

## Research Brief

### *Project Summary*

Titled *Demolition Men: Architects and the Ruins of Economic Restructuring in Communist Romania*, my project examines the intersection of architecture, economic restructuring, and state-enabled dispossession. It focuses on the spatial reorganization of Romanian cities in the 1980s to explore how the architecture profession provided the regime the theoretical underpinnings and blueprints for accelerated economic development, making the built environment the crucible for social change. When the state's large-scale building projects failed to bring promised development and instead delivered mass displacement, architectural discourse served to reaffirm the necessity of economic restructuring and conceal the dispossessions caused by demolitions. Yet, architecture also stymied the forward momentum of Romania's socialist developmentalism, as the disintegrating materiality of hastily built civic centers and mass housing foiled the social constructions of the regime's grand plans.

More broadly, my project revisits architectural history scholarship that situates the intersection of architecture and state politics between complicity and dissidence. Viewing socialist architecture practice as passively reproducing, actively supporting, or subverting political agendas, the existing scholarship assumes that architecture is a reflection of the political apparatus. In contrast, my project examines how architecture, as a mechanism of state intervention in the built environment, simultaneously accommodated and frustrated state power. As its materiality slipped in unanticipated ways, architecture made visible the dispossession caused by spatial restructuring. In its intersection with economic development, architecture revealed, rather than obscured political agendas.

My research at the Hoover Institution Archives has focused on materials related to the spatial reorganization of Bucharest, provincial towns, and villages in the last decade of communism in Romania. Described by preservationists as “the biggest peacetime revamping of a European city since Haussmann rebuilt the center of Paris,”<sup>1</sup> this epochal transformation brought the displacement of more than 42,000 people in Bucharest alone, often with eviction notices as short as 48 hours. The spatial reorganization that began in Bucharest after the 1977 earthquake had spread throughout the entire country by the mid 1980s. The Bucharest regime was facing pressure domestically and internationally, as the 1970s crisis of accumulation had left it without access to cheap credit and oil. As the regime moved toward disengaging from international finance and its corresponding political obligations, it turned to the domestic economy for the aggressive extraction of the resources needed to maintain its political autonomy. Spatial reorganization became a key vehicle for this enterprise. Yet, the scarcity of basic goods, a deprived labor force, the uneven allocation of resources, and the squeezing of domestic consumption quickly made apparent the failures of the regime's new grand plans.

During the severe austerity period of the 1980s, a significant portion of the country's resources was diverted toward extravagant building projects, revealing the contradictions between the regime's professed commitment to redistribution and its disengagement from universal provision. New, large-scale plans became all the more

---

<sup>1</sup> Berke, Arnold, 1988, Razing Romania's Past, *Preservation News: National Trust for Historic Preservation*, 28(11): 4.) Open Society Archives, fond 300-60-1 Box 5, Administration, National Committees (Civic Center).

necessary to mask these contradictions and to jolt the economy and the population into forward momentum. The massive spatial reorganization known as the Territorial Systematization Program headlined the agenda of this renewed push for modernization, and state architects became the chief masterminds of its implementation. In this capacity, architecture became an essential catalyst for overcoming the material limitations of the present and justifying the sacrifices asked of the population. Architects became the experts charged with the implementation of policy measures that had consequences extending well beyond the architecture profession. In the process, the principles of “rational” and “scientific” planning became potent political tools that empowered architects to make sweeping decisions about population relocation and the transformation of society via the built environment.

*Sources found at the Hoover Institution Archives*

I focused on the holdings in the *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Broadcast* collection, Romanian Language Service 1959-1995, in particular the broadcast scripts from January 1984 to December 1986. I had initially set out to access listener letters addressed to Radio Free Europe (RFE) between 1984 and 1989, but I subsequently expanded my research to include scripts for the Domestic Bloc programs, as well as correspondence and memoranda contained in the Speeches and Writings collections. I was particularly interested in the archival materials in the Listener Mail programs because they contained complaint letters and eyewitness accounts of everyday life in 1980's Romania. Some of the letters described in detail the demolitions and mass evictions carried out in Bucharest. The Domestic Bloc programs contained press reviews, commentaries on shortages and the economy, and analyses of decrees, new legislation, and five year plans. Starting with February 1984, the broadcasts regularly chronicled the demolitions in Bucharest and across Romania, and recorded the disappearance of historic structures and sites. I examined broadcasts dating from January 1984 to December 1986. More research will be necessary in the holdings dating from 1987 and 1989, the period during which the demolition of Romania's villages intensified.

*Preliminary Findings*

South of the Dambovita River, in one of Bucharest's oldest historic neighborhoods, dozens of excavators, bulldozers, and cranes busily carve through rows of 19<sup>th</sup> Century brick housing. At the edge of the demolition site, writes the French daily *Le Point*, an old couple looks toward the rubble hoping to see the remains of their old house. Like many of the 42,000 residents that had recently been evicted from the area and forcibly moved to mass housing on the periphery, the couple comes here every Sunday for a pilgrimage of sorts. They come to attend mass at one of the few churches left standing, and to watch the relentless construction of Bucharest's new Civic Center and the Victory of Socialism Boulevard. After mass, the parishioners exit the church in silence. One man points to the sky. “This disaster is His doing.” By “His,” the man means Nicolae Ceausescu whose plan to rebuild the city after a 7.2 magnitude earthquake escalated into the demolition of six percent of the city's fabric.<sup>2</sup> This account and many

---

<sup>2</sup> *Le Point*, “Nasterea Bucurestiului,” no 685/4, November 1985, 158-161, Box 4023. Hoover Institution Archives, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Broadcast Records.

similar human-interest stories contained in the scripts of the Domestic Bloc programs bring to life the everyday struggles in 1980s Romania.

The listener letters contained in the scripts for the Listeners Mail programs were particularly useful in providing insight into how ordinary citizens experienced the sudden transformations that displaced tens of thousands. Ranging from letters sent by dissidents, to grievances and complaints coming from disgruntled citizens writing under pseudonyms, the letters reported on the worsening conditions in Romania as austerity measures, shortages, and an acute energy crisis intensified. A recurring topic was the widespread demolitions and large-scale projects taking place in the midst of a decade of severe economic contraction. While thousands of tons of marble were being hauled to the site of Bucharest's new Civic Center, rolling blackouts due to fuel shortages left patches of Bucharest and other cities in the dark. While food rations were imposed across the country, entire villages were razed and peasants were forcibly relocated in "modern," high-density housing in "agro-industrial centers." Those who lost their homes in central urban areas became tenants in peripheral high-density districts, receiving little or no compensation for the loss of their personal property. A resident of the city of Arad tells his eviction and relocation story with much anguish in a letter sent to RFE and addressed to Nicolae Ceausescu: "With only 80,000 LEI compensation for my demolished house, how am I supposed to be able to buy the \$200,000 LEI apartment that the state is offering for my family? Like many others, we'll also have to sell everything, because none of our furniture will fit in the cramped 8 square-meter rooms of your new apartments."<sup>3</sup> The writer goes on to ask, "I thought we'd finished the nationalization of bourgeois housing in 1948. Are we now going through the nationalization of working class housing?" Letters like this reveal the disruptive process brought by Bucharest's urban renewal and the pauperization of those displaced. I had hoped to find more personal accounts from those evicted from villages but found that most letters focused on the evictions in urban areas. The foreign press covered the demolitions of villages mostly by reporting on protests by prominent intellectuals. The stories of those displaced from villages are largely absent, save a couple of letters written by villagers' relatives living in the cities.

A small number of letters and broadcast scripts shed light on the intense competition for institutional relevance and resources that transformed the architecture profession during the 1980s. As the regime began to roll out the Territorial Systematization program, a heated dispute engulfed the architecture profession, with reverberations beyond professional circles. This dispute—primarily among state architects and historic preservation architects—concerned the value of historic architecture and its place in the Party's urbanization program. Historic sites in cities across Romania were under constant assault by the new developments proposed by municipal architects. Pitted against each other, the preservation branch of the profession associated with the Direction of Historic Monuments (DHM), and the architects working for architecture and planning institutes, engaged in the mutual condemnation of their trade. This insertion of the political in professional discourses eventually led to widespread institutional purges. The Council for Culture and Socialist Education (CCSE) ultimately dismantled the DHM, purged all of the architects on staff who specialized in preservation, and took over all of its assets and projects.

---

<sup>3</sup> Listeners Mail 124, Box 3913. Hoover Institution Archives, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Broadcast Records.

Book reviews broadcasted in the World of Ideas and Domestic Bloc programs often highlighted how architects actively shored up narratives endorsed by the regime. For example, the review of a volume called *Bucuresti* highlights how architects selectively assigned significance to buildings from certain historical periods by situating them in a seamless temporal continuity with the progress toward socialism, while entirely removing others from history. With the dismantling of the DHM and the marginalization of preservationists, the radical reconstruction of cities led to a new approach to historiography, but one fraught with contradictions. The Systematization of cities erased not just the vestiges of last century's industrial capitalism, but also medieval historical sites that the regime had previously portrayed as the foundational myth of national genesis. This erasure presented a dilemma for Party ideologues and architects alike. A concerted political and administrative effort supported the protection and preservation of such medieval sites, and elevated them to the status of the sacred grounds of national genesis. Yet, the wholesale urban renewal of the 1980s brought the dismantling of preservation regulations, and the subsequent damaging or even demolition of many of these historic sites. Some of the materials at the Hoover Institution detail the hurried archaeological works performed in cities such as Botosani, Pitesti, Targoviste, or Oradea before construction was set to begin on their new civic centers.<sup>4</sup> After the bulldozers would raze 19<sup>th</sup> century structures, archaeological teams would often scour these sites in an effort to recover medieval and pre-historic artifacts. Unlike ante-bellum architecture, medieval vestiges were central to the Party-sanctioned historiography that sought to establish the continuity of the Romanian people in the territory of present day Romania. More research will be necessary in this area, specifically in the series of programs produced by Dan Ionescu, titled *Assailing the Memory of History*.

### *Preliminary Conclusions*

The archival materials at the Hoover Institution provided insight into the role of architects in the economic restructuring of late socialist Romania, at a time when the Party's economic policies became linked with physical planning. Mobilized in the service of the new Territorial Systematization Program, architects became the expert-agents of a new economic age. At a time of dramatic shortages, massive economic resources were diverted into large-scale planning schemes. The program caused significant losses to the historic urban fabric, the displacement of many people, and the waste of precious resources. Hundreds of thousands of housing units in good and adequate condition were razed, only to be replaced by substandard high-density apartments. In the process, many citizens lost their land and livelihood, and received little to no compensation. In rural areas, thousands of peasants were removed from the land and placed in high-density housing. As the demolitions and displacement intensified, architects became increasingly politicized figures who rewrote history and justified the erasure of the existing spatial and social order. Tasked with concealing the disruptive effects of late socialist forced urbanization, the work of architects was constantly challenged by the slippery materiality of their Potemkin architecture. Ultimately, the precarious existence of displaced peasants and low-skilled industrial labor could not be hidden behind the pastoral facades of the new building prototypes and the stage sets of the monumental historicist civic centers.

---

<sup>4</sup> Domestic Bloc 580, Box 3909. Hoover Institution Archives, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Broadcast Records.