

# Rewritten in stone: imperial heritage in the sacred place of the nation

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between architectural transformations and the reshaping of memory in post-imperial urban space. It reflects on two forms of symbolic violence: first, iconoclastic acts of reshaping space to reflect national self-determination and moving away from empire, and second, acts that embody the recovery of imperial legacies. It analyzes the recent restoration of the Habsburg-built Alba Iulia citadel in the eve of Romania's Centennial celebrations of the 1918 Alba Iulia assembly which proclaimed the unification of Transylvania with Romania. It interrogates the intentionality of architectural transformations and how this heritage project expresses the frictions between memory narratives centred on the nation and forms of imperial duress and nostalgia. It traces how the after-lives of empire materialize in the built environment, as they do in the attitudes and yearnings of the cultural elite. Moreover, it reflects on parallels between European post-imperial and Global South post-colonial nation-building.

**KEYWORDS** Empire; self-determination; heritage; memory; Romania; Habsburg

## Introduction

In 2018, several Central and Eastern European countries celebrated a hundred years of either independence or unification on the ruins of disintegrating empires. In Romania, this centennial culminated with festivities on 1st December marking the Great Assembly at Alba Iulia. In 1918, delegates of Romanians in Transylvania asked for the separation of the region from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its unification with the Kingdom of Romania. As the city of Alba Iulia was preparing for the 2018 national celebrations, some noted that a recent heritage regeneration programme had robbed the Coronation Cathedral, the main architectural marker of this union, of its centrality in urban space. The Cathedral had been built in the 1920s inside the city's grand Habsburg-era citadel, with a big plaza constructed over the Western

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**Figure 1.** Aerial photo of the Citadel, 2007, Image courtesy of arch. Mircea Sabău.

fortifications (Figures 1 and 2). However, with the extensive restoration of its fortifications in the 2010s, the citadel returned to its imperial shape. In the process, the plaza which served as access to the Cathedral was sectioned



**Figure 2.** The plateau leading to the Coronation Cathedral and the Alba Iulia Citadel, 2007. Image courtesy of arch. Mircea Sabău.



**Figure 3.** The Western Section, 2014. Public domain, photographer Cătălin Cădan

through a moat, without a direct bridge to connect the Cathedral to the rest of the plaza (Figure 3). The spatial reconfiguration of Alba Iulia's citadel brought in tension imperial heritage and national memory just in the eve of the Centennial.

This article examines the clashes between these two seemingly unrelated acts of heritage-making and public memory in the Transylvanian city. I discuss changes in materiality in relationship to the memory of empire, examining the material cultural formations of public memory. To do so, I analyze how the interplay of heritagization and architectural projects occurred in a canvas of competing cosmopolitan and national aspirations, of local and state memory. At the centre of the article stands an inquiry of the intentionality of architectural transformations and the reshaping of memory in post-imperial urban space. Through analyzing the constellation of actors involved, I highlight the role of local actors and discuss how they negotiate between various threads of urban, regional, national and broader imperial memory. Moreover, the article ponders on what a discussion of imperial legacies in Central and Eastern Europe, usually framed within debates on nationalism rather than in global discussions on Empire, brings to the understanding of imperial duress.

The essay first discusses opportunities and challenges of dialoguing between post-imperial territories of this European periphery with post-colonial contexts. It then introduces the theoretical framework of the analysis on how social agents produce the materiality of the built environment as a

mnemonic ensemble. It turns to the story of Alba Iulia and its heritage remaking, tracing memories, place biographies, and the motivations of contemporary actors.<sup>1</sup> By focusing on the changes in materiality brought by architectural reconfigurations, the article reflects on two forms of symbolic violence: first, iconoclastic acts of reshaping space to reflect national self-determination and moving away from empire, and second, acts that embody the recovery of imperial legacies.

### **Imperial duress in ‘Central Europe’. Dilemmas and opportunities**

Since the 2000s, there have been debates on the applicability of a postcolonial framework on contemporary Central and Eastern Europe (Ruthner 2002, Keler-tas 2006, Owczarzak 2009, Cervinkova 2012, Badescu 2016, Ruthner 2018). An uneasiness about using the term has set the scene for alternatives: approaches rooted in world systems theory, regarding the region as a periphery of the Western European core (Boatcă 2007, Boatcă and Parvulescu 2020), or looking at the dynamic of imperial legacies and duress (Walton 2019, Jovanović and Carabelli 2020). Increasingly, the study of empire has discussed imperial formations from outside the European colonial system, including the analysis of Ottoman, Chinese, Japanese and Russian empires (Stoler *et al.* 2007), or more recently of empires off-center (Jovanović and Carabelli 2020). In proposing the term, Jovanović and Carabelli off-centered the imagined geographies of both postcolonial studies and of ‘continental’ empires, which include also the Central and Eastern European region.

Examining Transylvania as a post-imperial space can be related to two dimensions that are relevant to broader discussions of empire and which link to the vast body of work on coloniality: indigeneity and orientalism. The region of Transylvania has a long history of belonging to the Hungarian Kingdom, the Habsburg Empire, and more recently to Romania, with a modernity influenced by both imperial and nation-building processes. First, in terms of indigeneity, the Romanian nationalist reading of post-imperial after-life was that of a region that was returned to its ‘autochthonous’ population. Romanian nationalism in Transylvania has been obsessed with autochthony (Boia 2013). During imperial times, the claims for rights for the rural, illiterate Romanian majority of Transylvania came through the mobilization of their small elite. These argued that the Romanians, while in a wretched state at the time, were the oldest population of the land and their autochthony should warrant them rights. From an appeal to recognition and rights, the narrative of the indigenous who lose their land to powerful invaders became a trope of Romanianization processes after 1920. These included acts envisioned as emancipatory through the empowerment of the majority language, the education of the peasantry, and forms of affirmative action, framed as reparatory ‘justice’ by their advocates. However, this impacted negatively

the new minorities, particularly those previously in power like the Hungarians. The indigeneity narrative has also manifested through outbursts of angry calls to send Hungarians 'home', despite the latter's presence for a thousand years in the Carpathian basin. After the 1960s, during the so-called national-communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Marxist narrative of class struggle was ethnicized, underlining a history of Transylvania in which a Romanian underclass was liberated and found its final fulfilment in the Golden Era of communism and empowerment of the people (Verdery 1983). In Ceaușescu's support of post-colonial states, he underlined parallels between people who have escaped Empire, and now have 'their own' states including Romanians and the liberated people of Africa and Asia.

Second, Transylvania is relevant to the discussion on the varieties of orientalism within Europe which started in the aftermath of Said's (1978) seminal work. Eastern Europe, according to Larry Wolff (1994), has been depicted as an underdeveloped, less civilized, marginal Europe since the Enlightenment. As for the peripheries of the Habsburg empire, they were described by Austrian journalist Karl Emil Franzos in 1876 as a 'Half-Asia', with oases of civilization brought by German speakers in larger cities (Franzos 1883). In Transylvania, early travel literature and ethnographic treaties similarly commended the civilized German and Hungarian city dwellers, but underlined the backwardness of Romanian peasantry:

the Transylvanian Romanian rarely rises above the most primitive circumstances ... still live in miserable hovels, while the Magyar lords and the Saxon townsmen live in comfortable city or country residences. This inclination to a contemplative life also carries over to his intelligence; he is perplexed by concepts and opposes every new idea one tries to teach him.<sup>2</sup>

Dwelling on Said (1978), Milica Bakić-Hayden (1995) talked about Europe's nested orientalism, in which the South and the East were subjects of an orientalizing gaze, which made the Balkans Europe's Orient. According to Maria Todorova (2009), however, the Balkans were not orientalized in Said's terms, but were subject to a specific gaze of 'balkanism', depicting the Balkans as an incomplete 'other' of Europe, flawed and backward. Having found the 'savage' next door boosted in fact a self-congratulatory understanding of a civilized Europe. Yet this nesting and Balkan gaze is not only about different ethnic groups or states: at times, it cuts right through them. When Samuel Huntington drew his infamous 'civilization' line, he cut it through Romania, separating Transylvania, as part of a western culture, from the Old Kingdom, marked to belong to the Orthodox civilization, the one which lacked the Enlightenment and would be prone to despotism. Yet, in Romania, orientalizing and balkanizing functions also internally. In a study of perceptions, Kiss (2017) showed that within Romania, Transylvanians of all ethnic groups tend to use a Balkanizing framework to construct internal

hierarchies of 'development' and 'civilization'. They place the South of the country lower than the rest,<sup>3</sup> regarding themselves as Central Europeans.

Central Europe, or Mitteleuropa, has been the object of much longing during the Cold War. For some, belonging to Central Europe was an acknowledgement of Europeanness, as opposed to the so-called Eastern barbarity of the Soviets (Kundera 1984, Fehér 1989). Central Europe was an object of desire, and this longing was connected in certain societies to imperial nostalgia.

Since the end of Empire, Habsburg nostalgia focused on tropes of the good organization of the Empire versus the dysfunctionality of some of its successor states. More recently, it related to the lost multinationalism and cosmopolitanism of the Empire, opposed to the nationalism of the states which followed. As Robertson (1997, p. 105) argued, this nostalgia was indeed, 'a barometer of present moods', exhibiting 'uncertainties and anxieties of the present with presumed verities and comfort of the ... past' (Davis 1979, p. 10). After the fall of state socialism, the representation of the Habsburg empire changed throughout the region, as it did in Western historiography, from what had been characterized during the twentieth century as a 'prison of the peoples' to one of cosmopolitan, multicultural living (Judson 2016). The Habsburg Empire and its diversity have been reconstituted through nostalgia and identity claims of Europeanness and distinction from national backwardness (Ballingier 2003, Baskar 2007, Sindbaek and Hartmuth 2011, Hametz 2014, Schlipphacke 2014, Junyk 2015, Wanner 2016, Carabelli 2019). Multiculturalism itself has become a brand, perpetually mobilized in inviting tourists and investors (Shaw *et al.* 2004, Shaw and Karmowska 2006, Donald *et al.* 2009). Central European heritage or even populations associated with the region became a marker of distinction. For instance, Cercel (2019) showed how the positive image of the Transylvania Germans in contemporary Romania is linked to a desire of European belonging. Yet for others, Central Europe was nothing more than an imperial Habsburg aftertaste, marked by stiffness, self-containment and petty bourgeois conservatism (Baskar 2007).

The longing for Habsburg Central Europe and associated imperial nostalgia is just one facet of the legacies of imperial formations. The afterlives of empires are long lasting (Stoler *et al.* 2007) through what Ann Laura Stoler (2013, p. 5) describes as 'protracted imperial processes that saturate the subsoil of people's lives and persist'. The imperial *longue durée* is 'constitutive not only of the past, but of our broader social reality' (Jovanović and Carabelli 2020, p. 5), it can be identified and traced. Stoler (2016, p. 7) discussed such imperial duress as a 'a relation to a condition, ... a force exercised on muscles and mind' akin to the colonial gaze.

Imperial duress acts differently in post-colonial and post-imperial settings where nation-building led to ruptures and selective empowerment, in contrast to those in which relations of power and dispossession remain

unchallenged. For Gastón Gordillo (2013), the re-emergence of Spanish ruins in the Argentinian Chaco region obscures the histories of resistance of indigenous people to colonial conquest. Imperial heritage obfuscates histories of indigeneity. In Transylvania, historiography and cultural memory have been reshaped to highlight indigeneity and subjugation of the Romanians under empires, as well as their resistance. Romanians have now the political power in Transylvania and are therefore incomparable with the dispossessed Chaco population. The re-emergence of imperial heritage in Argentina occurs while the colonized continue to be silenced. In contrast, in Romania the new attention to the heritage of empire is concurrent with a continuous celebration of the nation. This tension merits a scrutiny which regards the constellations of power and the interplay between imperial duress and nation-building.

Understanding the construction of heritage and cultural memory narratives is also an endeavour of tracing imperial duress, recalling Stoler's (2006, p. 146) argument that 'imperial effects are intimately bound to [...] what counts as knowledge and its fields of force' There is a rising interest in the analysis of cultural artefacts in the engagement between postcolonial and decolonial frameworks and Central and Eastern Europe. Using literary texts, and applying Bhabha, Said and Spivak, Ruthner (2002, 2018) has examined the effect of conditions of imperial hegemony and domination in the constitution of images of Self and Other in the post- Habsburg realm. Boatcă and Parvulescu (2020) have underlined the dynamics of coloniality and inter-imperiality that have shaped Transylvania by analysing literary depictions of rural life. I turn to the built environment and to the processes of (re)shaping heritage as a medium to examine both nationalism and imperial duress. I also turn to cities, spaces where empires often leave visible traces, with administrative and residential architectures replicated from one corner of empire to the other. Nation-building cultural policy has often selected and emphasized particular strands of heritage to boost the narrative of the nation. Between heritage and cities shaped by Empire and the historical narrative of national continuity there are often tensions. The Castle in Bratislava, the most visible landmark in Slovakia's capital, is the Castle of Hungarian Kings, a fact downplayed in the panels located at its entrance. If one is not equipped with the historical knowledge, one may not necessarily see difference or domination of others. As Terry Eagleton (2000, p. 62) put it, 'The national unity which is sealed by Culture is shattered by culture'.

### **Framing memory in urban space**

Examining place-making practice is a tool to understand historicity, memory, and as this article argues, imperial duress. Memory scholar Aleida Assmann (2018, p. 288) sees place as a 'thickening and materialization of history', echoing historian Karl Schlögel's remark (2003, p. 64): 'All our knowledge of

history is attached to places. ... We cannot do without images of the sites where the events have happened: History takes place'. Assmann (2011, p. 322) sees places of remembrance as essential for a nation's memory, just as chronologically organized history books create the framework of historical consciousness. While such places are associated with memory tropes, my endeavour is to understand also how the embodied presence in such locations relates not only to memory but to forms of duress and afterlives of political entities.

Central to this endeavour is the tension between positions regarding how architectural structures communicate meaning, sustain memory, or enhance duress of political formations. According to Dalibor Vesely (2004), architecture communicates meaning, as it embodies the expression of a human search to find a place in the world in a particular context and it is a venue of conveying practices and meanings from one generation to another. The affective turn in social sciences and the emergence of Actor-Network Theory have also brought materiality to a more prominent place in memory studies, including debates on vitalism, affective triggers, and the agency of objects and buildings (Hommels 2005, Navaro-Yashin 2009, Bennett 2010). The built environment, then, can sustain, trigger, and engender memory, or mediate it (Bakshi 2014). There have been, however, critiques of the assumption that the mnemonic value and political meaning of urban space and architecture are embedded in its form. In a piece that became foundational for studies of architecture, Fredric Jameson (1997, p. 259) argued that political meaning is projected on place through a process of allegorization, relying on context as much as unconscious associations. Jameson (1997, p. 259) suggested that no cultural product can be seen as having a definitive political value, as our 'spatial unconscious can associate anything with anything else'. While specific places can be seen in particular moments as embodying political meaning, this understanding is purely allegorical and thus subject to change (Jameson 1997).

Recognizing Jameson's warning, I do not see the materiality produced by national projects or inherited from empire as direct mnemonic device or a conditioning of dispositions favoring national or imperial frameworks. Instead I see it as an element in a contemporary cultural formation that includes both the built environment as well as the persistence of social practices, narratives, and allegorical frames projected on such objects. I am therefore interested in the cultural dimensions of imperial legacies articulated both in materiality, as in cultural predispositions, in memory and in what is defined as 'heritage'. Building on the emerging critical heritage scholarship (Silverman 2011), I decouple the understanding of heritage from celebratory and best-practice-focused approaches associated with contemporary heritage policies. I scrutinize instead the production as well as the possibilities of reception of such heritage.

The meanings deciphered depend on the transmission of what Jan Assmann (1992) distinguished as communicative memory and cultural memory, including memory narrative frames conveyed through history classes, museums, just as through everyday narrations and framings. A grand citadel is a mnemonic device of empire not through its sheer presence—it could be as well just a relic of an abstract ‘past’, as medieval populations regarded Roman ruins - but through the associative narration of memory of empire through various cultural and communicative memory devices. While a study of communicative memory frames would require an extended ethnography, I focus here on the role of elites to convey cultural memory through what they designate as heritage. I investigate how they explain their decisions, by tracing cultural dispositions reflecting elements of imperial nostalgia and national memory frames. As such, this study focuses on the production of space. It traces intention to human actors and, in the absence of an ethnographic study, it uses a phenomenological reading of the spatial arrangement that results. Before discussing the constellation of actors and decisions, we will now turn to the histories and memories and imperial formations competing in Alba Iulia’s built environment.

### **A Transylvanian citadel. Materialities of empire and nation-building in Alba Iulia**

The Habsburg name for Alba Iulia was Karlsburg, referring to the citadel built during Emperor Charles VI’s reign, called Alba Carolina. This was the last iteration from a series of transformations of the citadel, including the Roman Apulum, and the medieval fortress built by the Hungarian Kingdom with the white (lat. ‘*alba*’) stones of the Roman city. After the takeover of Transylvania in 1699, the Habsburgs built a new citadel in Vauban style, a star-shaped fortification with seven bastions and six ravelins, delimited by deep moats.<sup>4</sup> An important city in Transylvania before the Habsburgs, Alba Iulia’s lack of urban growth in the late period of Empire ensured that walls remained untouched by the urban development projects that demolished many Habsburg fortifications elsewhere. The citadel, the largest in contemporary Romania, still occupies today a large section of the city’s centre.

Alba Iulia is not only dominated by the material legacy of the Habsburgs, but also by its role as an essential *lieu de mémoire* for both Romanians and Hungarians. For the Romanians, Alba Iulia is the city of the Union, marking both the Great Union of 1918,<sup>5</sup> but also a short-lived union realized centuries before between Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania.<sup>6</sup> The entrance of Wallachian ruler Michael the Brave at Alba Iulia in 1599 as a new ruler of Transylvania has been touted as the first unification of all Romanian-speaking principalities and has a cult status in Romanian history teaching.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the city is important for the autochthony claim. Apulum was the largest Roman

castrum of conquered Dacia and the seat of the XIII Gemina legion, thus catering to the historical tradition which sees Romanianness as the mixture of indigenous Dacians with Roman soldiers and colonists, emphasizing their continuity in the land. Alba Iulia also supports the memory of a subjugated people under foreign rule, as it was the place where the leadership of the Romanian peasant revolt of 1784 was tried and executed, marking the continuous oppression of the peasantry. Romanian historiography traditionally emphasized the 'national struggle' for self-determination, which culminated with the Alba Iulia Declaration, seen as a definitive rupture. Since the treaties following WW1, Alba Iulia remained part of Romania, with post-1989 seeing yearly celebrations on 1st December, the country's new National Day.

Yet, as Gyulafehérvár, Alba Iulia is also an important place in Hungarian history. The name of the city refers to Gyula, a tenth century Hungarian leader who took part in the conquest of the Carpathian basin and who ruled from Alba Iulia (Berend *et al.* 2007). Gyulafehérvár also saw the construction of Transylvania's first Catholic cathedral, St Michael, which became the burial place of Transylvania's princes.<sup>8</sup> When the Ottoman Empire eventually conquered Hungary in 1526, Gyulafehérvár became the capital of the Eastern Hungarian Kingdom, and later of the Principality of Transylvania, a vassal state to the Ottomans that was ruled by a Hungarian elite. The city flourished in what was seen as the Golden Age of Transylvania, particularly the early seventeenth century under the rule of Gabriel Bethlen, who built a princely castle inside the citadel. After its takeover by the Habsburg Empire, Transylvania continued to be run as an autonomous unit, but was incorporated in Hungary as part of the Austro-Hungarian compromise in 1867, with Gyulafehérvár gradually losing its importance. After 1918, the Hungarian narrative has focused on both trauma of disintegration of historic Hungary as well as on their new role as a minority that sees itself as discriminated in nationalizing Romania. Gyulafehérvár with its cathedral and princely castle remained a place of memory for Hungarian Transylvania.

Transylvania's Union with Romania came to disrupt the unperturbed endurance of the Habsburg Vauban citadel. The Romanian state decided to organize a coronation ceremony for King Ferdinand and Queen Marie as Kings of United Romania, which was to take place in Alba Iulia. The rationale was the role of the city in the union of 1918 as in the one led by Michael the Brave (Egry 2017). A Coronation Cathedral, of Orthodox rite, corresponding to the faith of a majority of Romanians,<sup>9</sup> was to stand next to the Catholic one. This was seen as a reparatory gesture to the Orthodox church built after Michael the Brave's entrance in Alba Iulia, which was destroyed when the Habsburgs started building their fortifications. The plan of the Romanian Ministry of Culture, led by historian Nicolae Iorga, called for a new access for the citadel to come from the plateau where the Great Assembly of 1918 took place. It included the design of a square appropriate for the Coronation ceremony and other public

festivities. In 1921, through several explosions, the upper part of the Western walls of the citadel was destroyed, with the rest buried in order to support the new access square to the cathedral.<sup>10</sup> The intervention ruptured the architectural unity of the citadel, with a possible reading of a break with the past to recover national history through a new Orthodox church.

As there were no plans of the Orthodox church erected in Michael the Brave's time, the architect of the Coronation cathedral relied on a church in the Wallachian capital Târgoviște, echoing the national revival architecture of the Old Kingdom. As such, the Coronation cathedral did not relate to Orthodox churches in Transylvania. Many of these were built out of wood, because of a century-old interdiction to build stone churches for the 'heretic' Orthodox. Others were shaped as simplified baroque responses to Catholic churches (Călin *et al.* 2018). For some Transylvanians, the primarily Wallachian-inspired churches that were built in the centres of their cities after 1920, as well as the spreading of the National Revival style of the Old Kingdom, marked a turn from architecture brought in from Vienna and Budapest to architecture coming straight from Bucharest. A Hungarian architect called it 'colonial architecture', expressing a takeover of Transylvania by the centralized Romanian Kingdom.<sup>11</sup>

The advocates for the Romanianization of the Transylvanian urban landscape argued that through their marginalized position in the Empire, Romanians had imitated the imperial overlords, and after the unification there was a time for a form of national emancipation to use cultural forms produced by the already 'liberated' lands of the Kingdom. In 1929, a new plan for Alba Iulia was approved.<sup>12</sup> This included a new development axis that started from the Union Hall, the building inside the citadel where the 1918 declaration was signed, passed by the Orthodox Cathedral, and through the newly-built square towards the Western (Apuseni) Mountains, a stronghold of the Romanian national movement. As the plan specified, the Coronation Cathedral was to become the central element for the new development of Alba Iulia, in both the interwar and the socialist period (1945–1989). (Dumitran 2018, p. 206)

Both Romanian and Hungarian narratives have traditionally downplayed the imperial Habsburg presence in Alba Iulia. The pre-1918 period was largely framed as a period of Hungarian rule for both groups, albeit with a rosier or darker tint. This was a feature of both communicative memory of groups, as well as the cultural memory narrated through monuments, museums, and textbooks, including in the nationalistic history-making regime of the Ceaușescu years in socialist Romania. Yet, in other communicative memory circles, the Habsburg legacy lurked, reminding of a glorious and well-organized European empire before the crumbling socialist nation-state. The built environment of the city was telling: with all the 1920s modifications, the materiality of the Habsburg presence was dominant through the large Vauban-style citadel, which stood voluminously between the older town and the new socialist-era housing blocks to the West.

## The restoration of the Habsburg fortress and its discontents

Left neglected for decades, the citadel entered the 1990s unkempt and overgrown. While a plethora of heritage sights in post-socialist Romania lie in a ruinous state, the Alba Iulia fortress was revamped into a spectacular tourist site by 2014. An array of actors took part in the citadel's regeneration. The City Manager, working for the City Hall under the Mayor, oversaw the citadel's rehabilitation project as part of a series of EU-funded projects for urban development. The architects who took part in the rehabilitation project share a series of traits. Four of the five project leaders hail from Alba Iulia, and had shared an early interest in the citadel. Two had studied the citadel at the local heritage office, where they had worked in the 1980s. They are all winners of city hall bids, and three of them identified themselves during interviews as the ones who first suggested the regeneration of the citadel to Mircea Hava, Alba Iulia's long-standing mayor.

The fact that most architects working on the project are local can be read in multiple ways. First, in the interviews I conducted, some of my interlocutors mentioned the cronyism of local networks which led to contracting local firms (and usually the same ones). However, there was also another narrative—that of the emancipation of the local dimension. Alba Iulia was presented as a city that works with local stakeholders and talent to improve the quality of the urban environment. As such, it was an empowerment of the local after centuries of plans coming from elsewhere, be it Vienna, Budapest or Bucharest.

According to the City Manager of Alba Iulia, the rehabilitation of the citadel was a purely functional project, destined to promote urban development. Despite being important for the Romanians in a historical sense, contemporary Alba Iulia is a small city caught between the two economic powerhouses of Cluj-Napoca and Sibiu. Alba Iulia had to embrace whatever made it unique, which they identified as being its Vauban citadel.

The rationale expounded by Alba Iulia's authorities is one of pragmatic choices— not only based on the singular nature of the citadel, but also the financial resources available. The Mayor of Alba Iulia, Mircea Hava, has run the city since 1996, belonging to a series of parties. In Romania's clientelism-prone politics, opposition mayors have harder times securing government funds, yet Hava managed to do so. In times when he was in the government party, the Ministry of Development helped Alba Iulia piloting together with UNDP a project of rehabilitation of selected heritage buildings. The aim was to promote a touristic route to showcase the three fortifications—the Roman, the medieval and the Habsburg.<sup>13</sup> Yet in the significant time that Hava spent in the opposition, managing to get European Union funds became the only way to conduct urban improvement projects, of which political survival depends. Cities like Alba Iulia could access EU structural funds since the country's 2007 accession with the goal of urban development, to reduce

disparities within the European Union. Heritage works, such as the regeneration of the citadel, have been funded as tools for economic development through the tourism they could bring and the impact on the city's attractiveness for investors. As such, according to the City Hall, heritage regeneration was not a goal in itself, but a tool to promote economic development in a country hungry for investors.

'Eying the citadel for rehabilitation', the mayor entered into a direct conflict with the Romanian Army in 1996, as the military had occupied most of the citadel structures at the time.<sup>14</sup> The battles to take over the citadel were slow and gradual. 'We have taken our citadel back' the City Manager victoriously claimed, echoing Jan Gehl's (2013) 'reconquered cities'. The City Manager underlined that the administration's vision for the citadel was one derived from residents, pointing to an unpublished 2007–2010 sociological study conducted by the local university. According to the study's results, people were interested in public spaces where they could spend their time, and places that would feature cultural events.

The focus on the citadel as a tool for economic development was not questioned in the manager's narrative. Similarly, there was no questioning on the focus on the Habsburg citadel rather than on other elements of Alba Iulia's 'unique' role in Romanian or Hungarian history. 'It was the specialists, the architects who talked about [the citadel's] value', noted the manager in our interview. Asked about Habsburg memory and heritage, he insisted that 'we did not want any connection to be made', pointing out that the citadel was Romania's largest, having Roman and medieval precursors.

The concept for rehabilitating the citadel was one of a holistic recovery of the Vauban-style structure, adapted to contemporary usage. However, what happened in the last decade was a series of separate projects, with different funders, which took each about a year to complete. The reference point were the citadel's walls and moats, while the design remained more liberal in the area between the walls. The key architects shared a vision of a recuperated citadel form, envisioning a combination of old and new. The city manager saw as successful the balance between a return to the Habsburg past and contemporary projects. Nevertheless, many critics concentrated on the 'new interventions', accusing the City Hall and the architects of changing too much. One particular critical point was related to the main square of the citadel, where old trees had been felled and discovered Roman ruins were covered with a new structure.

Key to the project was the recovery of the Western section, undoing the 1920s dynamiting and the urban design created through the Iorga plan. The recovery included the rehabilitation of gates and walls and the restoration of the pre-1921 moat. The technical report realized to support the intervention argued that the citadel's 'touristic potential is significantly diminished by the discontinuity of the Western wing'.<sup>15</sup> The Western section project

underwent consultation with several stakeholders. According to the City Manager, the only stakeholder that opposed the project to redo the walls and moats was the Orthodox Church. The archbishop was mainly concerned by the lack of a bridge that would fall perpendicular to the altar, thus maintaining the unification axis. According to the City Manager, the Mayor assured the Orthodox Bishop that a new bridge will be built as a separate project, and the church accepted the rehabilitation project. Yet other sources indicate a network of supporters in the Ministry of Culture which strongly favoured the project and managed to negotiate with the Church, which in Romania also receives funds from the Ministry. At the time, the Ministry was ran by a team from the Hungarian Democratic Party of Romania, and consisted of several heritage specialists and activists who took part in ambitious heritage revitalization of aristocratic heritage in Transylvania, including castles of Hungarian counts, as well as of rural Hungarian ethnographic heritage, such as the Rimetea (Torockó village). Yet according to one of the participants to the rehabilitation, the support of the Ministry was strictly related to the importance of heritage and there was no other agenda involved.

### **Debunking expertise**

While the whole project was related to the expertise of specialists, critical voices doubted how expert the main protagonists in the citadel's rehabilitation actually were. One interlocutor pointed out that the City Manager was well intentioned, but lacked appreciation of architectural and urban design due to a background in agricultural studies. Even more contestations came towards the architects. A commission from the Ministry of Culture criticized the restoration of the Roman ruins as unprofessional and ignoring the advice of specialists.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, heritage experts criticized the involvement of architects who had no original heritage training to take care on such a process.

Local architects involved have criticized several of the 'newcomers', from Bucharest or Moldavia who came to work or give advice on the project. The issue of local ownership and knowledge came to the foreground, but it also echoed frequent complains in the provinces about the paternalistic attitude of Bucharesters who came and tried to run the show. Resisting their interference was also an act of local defiance, but also of differentiation with those coming from the South and East.

The argument that heritage is technical was one often used by my interlocutors. It was the key of the city hall narrative of the citadel's rehabilitation. The specialists of the built environment, i.e. 'those in the know', designated a heritage-centred approach that was technical and apolitical. Nevertheless, as Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) have shown, the decision of what is

heritage remains a deeply political one, marked by dissonance. The communist authorities of Romania have nationalized palaces and country houses of former aristocrats in both Transylvania and the Old Kingdom, and converted them into hospitals, orphanages, or collective farms. Ornaments have been removed, their decorative gardens becoming agricultural lands. It was a way of not only 'giving back to the people', but also a form of symbolic violence against the old aristocratic order. Conversely, the attention given to this heritage, particularly in Transylvania, was echoing both frustration and anger with the deplorable condition of historically significant structures (such as for instance the Bonțida palace of the Bánffy family, once called Transylvania's Versailles), but it was also ethnically marked. At the launch of the Europa Nostra award to the rehabilitations of Bonțida for instance, a group of (Romanian) locals told me that they could care less about that complex being renovated, as this was the one of the *grof*, the (Hungarian) noble who had exploited generations of their forefathers. Thus, what is heritage in terms of architectural history, is marked differently by socioeconomic histories of class difference.

### Ghosts of empire

While the City Manager stated bluntly that they were not interested in making any connection with the Habsburg period, the architects who mobilized the citadel restoration project idea, and oversaw its completion, discussed the merits of the Habsburg citadel as heritage. For one key actor, the Vauban fortress represented a solid legacy of three hundred years of organization, opposed to the traditional disorganization of Romania's non-Habsburg South. In this view, the demolition of the citadel to favour Romanian nationalism was a breach in a stable system of a powerful well organized Empire, dynamited by the unification with a disorganized Balkan kingdom.

This echoes the tropes of a current of Transylvanian cultural elites who fundamentally oppose their province, defined by its multiculturalism and its Central European Habsburg experience, to the Old Kingdom (*Regat*). This included contempt of the two historical region- Moldavia, depicted as a poverty stricken land with high birth rate that sends frequent migrants to more prosperous Transylvania, and, more dismissingly, Wallachia, decried as corrupt, messy and disorganised- in one word, Balkan. Such views echo Balkanist tropes as articulated by Maria Todorova. In the view of its cultural elites, Transylvania, forever shaped by its Habsburg civilizational experience, is thus a Central European captive in a corrupt Balkan land.

For many Transylvanian Romanians, both the communicative memory of their peasant forefathers and the cultural memory of the nationalizing state portrayed Empire as a time of oppression and dispossession (Verdery 1983). Yet, increasingly for many urban elites, Empire has become a time of

aspiration and longing. Imperial duress came about through the crumbling heritage of historic centres, as it did through an imagined set of values: of order and political organization, of a past emancipation that was hardly matched by the serf experience of many predecessors but could be seen in the modernizing frictions of the later empire. As Mignolo (2007, p. 499) has pointed out, the rhetoric of modernity was deeply connected to the logic of empire. In its materiality in Alba Iulia, modernity was expressed through the domination of the imperial army over the city below.

### **Bridging back**

The promised bridge to the Coronation Church did arrive in 2018 (Figure 4). The public was surprised, as the negotiations had not been open. For five years, the landscape of the reconfigured citadel put the Coronation church in an awkward angle. As one critic pointed out ‘the only bridge now is going to the Catholic church, it looks like the Pope has paid to have his church back as the important one’. And as the announcements were made for the great celebrations to take place with the 2018 Centennial, it became hard to visualize how the memorial procession would move spatially in the restored space.

On 1st December 2018, the new bridge, a slender metal and glass affair was inaugurated together with a monument to Romanian Unification. The monument was a winning design from 1993, unpopular in the social media, ironically, for its similarity to the Facebook logo. The two were built from money earmarked from the national budget for the occasion of the Centennial celebration.

The architects who were involved in the citadel regeneration project contested the bridge. One confessed that he avoided the place. He mused that during the five years that no intervention was permitted, the citadel managed to keep its Habsburg glory. Yet now the gate for change has been opened. Commenting on the Centennial celebrations, the same architect mentioned that 1st December was a catastrophe, with such bad organization that left many disgruntled. The trope of Balkan messiness struck again.

### **Concluding thoughts: on heritage and imperial yearnings**

This article explored the frictions between cosmopolitan post-imperial nostalgia and nation-building memory on display in urban space, through a place-making process that was dominated by local actors. Focusing on the process of reconfiguring Alba Iulia’s built heritage, we have seen how the City Hall argues that its project was a lucrative one, developmental, tuned to funding possibilities and following a purely technical, professional solution of the ‘experts’, depoliticizing the meaning of its city-making act. It is in the yard of the architects where we found the explanatory frameworks that



**Figure 4.** The new bridge. Photo by the author (June 2019).

remind us that heritage is political. Using neutral, technical frames of 'restoration', the architects' choice of favouring the reconstruction of a particular time period echoes imperial nostalgia. Further, it reveals how the Vauban-style citadel has become a marker of Europeanness, order and discipline, brought in opposition to a perceived takeover by local peasant nationalism and a Balkan, dysfunctional statelet.

Yet, notwithstanding intentionality and explanatory frames, as well as the apolitical claims of the city hall, it is the process of reshaping urban materiality that reorders political hierarchies. The regenerated citadel, the Habsburg reenactment shows, and more significantly, the removal of the plateau, constitute an act of iconoclasm, as was the 1920s symbolic violence against Empire. The materiality of the built environment, through its sheer presence or its absence, its restoration or its decay, communicates cues to the viewer. As Jameson pointed out, attributing political meaning to architecture depends, however, on the allegorical frames of the viewer.

The technical frame of heritage and the normalcy of these projects within a European heritageophilia, however, render the cultural practice of re-centring imperial materiality harmless. As such, imperial legacies and yearning for empire reside in the undercurrents and subterranean spaces of experience in everyday life. The after-lives of empire materialize in the built environment, as they do in the attitudes and yearnings of the cultural elite.

As one architect pointed out, the masses do not understand the good that Empire has brought, and thus celebrate the self-determination as sort of liberation. Yet, indeed, the boundary between appreciation of self-determination and nationalism is very thin- the citadel's makeover in the 1920s as its use today are not only exemplary of the politics of recognition and repair, but also of new symbolic violence, bringing forward a discourse of legitimizing triumph on shattered victimhood. From the serfs of the Empire, Romanians have become the rulers of the land, and as such, space can be remastered, and older symbolic power, like the Catholic church of the Hungarians, overshadowed.

It is not local politics that challenges the over encompassing national narrative, but a series of cultural agents who function within frameworks of regionalism and imperial nostalgia. They are a barometer of present moods, in Robertson's terms, of an increasing disgruntlement with the corruption associated with the Romanian state based in Bucharest. The after-lives of empire do not reside in a return of the Austrians nor even in the voices of the Hungarian minority. Rather, they are in the sheer materiality of empire, brought to life by the agency of mobilizing regional intellectuals who embody the yearning for Habsburg organization and civilization. This echoes the ghosts of empire that dwell in many a post-imperial elite in post-colonial lands, as it expresses the postcolonial gaze of members of various urban regimes in other post-socialist cities (Badescu 2016).

The longing for Empire is connected with the rhetoric of an orderly modernity brought by the Habsburgs, with discipline and bureaucracy and predictability that the Romanian state, perpetually changing, unpredictable and in flux, delivered in incomplete, pastiche, approximate forms. This echoes the tropes of disappointment and self-Orientalism that exist in many post-imperial contexts after the proclamation of an independent state. Yet what eludes local narratives is that in the case of Alba Iulia, as in many other contexts, the modernity of empire was expressed through a military project of control. As in most empires, the discipline of modernity, its organizational structure was connected to a large military and security apparatus. The citadel is not only architectural heritage, but also the heritage of imperial control and militarism.

Imperial nostalgia is also connected to cosmopolitan aspirations. Privileging the imperial legacy means saying no to the often reductionist and myopic national lens. It is an emancipation from nationalism. Yet a desire for self-determination does not imply exclusionary nationalism. For local cultural critics of nationalism, exponents of the struggle for self-determination (such as the Romanian peasantry or its historical religious elites) are seen as anti-cosmopolitan. This is not unlike other South-East European contexts, in which urban elites regard rural populations as unsophisticated, anti-cosmopolitan, and backward nationalists (Štraus 1995, Konstantinović 2009).

The Central and Eastern European region has produced significant work against nationalism, as a reaction to often violent nationalisms that it also harboured. Work on nationalism has often referred to the region as a bastion of mobilizations of memory. Transylvania has extensively featured in this literature. Against the horrors of twentieth century nationalism, cosmopolitan thinkers and urban dwellers have reacted swiftly. Yet the drive to remove nationalism's dark sides has more recently come to reinterpret the historic movements towards self-determination under the tropes of the present. Here lies the need for further scholarly dialogue between the understanding of the two post-imperial worlds: the post-imperial territories of Central and Eastern Europe and the post-colonial world. While in much of the post-colonial world, the decolonization process is prized, the national liberation and revolutionary struggles celebrated, an engagement with the sceptical attitude on nationalism emerging from the reevaluation of violence in the long twentieth century in Europe can be productive. Conversely, the postcolonial critique of elites yearning for empire can ignite other debates in the post-imperial cities of Central and Eastern Europe.

Returning to materiality and imperial duress, an act of heritage repair that resuscitates the military logic of a defunct imperial power is not an act of liberation from twentieth century nationalism. Furthermore, as many other heritage projects, this was not a return to the city residents, but rather a project high-jacked by commercialization and touristification. Another architectural act- the Union bridge- changed yet again the spatial hierarchies of the citadel complex, favouring the memory of the fight for self-determination of a majority, indigenous group against imperial rule. Dismissed as useless, a violent imposition over the pristinely recovered imperial landscape, it reorders space yet again.

While very close to each other, the three bridges now crossing the Western moat are not redundant, but rather underline the complexity of Alba Iulia's space, carrying different meanings from each of their respective vantage points. Perhaps the double-attempt – to repair symbolic violence of the nation against imperial heritage, and of imperial heritage against nation –, as well as the three resulting bridges show, in stone, wood and metal, the multiplicity of materialities, legacies and memories.

## Notes

1. Interviews were conducted in June and July of 2019 with the City Manager of Alba Iulia, five architects who were responsible with most of the projects, two heritage professionals who worked on projects in the citadel, university professors at the 1 December University, former UNDP staff, and representatives of civil society organizations. The author also analysed local media coverage and readers' online comments. The site was visited in 2000, 2003, 2014, December 1st 2018, and June 2019.

2. Wlisoeki, in (Ruthner 2002, p. 880).
3. The perception exists, despite statistics indicating the South to be economically more developed than the Eastern province of Moldavia (Kiss 2017).
4. Based on principles of designs developed by the French military engineer Sebastien Le Prestre de Vauban, these star-shaped fortresses were first elaborated to revamp France's fortifications. They represented the dominant form of Habsburg defensive architecture during the eighteenth century.
5. Alba Iulia was one of three cities which in 1918 hosted assemblies which declared unifications with the Romanian Kingdom. It is the only one still in Romania. Chişinău, where the March 1918 proclamation of the union between Russian-controlled Bessarabia with Romania was made, was taken over by the Soviet Union in 1940 and is today the capital of the republic of Moldova. Cernăuţi, where in November, the unification of the Austrian Bukovina with Romania was proclaimed, is now Chernivtsi in Ukraine (Dumitran 2018).
6. A less popular memory thread focuses on Alba Iulia as the city of the Union with Rome, where a significant part of the Transylvanian Orthodox population declared allegiance to the Pope in 1700, becoming Greek Catholics, a group that was very important in the Romanian national movement.
7. Michael the Brave ruled over united Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania only until 1601, when he was assassinated at the order of Habsburg Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor. The 'Romanian idea' of his unification has been featured extensively since the nineteenth century in Romanian historiography. This is the case despite the assessment of many contemporary historians that Michael the Brave saw the takeover as part of a strategic game against the Ottomans and collaborated with local elites to the detriment of Transylvania's largely-enslaved Romanian peasantry.
8. Among the many figures buried there, John of Hunyadi elicits mutual reverence by Romanians and Hungarians alike. Reputedly from a Romanian-speaking family who converted to Catholicism to preserve noble rights (the only option for Orthodox nobility), he was instrumental in Hungary's victories against the Ottomans.
9. In Transylvania, a large proportion of the Romanian speakers was Greek Catholic at the time of the Coronation.
10. Arch. Lancrajan, interview, June 2019.
11. Interview, anonymized.
12. The Mihălţian plan. See more in (Dumitran 2018).
13. Interviews, Catalina Preda and Mihaita Lupu, former UNDP staff charged with the project.
14. Interview, city manager.
15. Documentatie tehnica, p. 3.
16. [https://adevarul.ro/locale/alba-iulia/ministerul-culturii-critica-modul-fost-restaurat-castrul-roman-alba-iulia-lucrari-nerealiste-suport-stiintific-1\\_5825b03f5ab6550cb8698e6f/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/locale/alba-iulia/ministerul-culturii-critica-modul-fost-restaurat-castrul-roman-alba-iulia-lucrari-nerealiste-suport-stiintific-1_5825b03f5ab6550cb8698e6f/index.html).

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