Romanian Urban Collage: Colour-Architecture-Politics

Veronica Maria Zybaczynski

Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism, Faculty of Architecture, Bucharest, ROMANIA

*veronica.zybaczynski@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The architecture is the carrier of a message: either symbolic, or social, political etc. Which role has the colour? Is the political context influencing colour together with the architecture? Does colour participate or not in transmitting the message? Is it random or carefully chosen?

This article investigates, through an historical research, the role of colour in the architecture of Bucharest since the 19th century until today, examining and emphasing the relationship between architecture, colour and the political context.

KEYWORDS: urban colourscape, politics, evolution of colour in architecture

INTRODUCTION

Located at the junction of several trade routes, the city of Bucharest, with a strong commercial character, has known since the second half of the 19th century, significant changes that marked the transition from the semi-rural status of the city to the urban one. During the second half of the 20th century Bucharest experienced a major and painful transformation in order to host the megalomaniac vision of the former communist leader Nicolae Ceausescu. The falling of the communist regime, in 1989, marked the beginning of a period characterized by a relative lack of rules regarding urbanism and architecture.

BUCHAREST – ARCHITECTURE AND POLITICS FROM THE 19TH CENTURY UNTIL TODAY

At the beginning of the 19th century a large number of architects educated in Paris at Ecole des Beaux Arts began to incorporate the principles of French architecture in the buildings they designed: from the volumetry to decoration, from proportions to colour, this architecture breathes through all pores the French influence . The political context is favorable to the opening up to the Western Europe. Cina (2011, pp.70-71) noted that "adherence to western architectural models turned into stylistic reproductions, pronounced ostentations of cultural belonging. [...] Emphasis on the decorative element resulted in an eclectic style (pompier, deco) defined appropriately as French-Balkan."

The preference for pastel, mellow and delicate colours skillfully applied on the façades is still visible today, although Bucharest has gone through severe trauma both in terms of political and social situation and, above all, of architecture (Figure 1)

Figure 1. The historical center of Bucharest now and then

On the basis of the awakening of national consciousness and the desire to find its own national identity, at the beginning of the 20th century, in architecture was born the neo-Romanian style, whose remarkable figure is Ion Mincu, a style regarded by Augustin Ioan as "the autochthonous art-nouveau".

The searches for the national identity style are also supported by the chromaticity, by borrowing the colours and the accents of colour that are found in the popular middle-class dwellings, in the first stage, and, in the next stage, in the palaces and monasteries made in the Brancovenesc style (Figure 2).
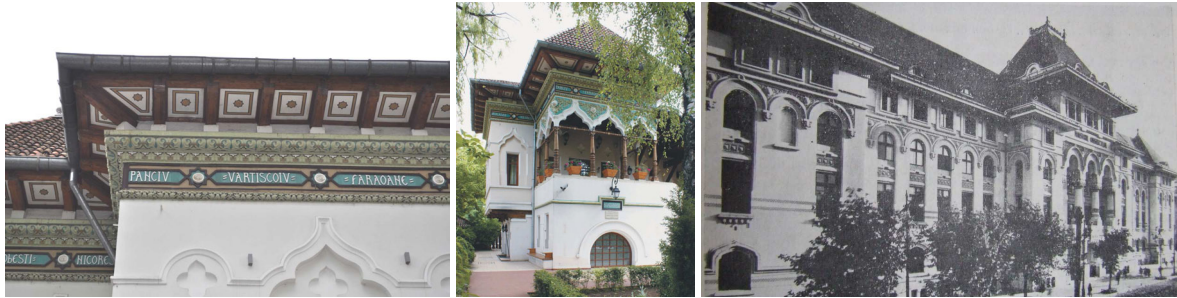

Figure 2. The neo-Romanian style. (left and center - Roadside Buffet, arch. Ion Mincu, right City Hall Bucharest, arch. Petre Antonescu)

In the immediate aftermath period between the two World Wars, the architecture began to be influenced by Modernism and Bauhaus (Figure 3), co-existing with influences both of French inspiration and of national architecture. It is a period when politics, through the royal dictatorship of fascist origin imposed by king Carol II, begins to manifest itself significantly on architecture, especially on public edifices, the monumental and strict chromaticity accentuating the austerity (Figure 4).
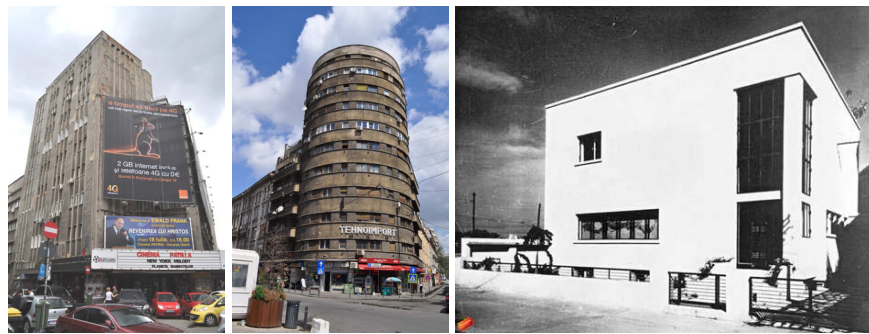

Figure 3. Modernist architecture in Bucharest (left - Aro Building, arch. Horia Creangă; center - Apartment building, arch. Henry Stern; right – Miclescu Vila, arch. Horia Creanga)

Figure 4. The Military Academy, Bucharest – arch. Duiliu Marcu

After the 2nd World War, Romania fell under the influence of the USSR and, implicitly, communism. From the political point of view, it is a powerful blow that will influence all aspects of the society until, hazardously speaking, today.

The architecture became monumental (both for public buildings and for dwellings), cold and is associated with a similar chromatic - gloomy gray tones, the purpose being clear: the triumph of the communism over democracy, over the Western society, the victory of the working class over the bourgeoisie and the intellectuals. The slogan that becomes iconic since this period is "we are working, not thinking" (Figure 5).
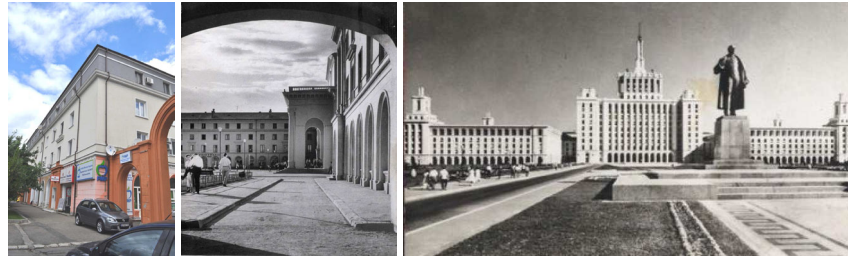
Figure 5. Left and center– Stalinist Dwellings, Bucurestii Noi District – arch. Alexandru Iotzu and arch Victor Aslan, right – Casa Scanteii, a replica of Lomonosov University, Moscow – arch. Horia Mircea Alifanti, Nicolae Bădescu and Marcel Locar

With the taking-over of political power by Nicolae Ceausescu in 1965, it began a process of political withdrawal from the USSR and the consolidation of Nicolae Ceausescu's power, with a series of actions including the political accentuation of the national character of architecture.

"The diversity of the ensembles, the buildings and even the elements of detail will be successfully performed only by combining everything that is most advanced and precious in the world architecture, with the local specificity, the traditions, the values of the Romanian national art. We are convinced that our architects and builders, who have demonstrated their ability and talent, will fully assert their spirit of initiative and creative fantasy to continuously develop and enrich the architecture of socialist Romania with its original imprint of the age we live in" says Nicolae Ceausescu - National Archives, from the file 34/1966 (CC of the PCR, Economic Section) quoted by Miruna Stroe in Project Housing and Political Decision. Romania 1954-1966.

This national character, the national identity as thought by Nicolae Ceasusescu, begins to be transposed into architecture by the construction of the great assemblies of Bucharest dwellings, whose façades carry traditional symbols that are emptied of meaning and distorted to kitch.

Since the 1970s, the focus has been on strengthening the political power by building civic centers on the sites where entire neighborhoods have been demolished. Tradition is preserved by demolition.

With the exception of buildings designed to expose / show off political power, all others are governed by one word: cheap. Thus, the colour of the building blocks is limited, in an overwhelming proportion, at gray, a colour that resists weathering and dirt.

Through the devastating earthquake in 1977, Nicolae Ceausescu receives an unexpected help, many valuable buildings of Bucharest collapsing.

Celac and Panaitescu write in Short History of the Organization of the Architecture in Romania from the Rules of AI Cuza and M. Kogalniceanu to the present: "The Romanian leader launches by *the theses of July* the ideological, dogmatic, anti-intellectual and lacking professionalism political course of the *small cultural revolution* that will evolve from neo-Stalinism to a primitive national communism" and which "will deeply negatively affect the architecture of the last decades of the twentieth century, will promote bureaucratization of architectural production and will lead to the degradation of the functional concept, expressive language and execution in architecture and urbanism of the '80s", a speech that will be channeled on the construction of the MASTER'S PALACE (similar to the medieval period). All the economic and constructive energies were concentrated until 1989 (when the Communist regime and Nicolae Ceausescu were removed) on the construction of this dream of the great ruler, the crowning of the Golden Age that Romania and the Romanian people lived: the People's House (Figure 6), an Edifice whose purpose was to demonstrate the victory of communism / socialism as well as its remarkable qualities.

It can be said that the white marble with which this construction is plated was meant to represent the purity of politics, the purity of communism and to transform Nicolae Ceausescu into a saving hero, in a Jeanne d'Arc of Romania.

Figure 6. People's House, now Parliament's Palace - arch. Anca Petrescu

The fall of the communist regime was an extremely important step in architecture, an impressive opening to Western architecture, whether it is Western Europe or the United States of America. (Figure 7)

Figure 7 Multicoloured Bucharest

Perhaps not surprising at all is the evolution of the chromactics - from cheap and dirt-resistant gray to an impressive chromatic palette: from pink to fresh green, from electric blue to intense yellow. Extrapolating Picasso's statement "painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war against brutality and darkness", it can be argued that the chromatic explosion at the level of architecture represented a pressure pipe. Although it started as a rebellion against the strict and oppressive rules of the communist regime, the architecture after 1989 was, and still is, largely governed by a single rule: there is no rule.

CONCLUSION

Starting from G.M. Cantacuzino, who noted in 1947 that "architecture can pursue more clearly the interdependence between society and the creation of artworks [...] because the architect works exclusively for the present", we can identify certain key elements of architecture and its chromaticity:

1. The 19th century marks the transition from the semi-rural to the urban status of Bucharest. The political context, the opening towards Western Europe was also reflected in the architecture. The period is dominated by pastel colours, light colours, attention to detail, both at the level of the public architecture and the architecture of the dwelling.

2. The beginning of the 20th century is under the sign of the distillation of a national identity, especially at the level of architecture, the chromatics being inspired by that of the traditional edifices.

3. Since the middle of the 20th century, the political context has changed dramatically. The politics became oppressive, oriented towards the construction of imposing, grandiose public buildings, both in terms of volumetry and of decorations and colour.

4. The end of the 20th century brings with it a significant relaxation of politics, a period of efforts to reorient and realign it to the West, and the echo is visible as well in the architecture as in the chromaticity of the city.

This historical research has revealed a particularly important aspect: although the external chromatics was not the main vehicle of the symbols of power and of the influence of politics on society, that - being indissolubly linked to architecture - can be analyzed in this context. Furthermore, from the analysis of the chromatics of the architecture of Bucharest (from the colours of the Romanian village, predominantly light, to the elegant chromaticity of the 19th century, from the severe chromatics of the middle of the 20th century to the present chromatic exuberance), it can be said that it represents an almost perfect radiography of the Romanian society both from the point of view of the evolution of the architecture, and from the political, social and economic point of view.

REFERENCES

[1]   Cantacuzino, G.M. 2002. *Introducere la studiul arhitecturii*. Paideia, 143-148
[2]   Celac M., Panaitescu A. 2016. *Scurt istoric al organizării profesiei de arhitect în România de la "Regulamentulu" lui A. I. Cuza și M. Kogălniceanu până în prezent*. Arhitectura 1906 Journal (2)
[3]   Cina, G. 2010. Bucharest, from village to metropolis. Capitel
[4]   Dame, F. 2007. *Bucureştiul în 1906*. Paralela 45
[5]   Ioan, A. 1992. *Arhitectura si puterea. Architecture and Power*. AgerFilm, 45-71
[6]   Majuru, A. 2003. Bucureştii mahalalelor sau periferia ca mod de existenţă. Compania
[7]   Penrose, R. 1981. *Picasso, His Life and work*. University of California Press, 356
[8]   Stroe M. 2016. *Locuirea între proiect şi decizie politică. România 1954-1966.* Simetria
[9]   Photographic Sources: personal archive, http://www.bucurestiivechisinoi.ro, http://www.agerfilm.ro