Romanian Postcommunist Densification-A CaseStudy

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Abstract

Most of the important cities of Europe have as an urban policy rational densification. The theory of the compact city, efficient both economically and ecologically, has become an urban planning paradigm worldwide.On a theoretical basis, the urban densification could be considered a highly acclaimed trend nowadays. There is an overflow of studies and good-practice projects, although almost all having taken place in Western Europe and North America. It seems that Romania is craving for western models, although applying them without any strategy which might prove rather harmful.Contemporary urban ambiguities makes communist planning look almost handsome. After 20 years of attempts, it is sad to realize that communist planning was more efficient and better managed. Romanians build avidly as they make the rules. European norms and structural funds seem to cause havoc instead of guidance. Romanians still have a strong tendency to wait for the leaders to make decisions in their own backyard. Thinking long-term on a larger scale is far from being a habit. We have a complex and often contradictory heritage which makes the Western theories hard to swallow. A genuine Romanian urban regeneration requires planners that understand the post communist local context.

Key words:
> *densification, urban density, socialist planning, compact city, Romanian urban planning*

Background - Small Talk About Density and Densification

Density and densification have always been equivocal concepts in urban planning. The decisions in the field of assuring an optimal density are extremely important in city planning; yet no general rules can be applied. Every urban settlement, small towns and huge metropolises alike, has its ideal level of densification, and it differs from neighbourhood to neighbourhood.

If one should ask whether there is an ideal density and an ideal living space, one would receive often-contradictory answers. Obviously, an urban planner from Bombay would give a very different answer from one in Washington or one in a small Romanian town. Each nation or cultural group has its own image of the ideal home and urban density.

Countless studies have tried to make correlations between the required space for habitation and the adequate density of every community. Edward T. Hall, in his book "The Hidden Dimension"(Hall 34-36), studies the need for territory in the animal kingdom and the

effects of shortage of territory, which leads to unexpected or downright bizarre effects. A dilemmatic example from his frequently cited book is that of a deer population confined to JamesIsland, near Cambridge (Maryland). The mortality rate rose inexplicably during 1957-1958. There was no evident reason considering that there was sufficient food available. The autopsy of the dead animals revealed no relevant diseases. The conclusion was that the combined factors of stress and territorial deprivation led to an increase in mortality. Agglomeration could be stressful for animals, but when it comes to humans, territorial requirements are even more complex.

Jane Jacobs, a fierce critic of modern functional urbanism and a supporter of the dense city, stated: "What are the proper densities for city dwellings? ... [P]roper city dwelling densities are a matter of performance. They cannot be based on abstractions about the quantities of land that ideally should be allotted for so-and-so many people (living in some docile imaginary society). Densities are too low or too high when they frustrate city diversity instead of abetting it. " (Jacobs221). In her opinion, there is a clear distinction between density and agglomeration. If the first contributes to the intensity and animated state of urban life, the second implies only the insufficient habitation space. Thus, the two notions should not be confused. In a way, she makes a plea for a historical medieval town, densely inhabited, with sufficient commercial functions, with a vivid street life and intense social interaction. In order to understand these concepts, all we have to do is take a glimpse at the historical centres of European cities (preferably not tourist hot spots).

We owe the rediscovery of the historical European city to post-modern visionaries Krier, Venturi, Rossi, and Gruen. Their ideas saved numerous cities from aggressive modernist theories. The first frightening image that comes to mind is the "Voisin" Plan of Corbusier, which implied the demolition of a generous part of Paris and its replacement with skyscraper-like buildings.

Paris, on the other hand, could be an excellent example for densification theories. Victor Gruen, in his book "*The Heart of Our Cities, The Urban Crisis: Diagnosis and Cure*", uses Paris as a positive example by contrasting its lively neighbourhoods with uninteresting American suburbs.

Two Case Studies and the Misunderstood Ideal Density

Paris has one of the densest downtown areas in Europe. In the historical part of the city, the average COS[1]is 3.5 to 3.7. Despite this, Parisian districts are famous for their vivid atmosphere.

If we consider as an area of study Boulevard Daumesnil between two metro stations in the 12th arrondissement, we notice the impressive number of commercial and social functions.

Boulevard Daumesnil is an urban area with six story early 20th century buildings, while in the adjacent streets there are '60's era ten story buildings and an average COS of 3.5.

The delimited area between two underground stations holds a multitude of commercial functions (boulangeries[2], fromageries[3], boucheries[4], supermarkets, restaurants, brasseries, etc.).

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[1]*Coefficient de Occupation des Sols* it represents the rapport between the surface of all levels of the building and the surface area of the individual plot

[2] French bakery store

[3] French cheese shop

[4] French butcher shop

In the proximity, you also have Bois de Vincennes, a huge park that provides sports and leisure facilities not only for the neighbourhood but also for the entire city. Even if we have a four-lane boulevard and an intensely utilized street, there is a strong community bond among the inhabitants. The salesman says hello and exchanges small talk with his everyday clients. The sense of belonging to a delimited community is very strong.

Our second example is a busy boulevard in Timisoara, MihaiViteazu, with housing from the beginning of the 20th century. The area of study has a similar scale as the one in Paris. The CUT [5] is 1.5 - 2.5. In the same area, there are two small grocery stores, four bank branches, a beauty salon and a restaurant. This adds up to less than a quarter of the facilities from the previous example. This brings substantial profit to the suburban supermarkets, while contributing less to the community spirit.

These contradictory examples back up the idea that density itself does not necessarily influence the quality of life, but rather the mixture of residential, leisure and commercial uses does. Therefore, density is not to blame for lack of quality in urban space. Clearly, the Parisian model cannot be simply imported to Timisoara. What makes certain neighbourhoods lifeless in Timisoara is the scarcity of auxiliary functions, not the level of density.

Socialist Versus Capitalist Planning

For two decades, post-communist cities have tried to pass the transitional period by copying western urban models. The urban planning practise varies from city to city and from country to country. Nevertheless, if we want a comparison between socialist and capitalist urban planning, some very interesting differences emerge. First, we shall refer to the dissimilarities between Western and Eastern Europe, focusing on the communist states that were not part of the USSR.

For five centuries, these states were a matter of dispute between the Ottoman, Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. All of them gained their national independence in 1918, except Bulgaria and Romania, who won theirs in 1870. Their existence as national independent states primarily took place under a socialist regime. Before communism, these states had predominantly agricultural economies. Their large-scale industrialization happened during communism. After a short period of economic growth, their young and fragile economies were struck by the great economic crisis, the Second World War, and finally Marxism-Leninism. That is why, even though twenty years have passed since the fall of communism in Europe, these states still find it hard to adjust from the centralized socialist economy to the market capitalist economy. In a similar way, post socialist urban planning finds it hard to adapt to post capitalist city management.

Socialist urbanism had some distinctive features. Firstly, the urban planning practices were drastically centralized. Secondly, the vast majority of real estate was under state ownership. Thirdly, public opinion was non-existent. Public outreach was rather a question of propaganda and was never taken seriously. In other words, the voice of the inhabitants was insignificant when shaping urban strategies.

On the other hand, urban planners were not subjected to community pressure. Gigantic projects, almost impossible to devise in a market economy, became trademarks of a God-like

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[5]The Coeficient de Ocupare a Terenului represents the rapport between the surface of the building and the surface of the individually plot

regime. The fundamental difference between a market economy and a socialist economy is that the first is based on request, while the second is based on offer.

Probably this is the reason why post-communist states find it hard to step out of the centralized economy system. Post-communist cities are accustomed to receiving approval from the capital, and so they find it difficult to devise their own coherent city policies.

Case Study: Romania, Then and Now

1) Then

In the past twenty years, Romanians have looked with vehemence at anything related to communism: politics, urban planning, etc. In this process all the aspects of communist urban planning were shunned. The common citizen associated socialist planning with grey neighbourhoods of typified collective housing. Thesedispleasing neighbourhoods became a trademark of socialist planning. Most of the movies about Eastern Europe have at least one panoramic image of those neighbourhoods. It is always hard to guess whether the image was shot in Bulgaria, Ukraine, Romania or Poland.

Nevertheless, in Romania, socialist urban planning had its positive aspects. Obviously, the institutions that handled urban planning were centrally organised. The major decisions were taken in Bucharest, and then they were uniformly distributed all around Romanian territory.

In each city hall, there was an urban planning department ("Serviciul de Sistematizare"), led by a chief architect. The chief architect issued all private building permits ("extremely rare in the '80's"). He was also a member of the Committee responsible for approving local urbanism documents: the General Plan, Zone Plans, etc. The county chief architect had greater power and responsibilities and he reported directly to the Prime Secretary of the Communist Party (the most powerful person in the county). All the mayors and institutions in the county were literally under his command. He frequently decided (sometimes consulting with professionals in Bucharest or architects with a certain "status" in the county) what decisions should be taken for each urban area. He was the one deciding whether the city needed a new centre, more social living or other urban utilities.

The need for social dwellings was issued according to a "five year plan" (plan cincinal), directly influenced by the national production of prefabricated parts. It was rather the industry producing construction materials that dictated the number of social housing than the real need.

Once approved by the Prime Secretary in the county, the Urban General Plan and all the important projects were passed to a national committee in Bucharest: CPCP[6], whose president had the final say. His decision became mandatory even if that meant expropriation or demolition.

When it came to building, there were catalogues with the types of constructions. These catalogues were periodically "upgraded". Responsible for these periodic upgrades were the planning institutions in Bucharest, Timisoara, Constanta, and other cities. Even if you could choose a type of project, you were restricted to the prefabricated parts produced in the region. If the catalogue projects couldn't be applied or the person upstairs could be convinced, one could create an "unicat" (unique) project, but only in 10 percent of the cases or less. The features of

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[6]Comitetul pentru Consiliile Populare – Committee for the people's Council

the Urban General Plans for the cities were designed in Bucharest. The process from plan to approval and to execution sometimes took less than a year.

2) Now

After the revolution in '89, practising urban planning took a slow and strange turn. The important cities like Cluj, Timisoara, Iasi, and Constanta gained their much needed administrative freedom. Theoretically, the centralized system still exists. The chief architect in the county could still give orders to the city chief architects. In reality, thanks to big private projects, the city chief architect has become a very influential person. Nevertheless, urban planning is not a very smooth process nowadays. During communism, the planning institutions drew the strategies, while the chief architect approved them. Now the chief architect has the same responsibilities, only former planning institutions have disappeared. So, a gap was created in the system. It is unclear who should step in to handle planning and strategy for the city. This has opened the door for a very speculative practise based on public call for projects. The city hall, in need of an urban project, makes a request, organises a tendering, and usually the cheapest proposal (not the best one) wins. The city loses the most suitable option and the city hall pays private urban planners to make up for the lack of a Strategic Design Department.

This absence is more and more obvious. There are no strategies based on studies and statistics, resources are wasted, while traffic increases and green spaces disappear. Reconciliation between 45 years of centralised planning and newly massive investments in the construction market is very difficult.

In the absence of proper legislation to accompany the whole process, many errors are made. A huge error, in fact, is that the Urban General Plan (PUG) can be modified by Urban Zone Plans (PUZ). This practice, perfectly controlled in communist times (when only the state had the power to make big projects), is hard to handle nowadays. Basically each owner can make his own rule on his plot of land. This leads to the absurd situation of having too many changes in the PUG. The City Hall can hardly keep up. In 2008, thanks to a change in legislation, the process was slowed down, but not stopped.

The City Hall has pretty much the same ability to say yes or no, but it is unaware of a more sustainable strategy. The concept of a Masterplan or Strategic Development Plan doesn't really exist in the Romanian legislation. Timisoara is the only city in Romania that has tried to build such a Masterplan on the basis of a G2G collaboration with the Dutch government. This was a small and tentative first step in creating a city strategy. Unfortunately, in the absence of the proper legislation to back it up, it remains just a piece of paper. Additionally, the uncertain status of the land restitution makes the City Hall uncertain when it comes to public property (that could house urban facilities for community well-being).

Thus, the post-communist period has a perfectly ambiguous status when it comes to urban legislation and institutions. This will not benefit the city in the long run. This particular state of being means that it is hard to decide between densification, extension and the types and needs for social housing. The typified collective dwellings that inspired East European cinema still represent a model for the average Romanian dream home. Today there are few choices of dream homes: the individual oversized villa, or the poorly finished apartment.

Romania's EU integration meant that European funds were poured into an already ambiguous urban planning system. New directors (of the Development and EU Integration

Department of the City Hall) emerged, with the power to challenge the chief architect's authority.

The important cities became development poles; metropolitan areas were created in great haste. There is an immense determination to use the money (refundable if not spent), but it is reckless to proceed without a plan of action. These times call for long term strategies. What use is money, when you do not know how to use it? It is hard to demonstrate a theorem without a hypothesis and a conclusion. That is why Romanian cities and post-communist cities in general cannot import Western European models.

From afar, the prosperous capitalistic cities seem like paradise, but on a closer look, the urban practice and legislation is the result of centuries of improvement. Romania is taking two steps at a time to catch up with the West, but this is neither easy, nor beneficial.

If one would ask a Romanian urban planner what is the ideal city density he would probably shrug his shoulders. There are no studies or strategies to help him draw a conclusion. Urban planning is practiced ad hoc,while the country heads toward wild capitalism and the rules change during the course of the game.

Conclusion

Before debating densification, we should consider local contexts. It is easy to present successful projects and theories in Western Europe and the U.S.A, but the real challenge is to find the solution for developing and transitioning countries in Eastern Europe. Recently, members of the European Union have been forced to follow the path set by the developed countries, even if their economies are based on a system more or less centralised inherited from communism. It is still unclear who should be responsible for urban planning; the rules and regulations are made along the way, while the investors' pressure is huge.

One should wonder in what way we could use Jane Jacobs's theories in the communist neighbourhoods. How can we generate urban life and social interaction in such an unattractive environment? The great challenge for the Romanian urban planners is not to find the ideal density for newly built social housing, but to create vivid, intense and community bounded neighbourhoods.

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