 39). Drazin also criticizes this approach in his article on the building of modernist apartment blocks as homemaking, pointing to the need to acknowledge the historical and social character of modernist blocks and showing that these architectural structures are not automatically disconnected from homemaking activities (Drazin 2005: 217).

Through their comments, the audience places the Romanița Collective Housing Tower into a wider context, for example, by comparing it with buildings from other countries: Armenia, Poland, France, Germany, and with Gaudi’s work. This is a valuable observation because it reinforces the fact that modernist architecture was not exclusively communist, it was present also outside the Soviet Union and the socialist states (Drazin 2005: 200). This observation can also be placed in the larger framework of studies that criticize the approach of the “East” and “West” regions as exceptionalist and essentialist (Tickell *et al.* 2007: 154) and the subordination of CEE knowledge production to a “metropolitan agenda” (Petrovici 2015; Buchowski 2012).

Some of the reactions from the audience also point to additional elements of

the social and cultural context that would be worth exploring in future studies focused on transformations of the built environment in post-socialism. Capturing the experience of the locals by comparing the exterior with the interior of the buildings could lead to interesting observations about the presumed contradiction between modernism and domesticity (Reid 2009: 465), but there is not enough space here to address this topic.

The small sample of comments analyzed here includes almost no reaction from the residents (with one exception), but this case study as a whole also advances some methodological questions concerning the inclusion of local voices in future research. This could be done, for example, by taking pictures of the building *and* the people, by supplementing with pictures taken inside, or by showing pictures taken by the residents themselves. The involvement of local actors could be taken even further by asking them to draw maps of the building in order to analyze how they “narrate” their memories about the building and how they relate with their material surroundings.



Conclusion

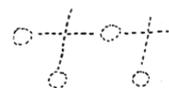
The purpose of this article has been to analyze the knowledge about Central and Eastern Europe produced by the “Socialist Modernism” project aiming to document and protect buildings erected between 1955 and 1989/1991. By focusing on the case study of one particular building from Chişinău, Republic of Moldova, I applied concepts from the study of place, cultural landscapes, and architecture, and I reflected on some of the methodological aspects of visual studies.

The first conclusion is that, in order to critically engage with the archive, it is important not to take it for granted as an inherently objective tool. This can be achieved by reflecting on the professional discourse

of the architects and artists who created the archive, the content of the pictures and the reactions of the viewers and on the intersections between these components. Including in the analysis the reactions of the audience, who reinterpret, contest or expand their initial claims, is especially relevant since the circulation of images on social media plays an important role in the activity of B.A.C.U.

In connection to this, the archive in itself is powerful in evoking the post-socialist transformation of the built environment, even conveying explicitly the effects of privatization and decentralization. However, it can only work as a nuanced source of knowledge if it is considered together with the content generated by the general public who views, interprets, and consumes these images.

The analysis also underscores the potential of this source of visual data for research in general fields, such as post-socialism, sociology of architecture, and heritage studies. For example, the archive documents the material degradation and decay of the urban environment, which is a prominent topic in studies about the transformation of cities in post-socialism. Furthermore, by emphasizing the architectural value of the buildings and the need to preserve them, the project starts a discussion about the “heritagisation” of socialism in the digital age. For instance, it can raise questions about how the distribution of digital photos of “socialist buildings” shapes the concept of heritage.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

#diez. 2014. “(foto) Asociația B.A.C.U. și cum putem salva clădirile din perioada socialistă” [(photo) B.A.C.U. Association and how we can save the buildings from the socialist period]. #diez, November 21 [available online at: <http://diez.md/2014/11/21/foto-asociația-b-a-c-u-si-cum-putem-salva-clădirile-din-perioada-socialistă/>; accessed August 10, 2018].

B.A.C.U. (n.d.) „About” [available online at: <http://bacu.ro/despre/>; accessed August 10, 2018].



- Buchowski, Michał. 2012. "Intricate Relations between Western Anthropologists and Eastern Ethnologists." *Focaal-Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*. 63: 20-38.
- Casey, Edward S. 1996. "How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time: Phenomenological prolegomena." *Senses of place*. 27: 14-51.
- Cunningham, David. 2007. "Architecture as critical knowledge." In *Critical Architecture*, eds. Jane Rendell, and Jonathan Hill, 51-59. London: New York: Routledge.
- Czepczyński, Mariusz. 2008. *Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities: Representation of Power and Needs*. Hampshire: Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Delitz, Heike. 2018. "Architectural Modes of Collective Existence: Architectural Sociology as a Comparative Social Theory." *Cultural Sociology*. 12 (1): 37-57. [available online at DOI: 10.1177/1749975517718435].
- Diener, Alexander, and Joshua Hagen. 2013. "From socialist to post-socialist cities: narrating the nation through urban space." *Nationalities Papers*. 41 (4): 487-514 [available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2013.768217>].
- Drazin, Adam. 2005. "Architecture without Architects: Building Home and State in Romania." *Home Cultures*. 2 (2): 195-220.
- Dremaitė, Marija. 2013. "Modern Housing in Lithuania in the 1960s: Nordic Influences." *DOCOMOMO: Survival of Modern. From Cultural Centres to Planned Suburbs*. 80-91.
- Elkins, James. 2013. "An Introduction to the Visual as Argument." In *Theorizing Visual Studies: writing through the discipline*, eds. James Elkins, Kristi McGuire, Maureen Burns, Alicia Chester, Joel Kuennen, 1-60. New York: Routledge.
- Emerling, Jae, and Ronna Gardner. 2016. "Introduction: Architecture! (To be said excitedly but with real frustration)." *Journal of Visual Culture*. 15: 3: 1-6. [available online at <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412916665138>].
- Favero, Paolo. 2014. "Learning to look beyond the frame: reflections on the changing meaning of images in the age of digital media practices." *Visual Studies*. 29, 2: 166-179 [available online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2014.887269>].
- Ingerpuu, Laura. 2018. "Socialist Architecture as Today's Dissonant Heritage: Administrative Buildings of Collective Farms in Estonia." *International Journal of Heritage Studies*. 1-15 [available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2018.1428664>].
- Ingold, Tim. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment. Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: New York: Routledge.
- Jewitt, Carey, and Rumiko Oyama. 2001. "Chapter 7 - Visual Meaning: a Social Semiotic Approach." In *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, eds. Theo Van Leeuwen, and Carey Jewitt, 134-156. London: Thousand Oaks: New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Jones, Paul. 2016. "Chapter 34. (Cultural) Sociologies of Architecture?" In *The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, eds. Davis Inglis, and Anna-Mari Almila, 465-480. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne: Sage Reference.
- Jones, Paul. 2009. "Putting Architecture in its Social Place: A Cultural Political Economy of Architecture." *Urban Studies*. 46, 12: 2519-2536 [available online at <http://usj.sagepub.com/content/46/12/2519>].
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Light, Duncan. 2000. "Gazing on communism: Heritage tourism and post-communist identities in Germany, Hungary and Romania." *Tourism Geographies: An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment*. 2 (2): 157-176. [available online at DOI: 10.1080/14616680050027879].
- Molnár, Virág. 2005. "Cultural politics and modernist architecture: the tulip debate in postwar Hungary." *American Sociological Review*. 70, 1: 111-135. [available online at <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240507000106>].
- Murzyn, Monika A. 2008. "Heritage Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, eds. Brian Graham and Peter Howard, 315 - 346. Hampshire: Burlington: Ashgate.
- Petrovici, Norbert. 2015. "Framing Criticism and Knowledge Production in Semi-peripheries." *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*. 2: 80-102 [available online at <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v1i2.105>].
- Pink, Sarah, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, Jo Tacchi. 2016. *Digital Ethnography. Principles and Practice*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage.
- Pink, Sarah. 2003. "Interdisciplinary Agendas in Visual Research: Re-Situating Visual Anthropology." *Visual Studies*. 18, 2: 179-192 [available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725860310001632029>].
- Popescu, Mihai. 2014. "Modernismul Socialist trebuie prezervat la fel de bine ca arhitectura interbelică" [Socialist Modernism Must Be Preserved as Well as Interwar Architecture]. *Vice*, June 18. [available at: <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/pgd53g/modernismul-socialist-trebuie-prezervat-la-fel-de-bine-ca-arhitectura-interbelica>; accessed August 10, 2018].
- Reid, Susan E. 2009. "Communist comfort: socialist modernism and the making of cosy homes in the Khrushchev era." *Gender & History*. 21, 3: 465-498 [available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2009.01564.x>].
- Socialist Modernism. (n.d.) "About" [available at: <http://socialistmodernism.com/about/>; accessed August 10, 2018].
- Socialist Modernism. (n.d.) "THE 'ROMANITA' COLLECTIVE HOUSING TOWER (CHISINAU)". [available at: <http://socialistmodernism.com/the-romanita-collective-housing-tower-building-chisinau/>; accessed August 10, 2018].
- Stierli, Martino. 2016. "Architecture and Visual Culture: Some Remarks on an Ongoing Debate." *Journal of Visual Culture*. 15 (3): 311-316 [available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412916665144>].
- Tickell, Adam, Eric Sheppard, Jamie Peck, Trevor Barnes, eds. 2007. *Politics and Practice in Economic Geography*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage Publications.
- Tschumi, Bernard. 1996. "Architecture and its Limits I." In *Theorising a New Agenda for Architecture: an Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995*, ed. Kate Nesbit, 150-155. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Van Leeuwen, Theo, and Carey Jewitt, eds. 2001. "Introduction." In *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, 1-9. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.