Introduction

In the wake of Ceaușescu’s regime collapse in December 1989, Romania’s transitional authorities abrogated two laws, which had attracted the wrath of public opinion: the first was the 1966 decree prohibiting abortions and imposing a draconic system of control on women’s bodies. The second was the 1974 “Law of Systematization”, which was the main act of territorial and urban planning in the country. It took Romania 11 years until the passing of a new law regulating planning activities. The dictatorship was associated with many things, but planning, in its Romanian incarnation of “systematization”, was made culpable for a decade of demolitions and evictions, the destruction of cultural heritage, and an imposition on private lives, which was regarded as an indication of the regime’s totalitarianism. The extensive demolitions and displacement, all in the name of building “a new socialist city” for a “new human”, led according to prominent intellectuals of the time, to an urban trauma. While the state invested its resources in these spatial remakings in the 1980s, the population underwent severe economic shortages. Policies of austerity affected access to food, electricity, and gas in cities. In the villages, systematization was depicted by various actors as a threat to their existence, with the plan to demolish most of the country’s small villages and consolidate them in reconfigured agro-industrial centers. Planning was deemed to be a most political and ideological of pursuits, and as such, it was almost expelled from the country after 1989. While state withdrawal and the neoliberal transformation of city-making overall affected Central and Eastern Europe after 1990, in Romania, the demise of the public occurred within this rejection of the state seen under the totalitarian paradigm. Romania’s socialist regime departed from the other countries in Central and Eastern Europe since the 1970s in its vast urban remaking projects, and it continued to depart in the 1990s through a lack of a new legal framework for planning, followed by decades of property restitution and private-led urbanism. In examining the relationship between politics and planning, Romania thus offers an example of two extremes: until 1989, a planning process subordinated to ideology and the will of an individual in power, and afterward one that expresses a complete reversal through the withdrawal of the state and the privileging of private initiative.
The relationship between planning and politics is well evoked by the remaking of capital cities. In Romania’s capital, Bucharest, a third of the historic center was demolished to make place for the new political-administrative center, the Civic Center, organized around the Victory of Socialism Boulevard (Victoria Socialismului), having, at one end, the House of the Republic, intended to be the largest building in Europe. Nicolae Ceauşescu himself oversaw the project, which aimed to give a socialist center to a city criticized by the leader for its petty bourgeois character and a past as the “Little Paris of the Balkans”. Bucharest’s remaking became an infamous case, called as an example of totalitarian city-making since the 1990s by Romanian and foreign authors alike (de Cavalcanti, 1992; Petcu, 2003; Duijzings, 2011, 2018; Light and Young, 2015). This chapter examines the Civic Center project not only as an expression of the idiosyncratic relationship between politics and planning in late socialist Romania but also as a lens to see the weakness of post-socialist planning in addressing the large urban voids resulting from the incomplete intervention of the 1980s. Consequently, the contribution highlights the relationship between spatial planning and urban reconfigurations with forms of political rule in a country that has experienced two contrasting systems.

**Romanian socialist planning and the systematization of territory**

The prevailing narrative suggests that before the idiosyncratic 1980s, the interplay between planning and politics in socialist Romania generally conformed to regional patterns, albeit with local variations: a break with interwar modernism after the installation of communist rule and the advent of socialist realism, then a return to modernism through an embrace of CIAM precepts, with Soviet influences such as *cvartal* and *microraión* as planning units (Popescu, 2009; Zahariade, 2011; Iuga, 2016; Maxim, 2018; Grama, 2019; Stătică, 2023).
In the case of Bucharest, as elsewhere, the focus was on the construction of housing estates outside of the city center. A single intervention in the center—square of the Palace Hall of the Socialist Republic of Romania (RSR), which replaced the royal gardens—brought socialist modernism next to the representative buildings of the deposed Monarchy (Celac et al., 2005; Maxim, 2018). While the 1980s have been singled out as a distinctive trajectory from other socialist countries, the roots of this transformation are in the 1970s (Zahariade, 2011). New legislation changed the ways of city-making: the Housing Law (1973), Streets Law (1975), and, as a culmination, Investment Law (1980) brought a change in the modernist planning and architecture, which dominated 1960s Romania. The new laws imposed higher densities and more-compact housing estates. In Bucharest, several neighborhoods previously built with the open urbanism of CIAM saw new constructions of collective housing on previously green spaces, a densification of the Charter of Athens city (Cina, 2010; Zahariade, 2011). The Investment Law prescribed total industrialization, the use of prefabrication, and the replacement of architecture with a “typified design” (Zahariade, 2011, p. 83). Moreover, the new laws oversaw the creation of street corridors, which also led to the dominance of perimeter blocks in 1980s neighborhoods. These transformations echoed the postmodern turn against the CIAM, and the return of the street and traditional urban typologies in many other contexts. However, one other law was rooted in the specificity of the urban planning tradition in Romania and was later used to express a radical political project: the Systematization Law.

In October 1974, the Great National Assembly—the RSR’s legislative—adopted Law 58, known as the Systematization Law. The concept of systematization, referring to the introduction of a rigorous order in the organization of space, has a long tradition in Romania and was, in fact, distinctively central in the Romanian planning tradition (Vais, 2022). In 1930s Romania, echoing the usage of sistemazione in Italian journals, influential urban planner Cincinat Sfințescu used the term sistematizare as a depiction of general planning practice and urban transformations (as opposed to the specific, technical plan regulator) and translated “planning” from English with this term (Vais, 2022, p. 210). During socialism, the judicious spatial organization of the territory was essential for the planning apparatus, and training of future specialists was done in both “architecture and systematization”. The profession of the architect encompassed both architectural design and planning (Enescu, 2006; Vais, 2022), which thus included systematization. Even before Law 58 was passed, the Communist Party announced a political program of systematization of the Romanian territory in 1972. The program addressed various scales of transformation: a national program, based on hierarchy and functional relationships between cities, towns, and villages; a rural program, aiming to reduce the number of “unviable” villages and obtain more land for agriculture (Gabanyi, 1989); and an urban program, which was closely related to the idea of constructing new centers for cities with administrative roles, acting as an expression of socialist reality: the civic centers (Răuţă, 2013).

The direction of planning was connected to broad ideological aspects. The rapid construction of housing and industrial facilities was the goal of the socialist development program. Planning professionals were expected to deliver according to the political line, but there was no direct involvement of leaders in decision-making. Certain architects like Horia Maicu and Cezar Lăzărescu had leeway and influence with the party heads. Nevertheless, neither the early communist leaders, like Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej, nor Nicolae Ceauşescu, in his early
years, had a direct impact on planning or stylistic matters (Zahariade, 2011). This was about to change in the 1970s with Nicolae Ceaușescu’s increasing interest in city-making as a political project. The remaking of city centers in order to represent the “socialist cities for the new socialist man” was a key endeavor.

Civic centers as the focus of 1980s planning

The 1980s systematization of urban centers was not the first time in Romania when political power was interested in reshaping the centers of cities and creating civic centers. The idea of civic centers emerged in Romanian debates in the 1920s and was actually influenced by the US City Beautiful civic center program (Răuță, 2013, p. 13). In 1926, Cincinat Sfințescu envisioned the Arsenal Hill of Bucharest as a possible civic center for the capital city. With little expropriation, he argued that this area of 16 ha could be hosting a series of institutions—the Seat of the Romanian Patriarchate, a number of ministries, and museums—creating a “civic center as understood in the United States” (Răuță, 2013, p. 69). While Sfințescu previously connected the need for civic ensembles to an invocation of the Vienna Ringstrasse, this time it was the US City Beautiful civic centers that inspired his vision. From the City Beautiful planning and the US-inspired Art Deco architecture changing Bucharest’s previous Paris of the Balkans profile, the late 1930s brought a more sober classical public architecture, as well as a continuation of the national style, also called neo-Romanian, inspired from vernacular and 18th century architecture, and popular in previous decades. Late 1930s Romania, which ran under a royal dictatorship after 1938, envisioned the transformation of both rural and urban areas as a form of modernization in a national style.

Civic center ideas were quickly shelved and only returned four decades later, after much change in both political and architectural realms. In their 1980s understanding, civic centers referred to large public spaces surrounded by political and administrative buildings. According to Augustin Ioan (2004, pp. 106–107), 1930s fascist architecture in Italy was a possible source for the Romanian socialist civic centers. In any case, the approach was similar, which was either motivated by inspiration or by a similar echoing of the Roman roots of Romanians, as emphasized by Romanian national communism in the 1970s (Ioan, 2009). He emphasized that administrative buildings featured a piano nobile, from where the communist leader spoke to the masses gathered in the square. Consequently, these public spaces were neither agoras nor spaces of communal and deliberative politics but places of domination.

The revival of civic centers bridged the interests of the political elites with those of architects and planners, making the built environment an arena of political display. However, as Alex Răuță (2013, p. 153) argues, it was also a discreet reference to the pre-war, pre-communist tradition of the profession in Romania, where debates about civic centers were important, while no actual project had been realized then outside of rural areas. Moreover, while in the post-communist narratives, the whole endeavor of systematization and transformation of cities was attributed to Ceaușescu himself, the agency of architects (with work attributions of both architects and planners in other contexts) should not be minimalized. For many architects, the opportunity to reshape centers, more than just design housing estates, was met with interest. Furthermore, particularly in the extra-Carpathian regions of Wallachia and Moldavia (the so-called Old Kingdom), there was a belief that the historic urban centers were not valuable to be preserved, as they were less dense, less compact, and less historic than their Transylvanian counterparts, shaped in the Middle Ages largely by German settlers. The 19th-century architecture of the Old Kingdom, eclectic and influenced by French Beaux Arts
and then by the national style, was seen as disposable in an act of modernization that embodied both the party’s socialist ambitions and the architects’ desires to reshape space. Consequently, tens of cities that served as administrative centers in Romania, mostly in the Old Kingdom, were reshaped from the center to the periphery through political will and an entangled agency of local and national authorities and architects (Răuță, 2013). Additionally, several cities in Transylvania received civic centers outside of their historic cores, which were deemed to be more valuable than their Old Kingdom counterparts. While in the Old Kingdom, Bucharest received a treatment more similar to the former: the new Civic Center was to replace parts of the old neighborhoods but did not affect most of the historically shaped center—contrary to the reports that the entire center was erased. Nevertheless, being the national capital, its Civic Center, also called the “Political Administrative Center”, embodied the connection between planning and political power at its highest.

The Victory of Socialism: the Civic Center project for Bucharest

The first mention of a socialist Civic Center for Bucharest appeared in the speech of Nicolae Ceaușescu on 22 March 1977 (Ioan, 2009, p. 184). The speech was given in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake in Bucharest—which destroyed hundreds of buildings, including signature interwar modernist buildings, and killed 1391 people in the capital city. The timing led to an interpretation that the major intervention of the 1980s came as a result of this earthquake. The earthquake did trigger the first actions to reshape the central area. Moreover, it led to the 1977 closing of the National Cultural Heritage Directorate—a allegedly after the institution criticized the destruction of a church during post-earthquake ruin clearing—which paved the way for ambitious demolitions later (Ioan, 2009). However, beyond the earthquake trigger, it is important to underline that the Civic Center emerged in the broader framework of the national systematization project of the 1970s (Zahariade, 2011).

The 22 March 1977 meeting concluded with the proposal to organize an architectural competition to systematize the center of Bucharest. Yet the process that followed departed from usual competitions and mirrored the transformations of the political system in socialist Romania: a limited number of state institutions that had a role in spatial systematization were invited to submit proposals, yet there was no jury, stated aims, nor competition brief and documentation, with information arriving to designers confidentially (Vais, 2016; Zahariade, 2011, p. 126). Between 1977 and 1989, there were neither public presentations of projects nor articles in Arhitectura, the main professional journal (Zahariade, 2011). Of the initial 17 teams invited, six went to further discussion rounds in 1979. Ceaușescu took on the role of the key decision-maker on the projects, en lieu of a professional jury, and reputedly did not like any of the proposals as they were not ambitious enough in scale (Ioan, 2009, p. 189). Several reputed architects left the competition—and some, the country. Moreover, many participants were confident that Cezar Lăzărescu, the dean of the architecture institute and perceived as influential with Ceaușescu, would be chosen. He introduced the idea of a single building to house all political functions, which also mirrored Ceaușescu’s 1979 decision to have one centralized structure (Zahariade, 2011, p. 127). Yet, despite Lăzărescu’s position and flexibility to match the leader’s view, Ceaușescu preferred a member of the Young Architects team, who showed an even higher malleability and responsiveness to his views: Anca Petrescu, who “was willing to give form to Ceaușescu’s desires and intentions” (Vais, 2016, p. 144).
The area of focus was the southern part of the city center, including Union Square, as well as a number of neighborhoods to the East and West. A new administrative center for the country, embodying the civic center idea, was to be planned on Arsenal Hill. One interpretation of this choice was the alleged seismic resistance of this part of Bucharest. However, the same area was the subject of several plans in the past, ranging from the 1926 Sfințescu plan, which proposed a Civic Center, to plans for a Patriarchal Cathedral on the site in the 1920s, to the 1960s plans for a new university. The 1980s plan included a new Central Committee of the Communist Party, the State Council, the Presidency of the Republic, the Government, and its ministries, envisioned as an ensemble of tall, monumental buildings (Ioan, 2009, p. 187). The spine of the project was the Victory of Socialism Boulevard (Bulevardul Victoria Socialismului). Its name made a double reference. On the one hand, it echoed the main avenue of old Bucharest, Calea Victoriei, thus named after the 1877 War of Independence, and representative of the “Little Paris” urban imaginary. On the other hand, it highlighted the triumph of socialism as a system in Romania (Celac et al., 2005).

The only documentation trip was made to Pyong Yang in 1978, including a delegation of architects and engineers who were taking part in the competition. Ceaușescu himself expressed his admiration for the urban makeover in North Korea, considering the cities rebuilt after the devastating Korean War as an example of what a socialist city should look like. Bucharest, with its aristocratic and bourgeois palaces, its hodgepodge of styles, heterogeneous cityscape evoking both the Paris of the Balkans and interwar inequalities and uncontrolled sprawl, needed to be tamed and become a proper, dignified capital city of socialist Romania. Thus, the Victory of Socialism also had an urban dimension, transforming the inherited city into a city evoking socialism and its modernity.

Demolitions affected around 485 ha (similar to the surface of Venice) (Ioan, 2009), including some of the city’s oldest churches, the Unirii market hall, and the Republican stadium. More than 40,000 residents were hastily displaced; even Lăzărescu had his house demolished (Vais, 2016, p. 144). A select number of national heritage buildings were not demolished but were the subject of encasing, being surrounded and isolated by 10-floor buildings that removed visual access to the respective churches and synagogues (Celac et al., 2005). These demolitions and displacements led to alternative names circulating amid the urban population, including “the Victory of Socialism against the entire city”, together with broader names for the Civic Center such as “Beirut on Dâmbovița” and Ceaușima, a juxtaposition of Ceaușescu with Hiroshima.

The professionals involved in the planning and design of the Civic Center related to the project in a number of ways. While many emphasize today that they had to do it because of political pressure, others, like Alexandru Beldiman, also point out that the demolitions of important parts of the city and the creation of a new urban area were nothing scandalous for the generations of architects trained in the spirit of the Athens Charter (Iosa, 2006, p. 131). While the architecture wanted by the leader was not modern, the spirit of the operation could be seen as such. Moreover, the architectural expression echoed contemporary postmodern treatments, which existed in the West. Consequently, the profession was less scandalized by the endeavor than it was later accounted for. Opposition to the project or withdrawals were rare, which also has to be, however, understood in the sensitive climate of the party state.

The Bucharest Civic Center was projected by the planning institute Proiect București and consisted of a main axis, the Victory of Socialism Boulevard, having, at one end, the House of the Republic and a square with ministries and, at the other, a large square surrounded with
residential buildings. Along the way, a new national library and an opera house were projected. By 1989, most buildings were in an advanced state of construction, or finished, with the exception of the Opera House, which still had not begun. A third of the way, the Union Square, a traditional market square of Bucharest, was reshaped as the country’s largest open space. The Dâmbovița River was channeled and put underground in this node of the Civic Center. The Boulevard had monumental dimensions yet was somehow removed from actual

**FIGURE 11.2** Map of the Uranus area of Bucharest, highlighting with red the Civic Center buildings erected in the 1980s, on display during an exhibition in the Bucharest City Hall.

*Source: Wikimedia Commons*
mobility routes in Bucharest. Its western section, from the Union Square to the House, remains little circulated to this day, particularly by pedestrians, in an otherwise bustling city. While intended to be a civic center, which would imply a center for citizens, it was designed, in fact, as a rather exclusive area: the state ministries, the House of the Republic, and the residential building for party members were served by streets with restricted public circulation, paved with artificially colored granite. The obsession with security and protection led to hasty decisions: in the autumn of 1989, residents of a new block on 13 September Avenue, who had moved there in 1985, had to leave the building as Elena Ceaușescu complained that they had visual access to the yard of the House of the Republic (Ioan, 2009, p. 191). The House of the Republic itself was realized by numerous subteams of architects who neither had access to the other plans nor to the site itself, seemingly for secrecy and security reasons. This led to the approach being called by architect Andrei Pandele (2009, p. 57) as “veterinary architecture”—while in human medicine, doctors can hear from patients what problems they have, veterinarians need to guess; similar guessing games were made by architects involved in the design of the house—which led to a lack of coherence of the project.

The architectural language marked a stark departure from the modernism of the previous decades: using columns, decorations, and classical registers, the buildings evoked at once 19th-century historicism, socialist realism, and contemporary postmodernism. Ceaușescu expressed his liking for two eclectic historicist buildings from the United Nations Square, just north of the designated Civic Center, and asked that to be a reference for the architecture of the new boulevard. This created a rupture with the decades of modernist construction in interwar and socialist Romania. While the designed apartment buildings were not significant departures from the mass housing designs elsewhere, architects used the occasion to create pastiches of historicist decorations, in a postmodern gesture that echoed the 1980s debates abroad, and particularly Ricardo Bofill’s postmodernist projects such as Antigone (Ioan, 2007). Nevertheless, the quick deadlines and dwindling budgets accounted for oversized structures, the use of poor materials, and low-quality execution.

The Boulevard, flanked by tall buildings, hid the remnants of the old city behind. The connections with the old streets with houses and gardens were limited to low pedestrian passages, which did not permit a visualization of the old city. As such, it served as a Potemkin village façade of representation of the Ceaușescu regime’s goals for the Civic Center. This approach was not new: since the mid-1970s, several other avenues in Bucharest were widened for traffic and “screened” (“ecranate”) with tall buildings, which hid the old city behind. First, these tall buildings were modernist tower blocks, but the 1980s brought even more opaque perimeter blocks, a typology that was actually not characteristic of Bucharest before (Cina, 2010, p. 233). The Civic Center streets also used the technique in the guise of perimeter blocks, but this time featuring heavy ornamentation of the facades, thus replicating a 19th-century typology of European cities, which was actually absent in Bucharest itself. The focus on the urban façade, the ornaments and composition types, and the presence of classical and eclectic elements recalls postmodern architecture. Nevertheless, the irony of postmodernism is lost on this serious, political project.

The unfinished project: planning and the political economy after 1990

In the aftermath of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, the Civic Center was largely constructed, with the exception of the yet unfinished House of the Republic and the
Opera complex. The evolution of the project mirrored the transformation of planning and design in post-1990 Romania. In the aftermath of the abrogation of the Systematization Law, between 1990 and 1996, there was no extant legal framework for planning. However, local councils could still issue urban planning directives, yet there was little funding for any public investment at a national level. In the case of the Bucharest Civic Center, the state allocated money to finalize the buildings under construction, including the House of the Republic. Nevertheless, buildings that were at foundation level only, such as the new Opera, or areas where construction had not yet begun by 1989, did not receive funds for completion in the early 1990s, and became the object of debate later on.

The colored granite of the Boulevard, intended for little traffic and costly to maintain once the streets were opened to general traffic, was replaced by asphalt. Its name was also changed: the Victory of Socialism Boulevard became the Boulevard of the Union—from a projection of the future to a memory of the past—the 1918 Unification was deemed a key moment of the Romanian state, with the new national holiday, 1 December enshrining Transylvania’s 1918 union (Bădescu, 2020). The Civic Center denominator remained in public parlance, while the House of the Republic was frequently called the House of the People and later became the Palace of the Parliament, thus realizing what Ceauşescu had initially wanted for the building (Bădescu & Stătică, 2023).

The Civic Center as a planning and urban design project was, however, stopped. In 1996, while there was still no specific planning legislation, the executive issued a governmental decision, which created a new planning framework. In 2001, Law 350 was issued. It was criticized for prioritizing private interest over the public, by permitting privately led area plans (plan urbanistic zonal), which would create derogations from the general urban plan (plan urbanistic general) (Nae & Turnock, 2011). These developments reflected a new relationship between planning and politics and had repercussions on the fate of the Civic Center: the difficulty of implementing a large project, the continuities in a security-obsessed political class, and the controversies of private-led urbanism.

**Bucharest 2000: from promise to deception**

Just months after the overthrow of Nicolae Ceauşescu, the Union of Architects of Romania (UAR) and the National Commission for Urban Planning organized an exhibit called “Bucharest. The state of the City”, in which the impact of the demolitions of the 1980s and the not yet finished Civic center was shown to the public. A Franco-Romanian team, composed of Jean Laberthornière, Raluca Butnariu, Dana Harhoiu, and Andrei Sassu, proposed a major intervention to address the impacts of the disruptive 1980s (Harhoiu, 1997). The head of the UAR, Alexandru Beldiman, advocated for an international competition, intended not only to bring different specialist opinions but also to bring the Civic Center to the public agenda (Iosa, 2006).

The Civic Center was a matter of discussion for both the municipality of Bucharest and the Romanian Government. The process of legislative and institutional transformation was slow, while the deconstructed central area began to be the subject of restitution of real estate claims, as well as a fledgling real estate pressure, both common to post-socialist societies (Stanilov, 2007). According to a former chief architect of Bucharest, the lack of a cadastre structure, and especially the economic crisis, made it difficult to find an investment formula for the Civic Center of the Capital (Gabrea, 2019). Moreover, political instability affected foreign
investment, seen at the time as the main hope. In the Izvor area of the Civic Center, as early as 1991, a British financial group hired Norman Foster to develop a master plan. Because of unclear ownership, the authorities chose to create a development agency for the land, which envisioned that entitled owners would either receive the land value or remain in the project as shareholders. According to the chief architect, this replicated the mechanisms of the Solidere project in Beirut (Bădescu, 2011), as well as the East German approach to use investment to unlock the reconstruction of the Capital (Gabrea, 2019). Nevertheless, the collapse of the Petre Roman government because of the mineriads in Bucharest—the descent of Transylvanian miners on the capital, at the call of the president, to end anti-government protests in Bucharest—led to the end of the project. Investors stated that they would not come until the Romanian state became politically stable (Gabrea, 2019).

The authorities eventually supported the initiative of the UAR to organize an international competition. Bucharest 2000 was supported by the Ministry of Public Works and Spatial Planning, under the patronage of the President of Romania. The Bucharest Municipality was invited, as organizer and co-funder. As such, the competition set off with a great premise to be a national priority project. Moreover, it generated significant interest internationally, for the opportunity to remodel a city center at the end of the 20th century. The competition was headed by Kenneth Frampton, and jury members also included Vittorio Gregotti, Fumihiko Maki, and Claude Vasconi, with Maki calling it “the best organized competition” he had witnessed in 20 years (Fezi, 2010, p. 126). A total of 235 teams from 35 countries took part in the competition.

The competition brief asked to address the “urban wounds” and “urban trauma” created by the 1980s intervention (Barris, 2008). The brief, shaped by a team from the Bucharest architecture school (IAIM), included the results of studies led by the IAIM.

The stated goals for projects included “the mitigation of the aggressions provoked by the urban operations realized from 1980 to 1989” through the creation of a flexible, open framework for sustainable development, a vision for the use of this central area, highlighting the site characteristics, the historic ensembles, and previous urban culture (Iosa, 2006, p. 89). This was an idea competition, with the actual solutions to be determined later by the municipality. As Barris (2000) noted, this makes an “intriguing parallel to Ceauşescu’s advisory role to the architect-in-chief of the House”, as the winning team would become an advisor to the city.

The projects proposed a variety of solutions, including the mitigation of the volume of the palace by new, dense construction, often of tall buildings, or its inclusion in a landscaped space. Many proposals used the perimeter block typology, demarcating exterior public space and private space inside the site, a formula with a good real estate yield but uncharacteristic of Bucharest before the 1980s (Cina, 2010; Gabrea, 2019). Some entries partially dismantled the People’s House or covered it with grassy landscaping. There were proposals to fragment the route of Victoria Socialismului Boulevard—the new Unirii Boulevard—through placing constructions on the route, compact planting, or the demolition of some 1980s buildings and the reconfiguration of older streets. The great prize was awarded (11 votes from 13) to the German practice of Meinhard von Gerkan and Joachim Zeis. They proposed the construction of high-rise buildings northwest of the palace to mitigate its size, as well as a reorganization of green space and the urban fabric considering the destructions endured (Tureanu, 1997).
In 1997, the General Council of the Municipality of Bucharest decided to adopt the results of the competition and to create a working group for its implementation. The Municipality commissioned and created an urban plan for the area, based on the winning solution. The negotiations to establish an institution—in the form of a public development agency—saw numerous hesitations from different public actors (Gabrea, 2019). In 1999, the government gave a decree to declare the Civic Center an area of national interest. This aimed to include the owners in a financial mechanism to realize a project inspired by Bucharest 2000. The decree was canceled by the new government in 2000, after severe criticism by the new Housing and Public Works minister, Miron Mitrea, who supported the Esplanada project instead (Iosa, 2006, p. 151). Bucharest 2000 was abandoned, which von Meinhard von Gerkan declared the greatest frustration of his 40 years of professional life (“We could not realise one single project”, 2006). The German architect highlighted that there was a major lack of commitment of the political class for the realization of this project for Bucharest (ibid.). While the

![FIGURE 11.3 Winning solution and alternative proposals for Bucharest 2000.](Bucharest 2000 archive)
House of the Republic was transformed through political will in the Romanian Parliament (Bădescu & Stătică, 2023), the Civic Center, once a core political project, was perceived as being abandoned by politics.

The only interventions to disrupt the massive volume of the Palace and the Civic Center plan were two architectural insertions. First, the National Museum of Contemporary Art, supported by Prime Minister Adrian Năstase in the early 2000s, aimed to bring life to the vast expanse of the palace, but faced opposition, both from Anca Petrescu as a breach of copyright and the Chamber of Deputies as a security threat (Bădescu & Stătică, 2023). Second, since 2011, the National Salvation Cathedral has been under construction just behind the Palace of the Parliament, a large Orthodox church that was the object of much contestation, but also showed the increased role of the Church as an institution in post-socialist Romania (Tateo, 2020). As for the Civic Center itself, in recent decades, the impact of the Civic Center on the neighborhoods just south of the former Victory of Socialism Boulevard as well as urban voids remaining after the 1980s demolitions became the focus of various initiatives, from the Integrated Urban Development Plan (PIDU) for Central Bucharest (2011) to cultural memory projects such as Uranus Now (2021–2022) (Figure 11.4).

**FIGURE 11.4** Reconnecting the city: Participatory mapping for the “Uranus Now” project (2021–2022), a grassroots initiative led by architects. Uranus now responds to the Civic Center’s demolitions with small-scale markers in contemporary Izvor Park, which refer to the erased cityscape, reclaiming public memory. On a planning level, after the EU accession in 2007, PIDUs became a common tool. The Central Bucharest PIDU, which is not implemented yet, tackles Bucharest’s N-S disruption by the former Victory of Socialism Boulevard by reconnecting severed areas with bridges over the river and a connected network of public spaces, emphasizing pedestrian and cycle mobility in a city dominated by cars.

*Source: Uranus Now, exhibit at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, 2021*
Esplanada: post-socialist PPPs and their discontents

The Esplanada project, proposed in a large swath of empty land in the Civic Center, reflects the tensions inherent to the post-socialist transformation of urban space very well. Up to the 1980s, this was an area of single-family homes, many with individual gardens; however, it was cleared out in 1984 to make space for the new National Opera, as part of the Civic Center project. Till 1990, the space remained unbuilt. Various plans for the area were drawn in the subsequent periods, reflecting the new post-socialist realities and priorities. On the one hand, there were the claims of former owners to get their properties back. Romania's restitution policies in the decades after 1989 were oscillating between giving the right to buy state property by tenants and restitution in kind, as opposed to financial compensation for the 1949 nationalization of property (Stan, 2010). Restitution became the framework after 2000, when the city’s older housing stock, but also the empty land resulting from the 1980s demolitions in the center, became objects of restitution claims (Șerban & Studio Basar, 2010). For the unbuilt land for the Opera, by 2004, there were already 66 persons who had notified the right of ownership under Law 10/2001 of certain land plots, with ten additional people already in possession of land (Savaliuc, 2008). On the other hand, in a city hungry for office space and where privatization had become a national priority, a much-touted project emerged, which included the selling of the area space from the public domain and the creation of an ample multiuse development.

The Esplanada project was born in 2004, initiated by the former Minister of Transport Miron Mitrea and aimed to redevelop the vacant land previously dedicated to the Civic Center Opera, officially called “The Chant of Romania Center” (Centrul Cântarea României). Baptized “Esplanada”, it was the object of the Government Decree no. 373/2004, signed by Mitrea and Prime Minister Adrian Năstase. The Decree declared it a site for functional re-conversion, for which a public–private partnership should be initiated in order to build a polyfunctional urban center on an area of over 10ha. The 2004 decision also mentioned the purchase of land from the owners or their expropriation for reasons of public utility. That year, the Ministry of Transport led by Mitrea concluded a project agreement with a “selected investor”, identified as the Hungarian-Canadian-owned Trigranit Holding Limited. The rationale for this selection was criticized as lacking transparency by the Romanian media (Savaliuc, 2008). Trigranit proposed to build dozens of high-rises with offices and housing, as well as hotels and shopping malls, alongside a concert hall, within ten years. The City Mayor at the time, Adrian Videanu, was a supporter of the one billion Euro proposal, particularly of the possibility of having skyscrapers in the eastern part of the Civic Center while the skyscrapers of the western part envisaged by Bucharest 2000 did not come to be. The Ministry of Transport, which owned the land, stated it would transfer the property to the City Hall after having a signed contract with the developer—as the public domain in Bucharest belongs to a variety of state actors—at times with different views for a site. A Memorandum of Negotiation was concluded in May 2006 between Trigranit and the Ministry of Transport, led by Laszlo Borbely from the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania, the Hungarian minority party that consistently took part in Romanian governments after 1989. The two parties agreed that the public authority would make the land available for 49 years, with the buildings to become state property afterward.

Romanian media criticized that the private properties that were already returned to owners were then rebought with public money to be given over directly to Trigranit (Savaliuc,
This point became a hot potato during the 2008 elections for the Bucharest Mayor. One candidate, Aurelian Pavelescu from a Christian democratic party, called it “a crime against the people of Bucharest”, calling it “unacceptable for the Government to get involved in Bucharest’s urban planning issues”, which, he added, should be taken by the community (Gabrea, 2019). The candidate who actually won, Sorin Oprescu, running for the social democrats and seen as the inheritor of the Communist Party, launched an alternative view: the space should become a park. The media extensively used his description of an Esplanada park with free-roaming deer and waterfalls, and this became one of the candidate’s trademarks. Oprescu won the elections. However, both the Esplanada deal and the park project were locked because of property restitution claims (Gabrea, 2019). Moreover, the chief architect at the time, Gheorghe Pătraşcu, later stated that the contract with Trigranit was signed by the government, but the Ministry of Finance did not give its approval, and with the change of government, the approval was interrupted (Digi24, 2018). In 2011, Trigranit withdrew from the investment.

The story of this case reflects how the changing political economy of post-socialism had impacts on planning: first, a solution based on the privatization of space was found, reflecting how privatization is the centerpiece of transition (Verdery, 1999); a return of the “public”, motivated by an understanding of politicians of the population’s desire for green public spaces; and, finally, the challenge of property restitution, one of the peculiar trademarks of the post-socialist transformation. In the words of a planning executive at the City Hall interviewed in June 2008, the first twenty years after 1989 have been a “non-stop revolution” of procedures, systems, and views of the “public” and “private”, which had a clear impact on urban spaces. Moreover, as the former chief architect of the city Pătraşcu said “Unfortunately, we have lost the strategic approach to development” (Digi24, 2018). At the time of writing, the area still stands empty, while there are new talks coming from the Government to build a Justice district, to bring city tribunals and the National High Court together, as well as the Bucharest Court of Appeal. The plan has not yet been approved, but if it does, it might signal a departure from the decades of lack of successful public-led projects in the area.

Conclusion

The Bucharest City Center showcases the relationship between planning and political systems. In the 1980s, the Civic Center organized around the Victory of Socialism Boulevard reflected the aspirations of the regime to remake society, as well as the planning tools that were available in the Socialist Republic of Romania. Under authoritarianism, the Civic Center managed to pull resources in a country otherwise undergoing austerity and saw the completion in less than ten years of a major project. It expressed both a strong ideology of a regime wanting to recreate space to reflect a new political project and the strong power to implement—from demolitions to planning and construction. It reflected the lack of participation, societal debate, and dissent and resistance in a state that reached in the 1980s the height of a personality cult and repression.

1989 constituted a radical change. In 1990, various actors vilified urban planning as a tool of dictatorship, and a new approach based on property rights replaced the old. It took Romania a decade to adopt new regulations for urban planning. After 1989, most major ideas connected to the area were not implemented, with competitions such as Bucharest 2000 being
in the end fiascoes reflecting the weak coordination of state actors in post-1989 Romania. In this context of state withdrawal, the actions undertaken to complete the yet unfinished Civic Center project showed not only the challenges of large-scale planning but also the potential that EU-led programs and bottom-up actions can have.

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Notes

1 Repeated pregnancy tests for all women and the absence of contraceptives were aimed to lead to an increased birth rate; the abortion ban resulted in an abortion black market, self-made interventions that led to death, and a steep increase in abandoned children that led to the infamous orphanage issue made a cause célèbre by Western media in the 1990s (cf. Kligman, 1998). All this to say that the law was perceived as one of the regime’s worst, which puts into perspective also the fact that the urban planning law came second in an ensemble of laws of an unpopular regime.
2 The CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne), the International Congresses of Modern Architecture, founded in 1928 and dissolved in 1959, held events across Europe to promote the principles of the Modern Movement.
3 In 1986, from 13 123 existing villages, 3931 were slated for demolition—nevertheless, until 1989, only 6 villages were actually destroyed (Fezi, 2013; Vais, 2022). In contrast to the information disseminated in the West by Hungarian diasporas (Kurti, 2001), these six were not Hungarian villages in Transylvania, but villages next to Bucharest, as the program had the scale of the entire state.
4 These included the Party’s design institute IP Carpați, the Bucharest planning institute Proiect București (IPB), the Bucharest architecture school IAIM, and the Polytechnic Institute of Iași.
5 Dâmbovița is one of the two rivers passing through Bucharest, in this case through its central area. It was the object of systematization itself, with the actual river flowing under a concrete case, where water is released (and stopped for periods during the summer, leaving the channel empty).

Literature


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