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Part IV

Political transitions and constructions of legitimacy

Architectures of power and the Romanian transition

From the House of the Republic to the Palace of the Parliament

Gruia Bădescu and Iulia Stătică¹

Introduction

What is the burden for a small, young democracy of having the world's largest parliament building, and one that was erected by a recent dictator, no less? Romania's parliament is an embodiment of both the aspirations of an authoritarian regime to shape the material-architectural apparatus of power as well as of the challenges of a tumultuous political transition. Therefore, we ask: in what manner can architectures of power be associated with both totalitarian regimes *and* democracy? We address the case of the Romanian Palace of the Parliament through a genealogy of its space, and through its impact on present displays of civic engagement. As such, the chapter opens the discussion on political transitions and constructions of legitimacy by exploring three questions: how an authoritarian regime has shaped its parliament; how such spaces are reshaped during transitional periods and by aspirations of reflecting democracy; and how protest and civic engagement challenge architectures that supposedly express the power of the people. We will see how the relationship between architecture and power becomes essential in building not only specific aspirations of a dictator, but also how symbols associated with them within a democracy interfere with forms of civic practices. When it comes to the monumental expression of power, the Romanian parliament building in Bucharest is unparalleled in Europe: the world's heaviest building, and among the largest and most expensive to run on the planet. Central point of Nicolae Ceaușescu's *Victory of Socialism* Boulevard and of the *Civic Centre* urban project of the 1980s, it has been often described in the literature as a

megalomaniac structure to embody power, reorient space and fulfil the political vision of a 'new city' for the 'new human' of Romanian socialism (Barris 2001; Iosa 2006, 2011; Ioan 2007; Light and Young 2013). However, less has been written about how this monolithic architectural form has been adapted to become the Parliament of Romania after the 1989 fall of Ceaușescu's regime, and what is its symbolic role within the rich topography of protests from the recent years. By focusing on continuities and frictions between different spatial visions, this chapter explores the spatial construction of political practice in the Romanian democracy. Through developing a genealogy of this space, the chapter enquires into the relationship between explicit representations of power and the transformation and reappropriation of architecture and the urban fabric still carrying material, political and ethical traces of a contested past.

Genealogies of power

Part of the extensive programme of transformation of Bucharest during Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship, the then-called House of the Republic marked a turning point in the constitution of a new urbanism, one that related to a territorial scale through vast demolitions of the historical fabric and that was closely linked to the construction of the Civic Centre. The project was presented as celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the 'revolution of social and national liberation', and made public in 1984 as the national expression of socialism (Zahariade 2011). Seen as the future kernel of Bucharest, the project was imagined to be the symbolic and representative centre of the city, around which the rest of the city – a homogeneous periphery – would develop as an urban and architectural model easily constructible and above all reproducible (Racolta 2010). The final project consisted of two main elements: the central axis, the Victory of Socialism Avenue – 120 metres wide and 4.5 kilometres long – and its ending point, the House of the Republic (Figures 14.1 and 14.2).

Starting in the mid-1970s, the systematisation of Bucharest initiated an intense construction of mass housing, and aimed at discarding the idea of the city as an archipelago formed of isolated *cvartals* – comparatively small urban housing projects – and *microrayons* – larger residential districts – instituted in the 1950s, following the USSR model. While the 1950s and the 1960s had witnessed the expansion of the city through mass housing construction, the Law of Systematisation of 1974 marked a shift in the urban development. The new regulations proposed to create a scientifically organised city, one that not only developed in the peripheries, but that incorporated the centre, including the historical



Figure 14.1 View (1989) towards the House of the Republic, today the Romanian Palace of the Parliament. © Sorin Vasilescu



Figure 14.2 View (1989) from the balcony of the House of the Republic, today the Romanian Palace of the Parliament, towards the Victory of Socialism Avenue, today Union Boulevard. © Sorin Vasilescu

fabric of the city. Urban elements that had been abandoned in the preceding communist decades – such as the street and the monument – were rescued during Ceaușescu's regime in the endeavour to reimagine the city. On the one hand, the street again became significant in the urban structure insofar as it is delimited by housing blocks. On the other hand, while heritage was being dismantled – with the dissolution of the Commission for Historical Monuments in 1977 – the idea of the monument was recovered. A new type of monument replaced the early socialist pseudo-modernist approach of a city with no landmarks as an attempt to detach the city from associations with tradition. With its volume and dominance over the urban landscape, and recognisability, the architecture of the House of the Republic epitomises the idea of the monument in a very literal sense, the same way in which the so-called Victory of Socialism Avenue epitomises the idea of the street. The destruction produced during the great earthquake of 1977 was seen as an opportunity by Ceaușescu to impose his own political agenda through the process of the reconstruction of the city, and a means of legitimising an entire campaign of demolitions (Ghyka and Călin 2018). While entire districts were demolished to make room for the new project of the Civic Centre, private homeowners were relocated in new apartment blocks spread all over the city (Giurescu 1989). The construction of the Civic Centre, which marks the climax of an urban modernity (Althabe 1996), involved the demolition of a fifth of historic Bucharest – an area of more than 500 hectares – and included the relocation of over 40,000 people (Iosa 2006).

Following a multistage national competition, in 1981, Anca Petrescu was chosen to head the project. It is important to emphasise the choice of Petrescu, a 27-year-old woman, as its principal architect in connection to the political articulation of gender in late socialist Romania. One might argue that the question of scale is generally politicised and often gendered, insofar as women have historically been identified with the intimate scale of the domestic space, while men were usually the main figures of the public, political sphere (Giesecking 2018; Steiner and Veel 2020). In our specific case, associating women with a massive scale that represents the political becomes a way of reaffirming their desired – at least in the official discourse – emancipation. The gesture of choosing a young woman as the leader of the colossal project has to be read as a statement to reaffirm her significance as a public figure, and in this way as an essential aspect in the literal construction of socialism. While generally Anca Petrescu was the subject of harsh criticism among her architect colleagues, we argue that her position within the project is more nuanced

and her choice in leading the project was deeply embedded in the political rhetoric. She should not be seen as the mere sole author of the House – the position she herself claimed after 1990 (Vais 2017) – but rather as instrumental to the political project, and more specifically to Ceaușescu's vision. We might also note here that this needs to be seen against a general contested background whereby women's intimate agency was undermined by a restrictive legal framework that emphasised both their productive and reproductive duties (Kligman 2000). At the same time, bringing a woman to the forefront as the architect of the monument of socialist power symbolises its association with notions of maternity and thus of a creative agency capable of, and charged with the creation of the *new socialist person*. Anca Petrescu herself, as a young architect leading the vast project, became the very symbol of the *new socialist woman*: modern, educated and a mother. Situated on the Spirii Hill – the highest topography of the city – and occupying more than 330,000 square metres,² the House of the Republic was to embody the image of socialist power, and to centralise all the governing institutions of the state: the headquarters and committee of the Communist party, the government and the ministerial headquarters, as well as the republic's presidency (Panaiteescu 2012). Its envisioning as a landscape rather than as a building – which violently replaced a significant part of the historical fabric of Bucharest – aimed to create not just a physical object, but a symbolic site for the projection of specific political and cultural ideals. Nature – in the form of the highest topography of the city – becomes integral to the architectural project, and functions as a pedestal for the monument. The House of the Republic thus embodies the excessive scale of power, along with ideas of growth and progress, while expressing contradictory affects and motivations such as surveillance, inequality or megalomania. The state's totalising role that has been explicit in the production of mass housing construction throughout the socialist regime is now replaced by the figural role of the monument of power.

Transitioning back to origin

In December 1989, Nicolae Ceaușescu was deposed during a violent uprising, understood at the time and in the post-socialist culture of remembrance as a revolution (Siani-Davies 2007). Nevertheless, the transition of the 1990s was marked by continuities of elites, including the conversion of the former Communist party and the Securitate (secret police) into main actors of the political scene and the privatisation processes (Gallagher 2005). The communist past, while decried by intellectual

circles, was not scrutinised by state actors until the 2000s, when it was criminalised through a presidential commission (Tănăsioiu 2007; Stan 2013). The fate of the House of the Republic mirrored this political evolution. While there were calls from the public in 1990 to demolish the building, still unfinished, as a symbol of authoritarianism, the state resumed the works interrupted by the uprising and completed the building well into the 1990s. A shift in public opinion occurred when the site was briefly opened for visits in 1990: many of the Bucharest residents who queued and visited the palace became aware of the great amount of labour and materials put into the site and were convinced that it was too late to demolish. Symbolically, the House of the Republic had become the House of the People (*Casa Poporului*), which has remained its most common informal name among the population. Alternative proposals for its makeover came from artists and businessmen in Romania and abroad: the largest casino in the world, a hotel, a new stock exchange to match the new capitalist economy or a museum of communism (Light and Young 2013; Duijzings 2018).

Yet the building became what it was intended to be. The House of the Republic was remade into the Palace of the Parliament. As such, the structure which materialised the aspirations of Ceaușescu's political project was re-metabolised as the representative building for democracy. In March 1993, the Romanian parliament decided that the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of the parliament, would be moved to the House of the People. The Senate, the upper house, was also relocated to the building in 2005. The two chambers moved from two buildings with distinctive historical-political meaning. The Chamber of Deputies was previously located in a palace built in 1907 in the French Beaux-Arts style prevalent in Bucharest on the Patriarchate Hill, next door to the headquarters of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The palace had been the seat of the National Assembly in Romania during both the kingdom years and the socialist period. The Senate was moved to the House of the Republic from the building that housed, until 1989, the Central Committee of the Communist party, featuring the balcony from where Ceaușescu gave his last speech.³ The 1989 Revolution began in front of that building, which has in fact a longer history of association with authoritarianism. The construction of what was originally intended as a Ministry of Internal Affairs began in 1938, just as King Carol II installed a royal dictatorship to respond to the growth of the far-right Iron Guard movement and to what he saw as the weaknesses of democracy. The building was erected in a severe neoclassical style typical of the political buildings sponsored by the king in the city, intended to evoke authority

during times of political upheaval. The post-1989 Romanian democracy thus originally housed its two parliament chambers in buildings that have rather distinctive pasts, one related to a longer tradition of democracy and the other to two authoritarian regimes. The two chambers came to coexist in the House of the Republic, thus realising Ceauşescu's intention for the building to be the administrative centre of Romania. As Augustin Ioan (2007) pointed out, the one thing missing from fulfilling Ceauşescu's dream was the relocation of the presidential headquarters, which in post-socialist Romania has been housed in the nineteenth-century Cotroceni Palace, not far away from the Palace of the Parliament.

In 1995–1996, the area around the House of the Republic became the subject of a large international architectural competition. The initiative of the Union of Architects of Romania was supported by the Ministry of Public Works and Territorial Planning and the competition was organised by the City Hall of Bucharest under the patronage of the president of Romania. As such, it looked at the time to be a project of national priority. Entitled Bucharest 2000, it aimed to give a new vision to the site and to address the 'urban wounds' that the 1980s operation created (Barris 2001; Ghyka 2015). While the competition called for the House of the Republic to be left in place, multiple projects suggested its symbolic destruction (Barris 2001). Nevertheless, one entry, surprisingly awarded fourth place, included three additional classical parade courts on the north, south and west sides of the palace, catering to the Versailles metaphor of the 1980s (Ioan 2007). The winning solution, focused on reducing the impact of the palace on the cityscape by inserting office buildings on all sides, never materialised, as the City Hall shelved the project by 2000 (Iosa 2006; Ioan 2007).

Two significant modifications did occur to the site. First, there was the insertion of the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC) in a wing of the building. This was intended to revamp the site, but was contested by Anca Petrescu as an unacceptable alteration of her vision (Jurnalul 2006). The main supporter of the MNAC project was Adrian Năstase, the prime minister from the Social Democratic party, seen as the party created by former communists. It was realised between 2003 and 2004, thus a mere six years from the completion of the palace. According to Adrian Spirescu, one of its architects, the design team debated whether to have an intervention based on rupture and resignification or one of dialogue with the existing structure. The final approach came from the decision to favour the conversation with the building and the cohabitation of the museum with the palace. This was seen as a response to the aggressive nature of the 1980s intervention, with the conciliatory gesture

understood as a way to move forward without repeating the mistakes of the past.⁴ One change was made, namely a glass annex and two lifts on each side. This brought critique from Anca Petrescu, who called the additions ‘a ringworm on the façade of the Palace of the Parliament’ ([Jurnalul 2006](#)) and opened legal action for a breach of copyright. Nevertheless, critics such as architect Ștefan [Ghenciulescu \(2006\)](#) pointed to the irony of the lawsuit for a small intervention on a building that itself was the result of a ‘frightening destruction’. Anca Petrescu was in fact a member of the parliament at that time, representing the nationalist Greater Romania party. The MNAC stayed on the site, and several contemporary artists refused to even come to the space. Moreover, in time, the museum’s presence in the parliament building became a hot issue for the two chambers of parliament, with claims that it constituted a possible breach of security. As such, sources indicated that there had been continuous pressure to relocate the museum elsewhere, including the refusal to pay for the repair of the access road and various security regulations. Initiated with the desire to reactivate the space, its relatively isolated location and the security hurdles have hurt the MNAC.

The second significant change on the premises was the construction of the People’s Salvation Cathedral in the large empty space behind the palace ([Tateo 2020](#)). Religion joined secular politics in an urban ensemble, mirroring the old arrangement on the Patriarchate Hill, but expanded to gargantuan proportions. Indeed, the dimensions of the new cathedral are voluminous; it appears on one side of the Palace of the Parliament as a taller structure, disrupting the symmetric front view achieved in the 1980s. As such, instead of the mitigating effects of the Bucharest 2000 winning solution, the cityscape remained faithful to Ceaușescu’s vision, yet with an iconoclastic addition to the socialist project: a gigantic church, marking the renewed importance of the Orthodox Church in post-1989 Romania.

Moreover, the former House of the Republic saw another symbolic reshaping moment in 2008, when it housed the twentieth summit of NATO, the organisation which opposed the Warsaw Pact of which Ceaușescu’s Romania was a member.

The wall of democracy

In the Romanian public sphere, the debate on the relationship between the architecture of power and the new Romanian democracy has been focused on the exterior wall of the complex. Almost three kilometres long, it separates the parliament compound from the city streets and squares

of what was intended to be the Civic Centre. A number of public figures have pointed out that the wall is incompatible with the transparency of democracy, keeping the Romanian parliament as a fortress that excludes citizens, and as such echoing its dictatorial past rather than its allegedly open present. Architects were at the forefront of the campaign to remove the wall. For instance, architect and cultural entrepreneur Teodor Frolu, one of the artisans of the Integrated Urban Development Plan for Central Bucharest which advocated for the wall's removal, stated that:

The problem is that public space is not used by residents of the Capital. It was conceived as a buffer space by the *Securitate*. Although Parliament seems to be well installed in this particular framework, we insisted on giving it back to the citizens through the creation of a large park (DC News 2012).

A number of politicians supported the idea of tearing down the wall and creating an open park, including a minister of tourism, a head of the Chamber of Deputies, and one district mayor. In August 2013, as Pink Floyd gave a concert in Bucharest, the president of the Chamber of Deputies and the band's lead Roger Waters hit the wall with a sledgehammer. Capitalising on the band's famous song 'The Wall', the Romanian politician gave Waters a piece of the wall, underlining the symbolic gesture that would have broken the barrier between the parliament of a democratic Romania and its citizens.

The Chamber of Deputies launched a competition for the area around the parliament. The winning project proposed a relandscaping centred on Romanian identity, by suggesting seven thematic gardens corresponding to Romanian landscapes, including mountains and the Danube Delta. Yet the wall remained. The opposition to these projects came from the political class mainly with regards to 'security concerns' and for the costs of the demolition. A former prime minister pointed out that the demolition of the wall would cost around 6 million euros, which would be a luxury for the struggling Romanian budget.

The most recent attempt to tear it down came from an architect-led project, supported by a new political movement. A team of architects from Bucharest and Copenhagen submitted a proposal in 2018 to remove the wall to create a large urban park. Connecting it with the Izvor Park – a large green area replacing a historic neighbourhood demolished in the 1980s – and the unused urban void behind the 1980s Romanian Academy, this new Uranus Park would be one of the city's largest and would 'bring the area back to the people'. The examples of Berlin, Ottawa and Oslo came

to the forefront – the argument was that most parliaments in Europe are spatially connected with citizens. Architecture and landscaping were seen as central to redemocratising the public sphere. This project was supported by the Save Romania Union, a party created by former NGO activists with the intent to renew Romanian democracy, and quickly entered parliament, capitalising on the disgruntlement of young voters with the political establishment shaped by the Romanian transition. While not yet adopted, the debate erupts time and again, highlighting both the view associating spatial openness with democracy, and the opposing platform of the politics of security.

Spaces of contestation: reshaping symbolic topographies of protest

If the question of openness of the Palace of the Parliament within the broader landscape has been discussed among architects, urban planners and NGOs for the past two decades, the issue has become a constitutive feature of recent rebellions against various instances of power. Taking the case of two of the most recent sets of protests, we may note both resonances and contrasts with established symbolic topographies within the city.

First, we refer to the vast protests sparked by the deaths of 64 people in a fire at Colectiv Club in Bucharest at the end of October 2015 and the subsequent deaths in state hospitals, all seen as symptomatic of state collapse (Mucci 2015). Tens of thousands of protesters took to the square in front of the parliament, with ‘corruption kills’ as the main slogan (Crețan and O’Brien 2020). Second, a number of significantly larger protests, also centred on an anti-corruption platform, took place in Bucharest between 2017 and 2019. Peaking at half a million protesters in early February 2017, they assembled against the emergency decree of the government to grant amnesty for a wide array of corruption acts, as well as to amend the penal code in a way that would have led to the acquittal of numerous politicians convicted for non-violent crimes (Păun 2017).

Both the protests around Colectiv and the anti-corruption protests between 2017 and 2019 started in University Square and marched towards Victoriei Square, in front of the government building, or towards the Palace of the Parliament, depending on what political body was supposed to take decisions. The place of departure – University Square – was a key symbolic space for the 1989 Revolution, and thus carried an important value in the symbolic topography of the city. Victoriei Square became a symbol of the fight against corruption, with images of the filled



Figure 14.3 Anti-corruption protest in front of the Palace of the Parliament, January 2018. © Gruia Bădescu

square becoming emblematic, as did those of police brutality during a large protest in August 2019. The space around the parliament, while also the stage of protests, became less viral, with the exception of images of protests in front of the wall (see [Figure 14.3](#)).

However, more recent protests have produced a shift in this symbolic topography of rebellion. In December 2021, protesters gathered to oppose the measures negotiated by the government to pass a new bill that would introduce mandatory vaccination against COVID for most workers. Thousands of supporters of the right-wing populist and nationalist Alliance for the Union of Romanians (*Alianța pentru Uniunea Românilor*) gathered in front of the parliament building.⁵ Hundreds of rioters forced their way into the parliament, vandalising cars and trying to enter the building.

It is interesting to observe that this protest started at the Palace of the Parliament, generically still remembered in the collective imaginary as the House of the People. From this perspective, we may also note that it marks a new language of rebellion that acts on a new symbolic

ground, reclaiming new urban symbols for the populist, nationalist discourse. Nevertheless, the resurrection of the Palace of the Parliament in the revolutionary configurations of Bucharest is significant insofar as it brings to light a new discourse: the symbolic crossing of the wall around the building of the parliament becomes a symbolic way of speaking about the popular power over a potential democratic crisis. Emerging as an act of violence against the building itself – and in this way paralleling the violence of the *tabula rasa* generated by the very building of this complex during socialism – the December riots at the Palace of the Parliament reinforced ‘the stereotypical representation of the revolution’ and the confluence of its initiators, mostly men, towards a new symbolic site of democracy (Cherstich, Holbraad and Tassi 2020, p. 14).

In articulating a divergent topography of rebellion, these protests contribute both to a centralisation of specific civic encounters, as well as to a hierarchisation of the symbolic structures of the city. In doing so, they emphasise ruptures not only with the past, but also within the present, and make clear the limits of transitions from authoritarian regimes themselves to clear away the ghosts of radical national projects. In contrast to a desire for designed transparency, in EU member Romania, the wall which was part of the initial 1980s’ vision for the state building has endured decades after. It has become a symbol of opposition from architects and NGOs, as well as for disenchanted protesters.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted, on the one hand, continuities in the treatment of space beyond the mere survival of the architectural monolith of the Romanian parliament building. On the other hand, it showed how its wall – despite its relative fragility when compared to the building itself – has remained a symbol of both power and transgression, and its continued presence has eliminated any possibility for public appropriation apart from violence. We have addressed the House of the Republic through a genealogy of becoming the Palace of the Parliament, and have seen how, rather than fading away, the symbolic distinction still resurfaces with vigour into tensioned practices. While in the case of the official institutional reappropriation the process has been rather straightforward, in the political unconscious of the city, its presence has stirred at once rebellious and disobedient attitudes. Nevertheless, the post-communist reappropriations of the space reside in the ability of contemporary imaginaries to highlight unexpected interpretations and re-significations, and at the same time to multiply its understandings as radical visions of civic engagement.

Notes

- 1 While writing this article Iulia Stătică received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Individual Fellowship grant agreement no. 840633.
- 2 As a comparison in terms of dimension, it is worth remembering that the proposed project for the Palace of Soviets occupied an area of 36,800 square metres (Racolta 2010, p. 165).
- 3 The Romanian Senate, created in 1866, was dissolved in 1940 and did not exist throughout the entire socialist period, when the National Assembly acted as the sole legislative body.
- 4 <https://www.adrianspirescu.ro/proiecte/mnac> (accessed on 15 October 2020).
- 5 Founded in September 2019, AUR gained wide popularity within a short time, and obtained almost 50 seats in the parliament during the June 2020 elections.

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