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COLLECTIVE HOUSING: CROSSOVERS FROM THEN TO NOW

Collective housing in Romania was mostly built during the communist era and was the typical environment for my generation's childhood. I will try here to describe the place, mostly through some memories and experiences of my childhood, and through conclusions I can take, after working on a faculty study together with my architecture school friends. I will talk first about the in between blocks of flats space and its role as a public space (see article on the *Mnemonics*[1] exhibition), then analyse the individual block of flats unit and compare them both with the classic modernist examples. Finally, I will speak about the meaning of the expressions *collective housing* in relation with collective living and social housing, mentioning today's market driven tendencies for social housing.

[1] Craciun Andrei, *Tineri români care au cucerit lauri la Bienala de Arhitectură de la Veneția* (article in Romanian) *Young Romanians who have won Laurels at the Venice Architecture Biennale* (own translation in English), [22.08.2018]; viitorulromaniei.ro; https://viitorulromaniei.ro/2018/08/22/tinerii-romani-care-au-cucerit-lauri-la-bienala-de-arhitectura-de-la-venetia/ [23.08.2018]; This interview is about *Mnemonics*, the Romanian project participating to the 2018 Venice Architecture Bienalle, in the pavilion competition, at the Giardini;

Childhood

From 1947 to 1989 Romania was under the communist rule. The great majority of collective housing was part from the newly designed dormitory neighbourhoods. They came as a solution for the accelerated process of industrialization, that focused mostly on the building of new factories around the urban centres. As a consequence, many peasants had to leave their old way of living in private owned rural houses, move in the cities and adapt to the collective living lifestyle.

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First time when I experienced collective housing I was a very young child, so, if I jumped too much on the couch the neighbour beneath us, Mr. Spiroiu, would angrily ring at the door and ask me to stop. For the rest the neighbours were not interesting at all, except for Victor, who I've met when I was maybe around 3. He was my age and living at the same floor, just in front of my door. His apartment became an extension of mine, since we were always playing and transiting from one to the other. My apartment seemed normal to me, while his, not at all. It was darker, with a scary African mask on the hallway's wall, with a specific smell of both sweet perfume and tobacco, and a black sink in the bathroom!? Both of us had their own room. I remember that we were playing inside either of them late in the evenings, blocking the door with furniture when our parents were coming to tell us that it’s about bed time.

When I was around five, I was allowed to play outside. It was a much bigger room to share with other children. Here I've met Răzvan. He was for a long time my best friend. We played close to my flat and built together cities for making wars between soldiers, cowboys and Indians (that fought together, because otherwise they would have been outnumbered by the soldiers). When we were in a bigger group of friends, we played football together. There was a kindergarten nearby, where we had to jump a fence to be able to play, only after the children of the kindergarten went home. We played

football there until it was too dark to do so. Regularly, there were not so many kids playing, but sometimes, there were so many children that we had to split into more teams. Usually, every courtyard had its own team. I don't know if rivalry was born from here, but we never got along with the guys over the concrete fence. It was a forbidden territory that I was afraid to explore. When things became nasty a real war was happening, be it with mud balls, sticks or grapes. If during summer we played mostly in the courtyard, during wintertime we preferred to play in somebody's stairway. Our courtyard had six of them, and we knew all of them very well. We used them both as shortcuts, since they had doors on both sides, and as places to meet and play. We were maybe 12 children in total, 5 my age. There were also girls that preferred to play here most of the time, including my sister who was 3 years younger than me. Still, when it was snowing all of us went outside. I remember that at some point, when it snowed a lot, somebody had the idea to build an igloo. There were maybe more than 20 children working at it, and curiously enough, our rivals, who were older than us, stopped hunting us for the moment. We've made it in the end and made also a fire close to it, using a dried Christmas tree as fuel.

InBetween

InBetween[2] is the title of a study we've made during our student years. This was our team: Alexandra, Anca, Bogdan, Clara, Radu, Roli, Maria, Sergiu and I, and as its name says, it was about the space in between the blocks of flats. The case study is on a neighbourhood from Timișoara, but this example is actually specific, due to its repetition, to the vast majority of Romanian condominium neighbourhoods built in the communist era (my childhood one included). It is a space which, on the opposite of the very

[2] Radoslav R. (coordinator), Isopescu B., Piscoi C., Rigler R., Sabău S., Sgîrcea M., Spiridon A., Tomescu A., Văleanu P., *In Between*, Editura Politehnica , 2009;



Figure 1 – Block entrance. Own made foto from Arad, Ioan Suciu street, 2018. An example of a present day very tidy Romanian block entrance, with own designed garden, benches, bike parking, etc.This cases are somehow rare, but maybe, in this case, the fact that at least the parking lots were delimited by a communal project, made the people in the area to look more after the in between the blocks space.

rational communist planning of the blocks of flats, has almost no design at all, as if the negative shape would be a left over space. La Ville Radieuse of Le Corbusier presented this ideal of repetitive figures floating in an incommensurable green ground space, as if the land had no specificity at all. Even if the tubular like space of the street wanted to be overpassed, while the city be thought from above, places still existed, when living in this type of space. But these images, as idealistic as they were, were not thought in time, as if change could never happen. Still, when analysing the neighbourhood, we understood that the in between space was abstract no more, as people started, especially after the fall of communism, to appropriate the space and adapt it to their needs. What they were doing by,

extending ground floor balconies, building pergolas and benches, delineating gardens, was mostly illegal, but at the same time healthy for the life of the communities. The urbanistic thinking of the communists imagined that people would meet in the community centres of the neighbourhood, but the population, which was, in its majority, borned in rural areas, was not accustomed to formalities. In the context of a process of assimilation of the capitalist culture, where individuality had to be expressed, space got rapidly differentiated. What was for Le Corbusier the infinite background for architecture volumes, became here the protagonist of an emergent society.

Public Space

Maybe it is not of a surprise that the same space became the subject of the Romanian pavilion at the 2018 Venice Biennale, interpreting the theme of the exhibition, *Freespace,* in Romanian terms and viewing the communal space between the blocks as a definitory public space. Even if the concept of Mnemonics[3] is not familiar to me, after reading an article about the exhibition[4], I was tempted to track my own memories from my experience of this space and used this subject as a catalyst for my text ideas.

Still, when entering this Romanian space of collage, it can feel ironical that it was first designed from the same functionalist standpoint that Gropius sustained at the 1930 CIAM, where space was nothing more than the minimum void that gave comfort to all individual apartments in terms of light, and maximum exploitation of the housing lot, showing the ideal ratios between every height and distance between the buildings. It was like a formula. Seeing the diagram, this space could hardly be imagined as filled with life.

[3] see note 1;

[4] see note 1;

Nevertheless, we have to remember that these schemes appeared after the WWI, when Germany was in a difficult international position, one of the big problems being the *housing shortage*[5]*.* In this context, high efficiency was needed. *Existenzminimum* was both the slogan of the Neue Sachlichkeit for the 1929 CIAM and its subject, and wanted, through social housing, to give at least the basic dwelling conditions for every citizen. Nevertheless, the initial designs of the movement were more attentive to the needs of the dweller and to the public space: the *siedlung* of Haesler at Celle, the Georgsgarten (1924), proposed private gardens and shared functions as a laundry room, shops or a library, while Ernst May's Bruchenfeldstrasse (1925), at Frankfurt, had a zigzag pattern of condominiums, that formed a shared garden[6]. This was not the case for the great majority of the Romanian neighbourhoods, built during the communist era, that resembled more the later German examples. The situation changed after the 1989 Revolution, when people began to surpass uniformity through spontaneous interventions, this monotonous space getting its own identity.

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My highest satisfaction as a child was to search or build places to hide. The Huckleberry Finn shelter would have been the ideal place to share with my friends. For a functionalist architect the rule would be to build 10 places to hide for children, if these have been on the brief. Instead, I wanted that with the lowest possible effort to find or build what I needed, in an already built environment. This was maybe the state of mind of the surrounding grown-ups. The space existed, the needs existed too. I agree with the idea of this space as a public space[7], because it was a space of compromise. There

[5] Silverman Dan P., *A Pledge Unredeemed: The Housing Crisis in Weimar Germany*, from *Central European History, vol. 3, no.1/2,* Mar/Jun 1970*,* p.112*;* published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Central European History Society, page count 28, taken from https://www.jstor.org; https://www.jstor.org/stable/4545563?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [04.09.2018];

[6] Frampton, Kenneth, *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (Italian version-Third Edition), Zanichelli Editore, Bologna, 1993, p.153, 154 (original title in English *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, Thames and Hudson, London,1980,1985,1992);

[7] This idea is mentioned in the interview from the cited article; see note 1;

were plenty of people involved that wanted to use it in different ways. Legally, it was neither private, neither collective property. It was the city's land. Some people needed places to rest and discuss, similar to the one in front of the Romanian traditional village houses, so they built benches in front of the blocks' entrances. Flower gardens or planting grapes and fruit trees or even vegetable were frequent. This introduced a kind of private owning of the objects that brought conflict, if it was not sensitive to the others. For example, somebody from my courtyard marked a private car park and introduced a lockable barrier. Soon after, the neighbours forced him to demolish it, because car parks were only shared. The trees were another problem when some people didn't let us take fruit from them, defending them, even by throwing objects to children. Nevertheless, the delight to eat from these forbidden trees was the highest.

And this space was not monofunctional at all. The parking area we often used as a tennis court or as a football field or just as a playground. Occasionally, when a wedding was happening, the same place was transformed temporary into a stage. The guests, together with a singing folk music orchestra, were waiting for the bride to descend from the block's stairway, in order to get into the decorated cars, that were driven towards the church. In the meantime, a cameraman and maybe a photographer were recording the event. Curious neighbours were gathering, while more discreet ones were only looking from their windows. There was no concept of multifunctional space behind this, but just people manifesting as they felt they should in different situations.

The Units

We spoke about this space, but what about the individual blocks around it? What was collective about them? My flat had a stairway and two storage spaces that were shared, usually used by the families at the ground floor, where they lied. For the rest, I don't remember to share too many things. During Christmas time we went around carolling and received money

instead. But, for most of the time you knew that the neighbours were around because of the unexisting acoustic insulation. You could hear them very well. If you have put a reversed glass on the wall, you could hear them even better. Identical apartments were stacked one on top of the other and random people put inside them. That was basically the idea.

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When using the term *unité* for his renowned building Unité d'Habitation, Le Corbusier was maybe thinking about two things: first about its unity and then, secondly, about a unit in a complex of repetitive units, as in his La Ville Radieuse scheme. Having the well-known pilotis, so just slightly touching the ground, it became more independent. Then, two interior double-height streets with shops were present, and also collective functions and a plaza like space on the rooftop. I think the idea was that the ensemble in its unity could work as an independent universe, working even segregated from the rest of the city. The functions were put together by taking and building the Russian avant-garde idea of the *social condenser*. Then, there were the apartments, so the units stacked two by two in a scheme that involved 3 floors, with one and a half floors for each apartment, and an access corridor in the middle, every apartment having windows on both facades of the lamellar building, and also a double height living room.

When simplified, Le Corbusier's ideas looked horrible. Like any simplified architecture, when mass-produced, lacked the qualities that represented its advantage. Collective housing meant for Corbusier the shared functions, while sharing rituals was no more characteristic for a modern person. Every apartment unit worked independently, for the rest, the rules of the function were dictating the behaviour of the user, as the configuration of the whole Unité d'Habitation was dictating the behaviour of the dweller. This rationalist idea looked perfect on paper, but forgot about individual options, even if, on the apartment level, it managed to create a new urban lifestyle model.

On the other hand, the Romanian flats were either typified or adapted to the plots. They were comfort 1 to 3 in base of floor surface and other features, had 3, 4, 6, 8 or 10 floors, 1, 2, 3, 4 or even 5 rooms, but there was no

identity at all. They were units that had to be built in order to fulfil the 5 year plan. This was for sure not for the sake of the people. These devices came from the machine age ideas, but in communism they were built not by illuminated artists (even if in the West this wasn't always the case), but by a regime that wanted to rapidly transform the cities into infinite landscapes of repetitive blocks: this was *La Ville Radieuse accomplished.*

Collective Housing

But what do we understand now by *collective housing*? If we analyse it etymologically, we have the word *collective*, which means together, and *housing* that refers to the house, something usually individual. So maybe, there is an internal conflict between the two. In Romanian, the translation would be *collective living*. This would mean actually living together, so something like a community. In a community there is an exterior pressure on the individual from the whole group, because the member represents it, while for the more modern idea of society, there are individuals that are part of it and have a social contract with it. By oversimplifying the two cases, there are morals and laws.

What we usually have nowadays in collective housing are people, that share the same building because they don't have enough money to build their own house, or people, who like a more comfortable urban lifestyle, without all the house related obligations. What about the collective part, are there any benefits of living together with other people? Because money usually dictate the features of an apartment (as the surface amount, available personal car park, available elevator, design, vista, green space), people, in these configurations, would live with people similar to their social status, which is also dictated by money. This brings psychological comfort. If the building or group of buildings is not segregated from the city, the collective functions are not wanted by the tenants, because this will increase both the price of the apartment and the utility price. Secondly, habits are also individual, so that the city can offer a much larger palette of

functions for people that have money to spend. The apartment looks rather as a product where everybody wants some features for it, while for the collective part of the expression I don't think I've heared many talking enthusiastically about it. People actually pay for comfort and don't want to be bothered by other people. And architects give them a design made of more or less intelligent plans and a facade that is attractive and status giving. In conclusion, in this case, the term *collective housing* is improper.

More often the emphasis on the collective part of the expression can be found in social housing, where people cannot benefit from the mobility and money spending of the middle class. Because of the lower amount of choices, they are more prone to collaboration and to taking care of their own environment. That is why communities rather happen to be formed here. But, if no incentives are given, the risk is that the neighbourhoods turn into ghettos. Still, architects seem to receive a better role here, where a good design has more chances to improve living. The 2016 Pritzker Prize winner Alejandro Aravena made a collective housing design where he left half of every house not build, in order to give motivation for a follow-up personal extension. This seems intelligent, as the owner could adapt the house to its needs. Taking the time factor into consideration seems normal, but it is very rare. I don't know if in this case the scheme worked, but I do know that for the Soarelui Neighbourhood[8], that we studied, two simple rules did: allowing transforming ground floor apartments into shops and not being scrupulous about having private gardens on the public land, between the condominiums. This helped to make the area multifunctional and also increased the dwellers' involvement in the taking care of the outdoor spaces, improving in the end the quality of life (even if it worked, the gardens were not legally owned, finding a way to give them legally to the community would have been a plus). As for the collective part, the blocks courtyards were transformed into informal football fields or just places to

[8] The study done in 2008-2009, and participated to the 4th International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam 2009, is about the 80s built *Soarelui neighbourhood* in Timişoara, Romania. The study is based on a pattern structure taken from Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977, and inspired by Christopher Alexander's *The Timeless Way of building*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1979;

gather. Especially in the warm season, people spent a lot of time there. The main idea is that any collective activity can happen only where there is a need for it and housing can become collective only when both the blocks of flats and the space between them can hold these activities. This can only take place when the logic is not entirely top-down, be it the state or a marketer at the top.

Closure

In order to make it work, collective housing has to gain what my childhood neighbourhood had, a space prone to hold both rules and spontaneity. For that reason, architects should forget about doing *colourful packaging*[9] and sellable images that can be used for the good of the investor and not for the good of the actual living. Collective housing is more than an individual apartment plan and a nice facade. It is also about a social vision, individual buildings or ensembles working through shared functions and in between spaces that manage to work as public ones. If we want to not only build collective housing, but to reach collective living, architects should not just adapt to the market, learning instead from what modernist architects like Le Corbusier had in mind: a social program and an individual standpoint from the start. Too many architects borrowed the postrationalisation habits from marketers, instead of having the courage to sustain own discourses and to test them into their work. They preferred the safe way that is risk free, but puts the profession closer to that of a service giver than to a respected field. On the top of that, we should also learn from modernist mistakes that both over designed and idealized societies, not letting the dwellers to create their

[9] Curtis, William J.R., *Modern Architecture since 1900*, Phaidon Press Limited (Third Edition), London, New York, 1996, p.604. Curtis is using this term describing the end 70s and 80s postmodernist architecture, these tendencies finding proper ground nowadays in the collective housing realm too.

own places, by relying upon mechanisation and endless repetitions. Finding what is specifically human and can be shared by human beings are the only ways to start going towards a successful design of collective housing.