DISMANTLED MODERNITIES

studies on architecture through the lens of fashion

editors

Cristina Purcar
Daniel Șerban
Oana Antonia Filip

Presa Universitară Clujeană

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Presa Universitară Clujeană
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This Is Not [a] Fashion
Attempting an Introduction

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Context, Pretext, and Intentions: From the Fashion House to Fashion in Architecture

Perhaps more often than not, when considering fashion, one first and foremost thinks of clothing. This association is so immediate and evident, that one often tends to take it for granted, without questioning its presuppositions and conceptual fallacy. To conceive of fashion as fashionable clothing, or as the dynamics of taste in clothing, relies on the assumption that the notion of fashion is somehow synonymous to dress or essentially belonging to its sphere. Upon reflection and research however, two important distinctions emerge: firstly, that fashion is far from *only* active in dress, and secondly that categorially, fashion is different from *the fashionable*, from whatever is, or was, *in* fashion. In the second section of this introduction, we attempt to further clarify these theoretical aspects. If the project of the present book originates in what we now recognise as a partial and biased understanding of fashion, it hopefully was a fruitful one, nevertheless.

The elaboration of this volume begins with the conference "Casa cu mode. Arhitecturi ale coexistenței în *diversecity* / Fashion(ed) House. Architectures of Coexistence in Diversecity," held in the fall of 2024 in Cluj, in the context of the second edition of the festival *FAST - Festival for Architecture Schools of Tomorrow*, co-organised by the main higher education institutions in architecture from Romania and the Romanian Order of Architects. The pretext of the call for papers theme was the very venue of the conference – the former Casa de Mode / Fashion House on Bariț iu Street, today the Technical University HUB. Inviting reflexion on the possible connections between architecture and fashion seemed timely also because the overarching theme of the festival itself – *diversecity*[1] – prompted the exploration of urban reality through cultural forms and representation.

1 This theme was taken over from the 2024 Forum of the International Union of Architects, held in Kuala Lumpur.

An architectural programme characteristic of the socialist period, the Fashion House opened in 1970 to house the "Drumul Nou" cooperative, specialised in the production of clothing for export and of a limited amount of internal customised orders. Like the Cluj Fashion House, most of the buildings belonging to the same functional family were high quality modernist insertions into historical city centres acting as prominent means of propaganda for the communist regime. Disused and derelict, the Cluj Fashion House has recently been renovated and converted into spaces for events and community interface of the Technical University, its original name remaining all the more suggestive as a lexical alliance, detached from its initial meaning. Originally signifying the limited understanding of fashion as clothing design, once its initial function had become redundant, the syntagm "fashion house" semantically opens to the questioning of fashion's impact on architecture, metonymically signified by "the house," as the reuse of the Fashion House in its reaffirmed relationship with the city not only reveals the latent potential of the edifice, but also of its original name.

The conference Call for Papers was thus drafted under the strong influence of the "fashion house" syntagm and of its original meaning: it set forth analogies between clothing and building, implications of textiles in construction, stylistic affinities between bodily and environmental aesthetics, the mutual implications of structure and appearance, the poetics of weaving, the dynamics of models, modernisation, and modernity, etc. We were emphasising streams of inquiry in architecture with rather long lineages, reaching back to influential figures such as Semper and Wölfflin, echoed today from within the clothing design field perhaps by writers such as Bradley Quinn. The call thus invited work addressing the relationships between architecture and any of the themes suggested by fashion's lexical family and semantic field, and opened as follows:

> "Clothes, like houses, are our 'coverings,' 'exteriorities' that protect us, provide us with a certain comfort, a certain security and at the same time, regardless of whether we want it or not, represent us. We live in clothing as we live in houses, cities, landscaped spaces; these act both as signs, signifying us to ourselves and to each other, and as devices (in Foucauldian sense) conditioning us. The art of making clothes, just as the art of making houses, cities, territories, are ethically, aesthetically, technically and functionally determined. Fashion design, like environmental design at any scale, are as much responsible for meeting primary needs (such as protection or safety) as they are for satisfying secondary needs, such as the signification and communication of values and attitudes."[2]

2 The conference Call for Papers is available online: https://fast.oar.archi/2024/conferinta-stiintifica-fast/#flipbook-df_2167/1/, accessed November 2025.

It is quite telling that in the above fragment "fashion design" is used as a signifier for clothing design, perhaps as a reflex of the almost ubiquitous belief that fashion's proper range is the domain of dress, despite the awareness that its workings clearly impact our discipline too. The proposed themes were:

- fashion, model, style;
- modernisation and traces;
- decoration as depth, clothing, and the structure - ornament dialectic;
- the human figure, architecture's subject;
- textile industry and post-industrial architecture;
- art, architecture, textiles - draperies and walls;
- *re*presentation as project;
- goods, fashion and architecture;
- urban (clothing) ecologies and unwasteful architectures;
- modernism through alternative narratives.

The conference program included 29 contributions by 38 authors representing eight universities. The papers, presented in the form of longer presentations or short addresses accompanied by a poster exhibition, were distributed in four thematic sessions: "Stances Around a *Zeitgeist*," "Modelling and Fashioning Housing," "Negotiated and Contested Modernities," and "Represented Representations."[3]

The further unfolding of the project following the conference, throughout the reviewing and editorial process, occasioned the development of a more nuanced understanding of fashion as a complex, elusive social agency, most conspicuously visible and most longstanding in the realm of apparel, yet by no means acting only therein. It has become evident that fashion is intimately linked to modernity and to capitalism, that it not only affects external appearances, but also ideas, theories, and worldviews. Therefore, while seeking a more profound understanding of its workings in architecture, it also seems necessary to outline a theoretical foundation for the concept. The following exploration is not only meant to set a reading key for the papers included in the book, but also to provide contrapuntal elements of disturbance to some of the preconceptions we, as well the chapters' authors, may still hold onto when it comes to our own relationship to- and positions within fashion. Along with the contributions included in the book, the following theoretical summary is also meant to inspire and open further research tracks into what appears to be a far from exhausted and far from safe research territory.

3 The conference Programme is available online: https://fast.oar.archi/2024/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Conferinta-FAST-2024-program_24.10.pdf, accessed November 2025.

Fashion, in and Beyond Architecture: A Partial *Status Quaestionis*

In this section, we summarise key-ideas of several important writers on fashion over the twentieth century, selected out of Malcolm Barnard's 2020 fashion theory reader,[1] texts that discuss fashion unrestricted to clothing, within the broad social context. With fashion mainly theorised within the sociological discipline, this review brings together the early 1900s ideas of Georg Simmel, with insights authored from the 1960s to the 1990s by Herbert Blumer, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Lipovetsky, and Angela Partington, discussed thematically according to three questions: the social role of fashion, fashion's range of action, and fashion's *modus operandi*.

Whether they consider fashion a phenomenon (Simmel, Lipovetsky), a mechanism or a process (of collective selection) (Blumer), a form (Lipovetsky), a system (Barthes), a cultural barometer (Wilson), or "the enchanting spectacle of the code," "the emblem of modernity," "the form of general equivalence"(Baudrillard), these authors seem to concur on its being a poorly chartered territory.[2] Thus, in the 1960s Blumer noted the scarcity of scholarly research endeavouring "to take seriously the topic of fashion," inviting scholars to retrieve "the origin, formation, and careers of collective taste" in order to help advance our understanding of the fashion mechanism.[3] For Blumer, not only is fashion instrumental to modern individuals in general, as a means to adjust to modern society, but also to "perceptive scholars," as a potent analytical tool suited to understanding "a moving or modern world."[4] To the presumption that fashion engenders no real social consequences, Blumer opposes the view that fashion acts in an imperative, totalitarian way, that "its touch is not light. Where fashion operates it assumes an imperative position."[5] Likewise, in the 1990s Lipovetsky still remarked that fashion was not a fashionable topic of intellectual endeavour, that "among serious intellectual preoccupations it has marginal status," and that despite its increasingly faster expansion, "it is failing to reach the very people whose vocation is to shed light on the mainsprings and mechanisms of modern societies."[6]

> "We are overinformed about fashion in terms of journalistic accounts, but our historical and social understanding of the

1 Malcolm Barnard, ed. *Fashion Theory. A Reader*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020).

2 Jean Baudrillard, "Fashion, or the Enchanting Spectacle of the Code" [Symbolic Exchange and Death (Sage, 1993)], in *Fashion Theory. A Reader*, ed. Malcolm Barnard, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020), 624, 627, 628.

3 Herbert Blumer, "Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection" [The Sociological Quarterly 10, 1969], in *Fashion Theory. A Reader*, ed. Malcolm Barnard, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020), 340, 348.

4 Blumer, "Fashion," 353.

5 Blumer, "Fashion," 341.

6 Gilles Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion. Introduction" [Princeton University Press, 1994], in *Fashion Theory. A Reader*, ed. Malcolm Barnard, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020), 27.

> phenomenon leaves much to be desired. The plethora of fashion magazines is matched by the silence of the intelligentsia, by its forgetfulness of fashion as both infatuation with artifice and the new architecture of democracy."[7]

In Lipovetsky's diagnosis, there seems to be unanimous consensus about fashion being irrelevant, as well as an unwavering consensus leaving no room for debates, that fashion is "a pseudo-problem whose answers and explanations are known in advance."[8] However, he asks, "[h]ow can an age dominated by technology, an age in which the world is subjugated by reason, also be the age of fashion in all its unreasonableness?" hence, for Lipovetsky, fashion is "an exceptional, highly problematic institution, a sociohistorical reality characteristic of the West and of modernity itself" whereof, despite abundant chronological histories of styles and reviews of present-day trends, we ignore "the global meaning, the underlying economy."[9]

The Social Role of Fashion

For Simmel, fashion is "a universal phenomenon in the history of our race," operating as "a product of class distinction" akin to honour, which both includes one within a given privileged circle and emphasises this status as different from others.[10] Fashion according to Simmel stems from the mutual limitation of two antagonistic forces, at work in shaping the "whole history of society," namely "the interest in duration, unity, and similarity with that in change, specialisation and peculiarity," the tension between "ever-retracted attempts and ever-revived hopes" as a powerful source of development, an "incentive to advancement."[11] Simmel has been generally recognised as the first fashion theoretician to describe its process as basically consisting in elite groups setting themselves apart by noticeable signs, while immediately subjacent social groups striving to emulate these distinctions in order to attempt attaining a superior status. Fashion hence emerges in the form of style and is perpetuated by an on-going process of "innovation and emulation."[12]

While acknowledging Simmel's foundational contribution to establishing that: (a) fashion occurs in a relatively open society; (b) prestige is paramount to the operation of fashion; (c) fashion essentially means a (usual and non-aberrant) process of change, Blumer's criticism and overcoming of Simmel's notion of fashion consists in a historical updating of an understanding more in tune with the contemporary society of his time.[13] Blumer highlights the importance of

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7 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 27.

8 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 28.

9 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 28-29.

10 Georg Simmel, "Fashion" [International Quarterly 10, 1904], in *Fashion Theory. A Reader*, ed. Malcolm Barnard, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020), 93.

11 Simmel, "Fashion," 92.

12 Blumer, "Fashion," 342-43.

13 Blumer, "Fashion," 343.

collective agency in the collective act of selection among a range of competing elite-suggested trends and the emergence of collective taste as a democratic exercise of free choice, playing a "vital role in modern group life."[14] He argues that while participating in fashion, people are not simply consumers of pre-set vogues, but active creators of culture, properly shaping it through what he famously calls "collective selection." In Blumer's reading, in an advanced industrial society, participation in fashion acquires a collective empowerment dimension, not just for the elites, as "collective taste," through "collective selection," endows individuals with a potent role in co-defining what is in fashion, in response to proposals advanced and successively refined by both creators and producers.[15]

Blumer stresses that only grasping the collective nature and all-embracing participative dimension of "the mechanism by which fashion operates" would allow one "appreciate the vital role [fashion] plays in modern group life."[16] The fashion mechanism, he claims, appears in response to the need of the present "to be in step with the time," hence its societal role "of enabling and aiding collective adjustment to and in a moving world of divergent possibilities."[17] More specifically, fashion for Blumer fulfils a threefold role: (a) "[f]ashion introduces order in a potentially anarchic and moving present;" (b) being in fashion enables "detachment from the hold of the past," affording the freedom to move in the new directions needed "to meet a moving and changing world;" (c) "fashion nurtures and shapes a body of common sensitivity and taste, […] a basis for […] handling and digesting the experiences which the world yields."[18]

Going both beyond Simmel's class differentiation and Blumer's emphasis on collective empowerment, for Lipovetsky, fashion "is less a sign of class ambition than a way out of the world of tradition."[19] In his quite optimistic reading, fashion is an ambivalent, paradoxical agent, whose irrationality stimulates responsibility, freeing subjectivities, fostering discernment, and reinforcing an open public space through the very excess of seduction and the frivolous, which are regarded as potentially emancipatory agents and democratic catalysts "in the development of critical, realistic, tolerant consciousness:"

> "If the terrain of fashion is propitious for the critical use of reason, it also makes manifest the exile and confusion of thought: there is much to correct, to regulate, to criticize, to explain ad infinitum."[20]

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14 Blumer, "Fashion," 347-49.
15 Blumer, "Fashion," 346, 347-48.
16 Blumer, "Fashion," 349.
17 Blumer, "Fashion," 352.
18 Blumer, "Fashion," 353.
19 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 28.
20 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 33-34.

Fashion's Range

That fashion's operation had extended far beyond "the bounds of its original domain which comprised only personal externals, [acquiring] an increasing influence over taste, over theoretical convictions, and even over the moral foundations of life," was already noted in Simmel's seminal 1904 text.[21] In principle, for Simmel, "any given form of clothing, of art, of conduct, of opinion may become fashionable" as long as it is modifiable – in other words in as far as it can become a mode. However, while relying on the "the power of the moving form" – the mod[e]fiyable – fashion's rule is not exercised upon all cultural forms indiscriminately, with the "classic" representing the case of an "inward resistance" by offering fewer "points of attack […] from which modification, disturbance, destruction of the equilibrium might emanate."[22] Simmel also pinpoints the tight connection between fashion and capital, noting that typically subjected to it are "the externals of life […] more accessible [as they are] to the mere call of money."[23]

In the second half of the twentieth century, Blumer argues that fashion is at work in virtually every domain of "human group life," including not just the fine and the applied arts, but also fields such as medicine, industry, business management, literature, philosophy, politics, human sciences and, more surprisingly perhaps, even in the "pure" sciences such as physics, biology and mathematics:[24]

> "The domain in which fashion operates is very extensive, indeed. To limit it to, or to center it in, the field of costume and adornment is to have a very inadequate idea of the scope of its occurrence." "Fashion is not confined to those areas, such as women's apparel, in which fashion is institutionalised and professionally exploited under conditions of intense competition […] it is found in operation in a wide variety and increasing number of fields which shun deliberate or intentional concern with fashion."[25]

For Baudrillard, we are even about to witness the collapse of all sectors into the sphere of fashion despite the fact that fashion is "one of the more inexplicable phenomena."[26] Its importance is such that "[t]he logical processes of fashion might be extrapolated to the dimension of 'culture' in general – to all social productions of signs, values and relations."[27] While differentiating

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21 Simmel, "Fashion," 97.

22 Simmel, "Fashion," 101.

23 Simmel, "Fashion," 95.

24 Blumer, "Fashion," 340-41.

25 Blumer, "Fashion," 341, 349.

26 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 625.

27 Jean Baudrillard, "The Ideological Genesis of Needs/Fetishism and Ideology" [*Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* 47, 1969], in *Fashion Theory. A Reader*, ed. Malcolm Barnard, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020), 614.

between "'light' signs" ("clothes, the body and objects") and "'heavy' signs" ("politics, morals, economics, science, culture, sexuality"), which "unequally but simultaneously, […] merge with models of simulation, of differential and indifferent play," for Baudrillard "they are all haunted by fashion, since this can be understood as both the most superficial play and the most profound social form – the inexorable investment of every domain by the code."[28]

Writing in the 1990s, for Lipovetsky, fashion is both accelerating its pace and "invading new realms and drawing all social spheres and age groups into its orbit."[29] In contemporary society there is, he finds, an unprecedented generalisation of fashion, embracing "spheres that once lay beyond its purview, [triggering] the advent of a society restructured from top to bottom by the attractive and the ephemeral - by the very logic of fashion:"

> "Fashion is no longer an aesthetic embellishment, a decorative accessory to a collective life; it is the key to the entire edifice […] for it has succeeded in reshaping society as a whole in its own image. Once a peripheral phenomenon, it is now hegemonic."[30]

How Fashion Works

In Simmel's understanding, fashion is essentially a process of class differentiation, an agent of social affirmation. Addressing a clearly stratified society, besides the "element of imitation," Simmel notes the necessary co-presence of an "element of demarcation," especially noticeable in societal structures where groups are not superimposed to each other, but rather neighbouring.[31] Adopting any fashion trait in a certain domain implies adhering to values which are perceived as affording some kind of emancipation; while becoming a representative of the select group, one simultaneously reinforces the latter's distinction and the exclusion of the other groups: "the fashions of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them."[32]

In turn, Blumer argues that Simmel's analysis, while perhaps applying for seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Europe with its neatly layered society, does not hold as such anymore for the twentieth century. Fashion, Blumer claims, can no longer be understood merely as a class differentiating phenomenon, whereby the choices of the elite by themselves, because of the elite's prestige, define what is to be in fashion. Rather, he suggests, the choices of the elite are both transcended by and included within the fashion mechanism, instead of

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28 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 624.
29 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 27.
30 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 29.
31 Simmel, "Fashion," 95.
32 Simmel, "Fashion," 93.

causing its ongoing movement.[33] In Blumer's argument, fashion is a complex process of "collective selection," whereof the elite provides only the most prominent representation, without however "setting the direction of the fashion movement" itself. In contemporary society, there is "a wish to be in fashion, to be abreast of what has good standing, to express new tastes which are emerging in a changing world."[34]

Angela Partington also critiques Simmel's fashion theory for treating culture as a passive reflection of socio-economic relations and for assuming that fashion flows from elites to subordinate groups. In a more applied manner, she argues instead that culture is a site of active meaning-making, where consumers across classes produce distinct values, and that fashion dynamics should be understood in relation to class struggle rather than cultural diffusion.[35]

Partington's mass-market or "trickle-across" - instead of "trickle down" - model further challenges elite-centred views and undermines the idea of emulation as the primary mechanism of fashion change. She shows that fashion adoption occurs simultaneously across social strata, with innovators present in all classes and information circulating mainly within, rather than between, social groups.[36] This resonates with Blumer's regard on innovation not being tied to high prestige, while "in the competitive process fashion readily ignores persons with the highest prestige and, indeed, bypasses acknowledged 'leaders' time after time."[37] In the view of both, fashion often ignores established elites, selecting designs based on broader social dynamics rather than status alone.

From the twentieth century onward, subcultures provide clear evidence of a multidirectional process. Working- and middle-class subcultures such as punk, hip-hop, and earlier youth movements like the Teds and Mods generated influential styles in music, dance and body-art, and non the least in clothing, which were later appropriated and recontextualized within mainstream and high fashion. Earlier examples focused on music alone, such as the upstream movement of jazz and blues are nonetheless well-known while, for instance, the more recent spreading of trap and *manele* musical genres into the mainstream scene in Romania, offers a more close-to-date and regional perspective onto a similar dynamic, although of lesser prominence.

Blumer identifies fashion as a sort of "collective groping for the proximate future," "in an effort to move in a direction which is consonant with the movement of modern life in general."[38] Being in fashion happens through

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33 Blumer, "Fashion," 343-45.

34 Blumer, "Fashion," 346.

35 Angela Partington, "Popular Fashion and Working Class Affluence," in *Fashion Theory. A Reader*, ed. Malcolm Barnard, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020), 330.

36 Partington, "Popular Fashion," 331.

37 Blumer, "Fashion," 345.

38 Blumer, "Fashion," 345, 346.

models proposed by innovators (origin), in response to perceived incipient tastes in society, selected though a process of formation via mutual sensing and adjustments between innovators and the society (careers), channelling "vague inclinations" via refinements into properly formed expressions of collective taste, "through an interesting but ill-understood interaction between prestige and incipient taste, between eminent endorsement and congenial interest."[39]

Lipovetsky takes Blumer's optimistic reading of fashion as collective selection further, stressing its increasingly individualistic capacity of empowerment. Much like Blumer's to a certain extent, Lipovetsky's reappraisal turns fashion into a most serious theoretical topic, one that appears highly instrumental to understanding the goods and ills of contemporary society. Writing in the early 1990s, with an optimism likely spurred by the rejuvenated enthusiasm for Western capitalism brought about by the recent fall of the Iron Curtain, Lipovetsky finds in the very fashion-ruled contemporary society of that time nothing less than "the primary agent of the […] consolidation of liberal democracies:" "Under fashion's reign, democracies enjoy a universal consensus about their political institutions; ideological extremes are on the wane and pragmatism is on the rise […]."[40] If, with hindsight, Lipovetsky's positive assessment of fashion's "subjects" tends to appear problematic, even naïve, today, his reading is still challenging. He endeavours to show that "in the long run, the consummate fashion system represents an opportunity for democracies."[41] In his account, fashion is represented as a paradoxical agent of human emancipation by the workings of which "subjective independence grows apace with the empire of bureaucratic dispossession."[42] Lipovetsky thus advocates an optimistic embracing of fashion's empire, aware that it is our task to discern and harness its liberating potential from its alienating one.

Through this critique Lipovetsky seeks to counter the always-in-fashion denunciation of fashion highlighting an entire tradition of suspicion towards shallowness and appearances, beginning with Plato's cavern, the unanimous and long held condemnation of superficiality, through Adorno's, Horkheimer's, Habermas,' or Debord's criticism of culture industry and of the extreme mediation of experience, the industrialisation of consciousness, the amputation of critical thinking, maintaining that "in an age recycled by the fashion form, history is more open than ever."[43] While for Blumer fashion is "a pliable and re-forming body of *common* taste,"[44] an instrument of collective empowerment, for Lipovetsky the accent lies on fashion's power of *subjective* liberation. For the latter, the "empire of fashion" constitutes nothing less than the ultimate phase,

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39 Blumer, "Fashion," 348, 351.

40 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 30.

41 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 31.

42 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 32.

43 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 31-32.

44 Blumer, "Fashion," 353. Our emphasis.

the mature stage of democracy, fostering individualism in an unprecedented way.[45] A paradoxical individualism, he stresses, since:

> "Fashion produces the best and the worst inseparably: news around the clock and zero-degree thinking. […] its unconscious is conducive to consciousness; its madness is conducive to the spirit of tolerance; its frivolity is conducive to respect for the rights of man."[46]

If fashion accounts for the dynamics of social change, scholars theorising it are far from concurring as to the nature of the "novelty" propelling this change. In the openness and attraction towards novelty, Simmel finds a specific trait of modern society, which has removed "the primitive feeling of insecurity with reference to all things new," along with the advancement of civilisation, replacing it with a "piquant interest in exceptional and odd things."[47] Not devoid of colonial preconceptions, Simmel's explanation of fashion's establishment among "highly civilised nations" is argued by the fact that "segregation by means of differences in clothing, manners, taste, etc. is expedient only where the danger of absorption and obliteration exists."[48] Simmel thus seems to anticipate Blumer's and Lipovetsky's positive assessments, presenting fashion as an antidote to alienation.

Although "concerned only with change" fashion, Simmel argues, "tends to conserve energy," hence its cyclicity, returning to older forms as soon as the "charm of difference, which constitutes its very essence" finds the established forms to contrast with, as well as partial oblivion as to its earlier occurrence(s).[49] For Baudrillard too, cyclicity is at the core of fashion's 'structure,' yet simultaneously and as much as linearity is presupposed by technical progress. In his disillusioned critique, he seeks to denounce fashion's simulated novelty and reduction of everything to interchangeable signs:

> "It seems that modernity sets up a linear time of technical progress, production and history, and, simultaneously, a cyclical time of fashion. This only seems to be a contradiction, since in fact modernity is never a radical rupture."[50]

For Baudrillard fashion is the emblem of modernity which, in its very essence, is a code based on binary logic. Fashion stars the "*myth* of change," whereby the 'old' and the 'new' – modernity's simultaneous inventions – are perpetuated

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45 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 33.
46 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 34.
47 Simmel, "Fashion," 95.
48 Simmel, "Fashion," 96.
49 Simmel, "Fashion," 100.
50 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 626.

as "'retro-' and 'neo-,' modern and anachronistic."[51] While Simmel reveals fashion's non-saturation principle early on – the more a certain fashion spreads, the closer it is to its dismissal – he also seems to take the new or novelty for granted, stressing that fashion couples indissolubly novelty and transitoriness.[52] Conversely, for Baudrillard, modernity's "dialectic of rupture very quickly becomes the dynamics of the amalgam and recycling. […] Modernity is not the transmutation but the commutation of all values, their combination and their ambiguity" because, he claims, fashion works through "the play of simulation and combinatory innovation."[53] Moreover, if for Blumer "fashion is always modern,"[54] for Baudrillard "fashion is always retro, [it] is the inactual (the 'out-of-date,' 'the irrelevant')," since by abolishing the past (*passé*) it resurrects all forms as simulacra, through an "aesthetic of renewal" whereby fashion is never actual: "it speculates on the recurrence of forms on the basis of their death and their stockpiling, like signs, in an a-temporal reserve." Through exposing fashion's apparent novelty as simulacrum, Baudrillard's insight uncannily places the historical development of fashion in parallel with that of the seemingly incongruous institution of the museum: "Fashion and the museum are contemporary and complicitous. Together they are the opposite of all previous cultures, made of inequivalent signs and incompatible styles."[55] Moreover, just like the simulacra of 'the new' replacing 'the old,' for Baudrillard "[t]ruly beautiful, definitely beautiful clothing would put an end to fashion. […] Thus fashion continually fabricates the "beautiful" on the basis of a radical denial of beauty, by reducing beauty to the logical equivalent of ugliness."[56]

Another theoretical key to grasping fashion's *modus operandi* is the notion of the model. In Baudrillard's view, reminiscent of Benjamin's famous critique of the artefact's status at the time of mechanical reproduction, models are the media of fashion, and there is fashion as soon as "a form is no longer produced according to its own determinations, but *from the model itself* – that is to say, that it is never produced, but always and immediately *reproduced*. The model itself has become the only system of reference."[57] This apprehension is similar to Roland Barthes' in his seminal 1967 semiotic analysis of "the written garment" as found in fashion magazines, according to which, "the fashion sign" appears within a mass culture at the junction between a "singular (oligarchic) conception and a collective image, being simultaneously imposed and requested."[58] While Barthes (referring to feminine dress fashion) posits that "the fashion sign is structurally born every year by decree" of the fashion-group

51 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 626.
52 Simmel, "Fashion," 97.
53 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 626-27.
54 Blumer, "Fashion," 347.
55 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 625-26.
56 Baudrillard, "The Ideological Genesis of Needs," 615.
57 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 628-29.
58 Roland Barthes, *Système de la Mode* (Editions du Seuil, 1967), 219. Our translation.

or the magazine's editorial board,[59] Blumer stresses that what appears to be a top-down imposition and demand for compliance actually is a complex process of elite endorsement *and* collective selection.[60] Hence, the essentially collective nature of fashion leads Blumer to deem unsatisfactory the various psychological (individually focused) attempts to explain it, since they fail capturing

> "the collective process which constitutes fashion – the emergence of new models in an area of changing experience, the differential attention given them, the interaction which leads to a focusing of collective choice on one of them, the social endorsement of it as proper, and the powerful control which this endorsement yields."[61]

If fashion's workings are played out between the individual, the group, and society at large, these dynamics of emulation, assimilation and emancipation are differently tackled by the reviewed scholars. Simmel shows that fashion eradicates the feeling of shame in matters of its realm, "because it represents a united action" and because, "as a member of the mass the individual will do many things which would have aroused unconquerable repugnance in his soul had they been suggested to him alone."[62] At the same time, he regards fashion as a socially validated opportunity of individual departure from the safe haven of the commonplace, an idea that seems to oppose the contemporary fashionable ethics and aesthetics of the commons. At his turn, Blumer opposes the misconception of fashion as an aberrant, whimsical, and wavering marginal phenomenon – a sort of collective "craze or mania" – a rational and ethical explanation for both the individual and the collective participation in fashion, emphasising the calculated nature of fashion-adopting acts as positive responses to the perceived "character of propriety and social distinction," to the perceived "respectability" of models "carrying the stamp of approval of an elite."[63]

Authors generally agree that fashion is most conspicuously visible in the sphere of (women's) dress. For Lipovetsky clothing and accessories are "the archetypal domain of fashion,"[64] and for Blumer fashion's mechanism of collective selection is most clearly perceivable in the women's dress market, yet "clouded or concealed in other fields."[65] For Simmel instead, writing before the outspread of feminism, the feminine gender was characterised by "a lack of differentiation, […] a greater similarity among the different members of her sex, […] a stricter adherence to the social average," so that "resting on the firm foundation of custom, of what is generally accepted, woman strives

59 Barthes, *Système de la Mode*, 219.
60 Blumer, "Fashion," 343-44.
61 Blumer, "Fashion," 349.
62 Simmel, "Fashion," 100.
63 Blumer, "Fashion," 341-42.
64 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 29.
65 Blumer, "Fashion," 343-44, 349.

anxiously for all the relative individualisation and personal conspicuousness that remains."[66] According to Simmel's reading of his own time, there was perfect match between feminine nature and fashion, through a compensatory rationale, as women were supposed to find in fashion "a field of general imitation" as well as "some measure of conspicuousness and individual prominence […] when its satisfaction is denied her in other fields."[67] On the other hand, as a game of interchangeable simulacra, Baudrillard points out that "fashion has only to do with the feminine, and not with women. Society in its entirety is becoming feminine to the extent that discrimination against women is coming to an end."[68]

One of the most problematic questions in fashion theory is that of its ir/rationality. While Simmel writes of "the whims of fashion,"[69] for Baudrillard fashion's triumph consists in "imposing and legitimizing the irrational according to a logic deeper than that of rationality."[70] He regards the outspread of fashion as the generalised "*liquidation* of meaning […], the corruption of rationality it implies, as reason crumbles under the blow of the pure and simple alternation of signs," in other words the continuously recycled spectacle of "fashion's innocuous revolutions."[71]

Conversely, Blumer makes a case against preconceptions such as considering fashion inconsequential, aberrant, and irrational,[72] while Lipovetsky seeks to demystify what most fashion theorisation has propagated as "the ruse of fashion's irrationality."[73] Nevertheless, the more fashion is increasingly and deeper entrenched into the workings of modern life, the more, argues Blumer, are people inclined to ignore the range of its operations. Typically, one fails to recognize the fashion process in which one participates, the fashion appearing to those which partake in its development as an "up-to-date achievement;" conversely, it is easier to trace fashions via retrospection hence, we would argue, through historiographical practice.[74]

To counter this lack of evidence, Blumer enlists six necessary and "essential conditions," that should enable detecting fashion's operation in other areas of collective life than women's apparel: (1) the specific field needs to be "thrust into the future," or "in passage, responding to changes taking place in a surrounding world, and oriented to keeping abreast of new developments;" (2) "the area must be open to the recurrent presentation of models and

66 Simmel, "Fashion," 98-99.
67 Simmel, "Fashion," 99.
68 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 633.
69 Simmel, "Fashion," 94.
70 Baudrillard, "The Ideological Genesis of Needs," 615.
71 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 625.
72 Blumer, "Fashion," 341.
73 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 33-34.
74 Blumer, "Fashion," 352.

proposals," competing each other in their claim for adoption; (3) the field must allow for "a relatively free opportunity of choice between the models" both in terms of their presentation to the public and in terms of the latter's adoptive capabilities (wealth, intelligence, skills, sensitivity, etc.); (4) the relative merits of competing models proposed to advance the field cannot be validated through objective testing and demonstrable proofing; (5) prestige figures in the field adopting one of the competing models endow it with validity over others, increasing the probability of its collective adoption without, however, guaranteeing it; (6) the field must be open to the emergence of the new, whether triggered by external events, new participants, or internal reforms.[75]

"Is a House an Object [of Fashion]?"

While Blumer's above six "essential conditions" seem indeed valid for the field of architecture, this theory survey concludes with Baudrillard's striking thematisation of fashion's logic in architecture, metonymically evoked by the house:

> "Is a house an object? Some would contest this. The decisive point is to establish whether the symbolism of the house (sustained by the shortage of housing) is irreducible, or if even this can succumb to the differential and reified connotations of fashion logic: for if this is so, then the home becomes an object of consumption – as any other object will, if it only answers to the same definition: being, cultural trait, ideal, gestural pattern, language, etc. – anything can be made to fit the bill. The definition of an object of consumption is entirely independent of objects themselves and *exclusively a function of the logic of significations*."[76]

In Baudrillard's sombre critique, "the entire order of modernity […] is infiltrated by [fashion's] logic," and "the whole world is an 'agent' of fashion, just as the whole world becomes a productive agent."[77] Moreover, "there is no possible subversion of fashion since it has no system of reference to contradict (it is its own system of reference). One cannot escape fashion (since fashion itself makes the refusal of fashion into a fashion feature […])." Fashion is always there as long as one submits to what Baudrillard calls the "diktat of 'modernity,'" suggesting, in guise of a resistance strategy, an analytical praxis of deconstruction, something that is both alluded to in this book's title – "dismantled modernities" – and hoped to be at stake in the included contributions:

> "[f]ashion leaves no room for revolution except to go back over the very genesis of the sign that constitutes it. Furthermore, the

75 Blumer, "Fashion," 350-51.

76 Baudrillard, "The Ideological Genesis of Needs," 614.

77 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 627, 635.

> alternative to fashion […] lies in a deconstruction of both the form of the sign of fashion and the principle of signification itself […]."[78]

Having been the object of analysis in the reviewed sociological writing, fashion henceforth becomes the tool for analysis, in the attempt of discerning its operation – as suggested by Baudrillard – in the transactions between architecture and modernity. In his introduction to the fashion theory reader, Malcolm Barnard asserts that all disciplinary theory is also discipline construction, hence it is reductive.[79] Therefore, instrumentalising fashion within the history, theory, or criticism of architecture should not only help elucidate some of architecture's internal questions but also help minimise the reductionism inherent in fashion theorising.

Architecture Through the Lens of Fashion

Far from claiming to be comprehensive, a brief review of relatively recent writing from within the discipline of architecture that addresses the architecture and fashion relationship reveals two main strands of approach: on the one hand, when the relationship is specifically the object of inquiry, authors tend to conceive of fashion in its narrower sense, largely as the field of dress design; on the other hand, architecture's entanglements with fashion, understood in the broad sense highlighted above within sociological theory, seems to be only indirectly tackled in architectural writing. In other words, it appears that when fashion is used as a theoretical tool for architectural analysis, the prevailing connecting idea is the metaphor of clothing. This issue is closely tied to what is understood by *fashion* in English, where the term, although at least as semantically expansive as its Romanian counterpart, *modă*, primarily denotes a clearly delineated yet extensive field of cultural and creative production, one that claims disciplinary legitimacy and parity (even as this very claim to equal status and critical recognition is debated in a significant body of scholarly literature). *Fashion* seems to designate more directly than *modă* the domain of dress and garment design - an art form, a distinct theoretical field and academic discipline, as well as its associated industry. These are dimensions that *modă* does only partially contain, while often merely imply.[80]

Indeed, much of the literature that addresses the relationship between architecture and fashion focuses first and foremost on the relationship between the two artistic fields and, in extension, on the ways in which the mechanisms underlying the evolution of architecture, its changes and spatial and symbolic

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78 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 634.

79 Malcolm Barnard, "Fashion and fashion theories," in *Fashion Theory. A Reader*, ed. Malcolm Barnard, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020), 14.

80 In Romanian the term used for the academic specialization is *design vestimentar*, and while *industria modei* itself is a valid translation for the fashion industry, phrases such as fashion business and fast fashion have not actually been given Romanian equivalents; instead, they have been adopted as-is. This helps explain why the concept *modă* is more closely associated with cultural expression than with a specific professional or academic practice.

avatars, can be related to fashion, understood here as a cultural system and an inherent social process. In the deciphering of such mechanisms, clothing design as a field of knowledge can have a decisive role, precisely because it renders its operative tools and processes more visible, more dynamic, and, not unlikely, more thoroughly theorised.

Architecture (and architects), however, often display a marked resistance to having their discipline interpreted or critically examined through the conceptual frameworks of fashion, a stance that parallels broader intellectual dismissals of fashion as a field. Numerous authors identify, in both architectural criticism and architects' own authorial discourses, a persistent perception of fashion as subordinate: ephemeral, superficial, and lacking seriousness.

Addressing this issue, in his essay "In' Architecture: Observing the Mechanisms of Fashion," Val Warke challenges this assumption by demonstrating that architecture is, in fact, unavoidably embedded in mechanisms of fashionability, through which architects and critics adopt trends, construct reputations, and signal belonging or distinction in ways not unlike clothing design systems.[81]

Mary McLeod also critiques conventional architectural history for downplaying fashion's role in shaping architectural aesthetics and discourse. She suggests architecture has often denied or ignored its connections to dress design, even as clothes and gendered assumptions subtly structured architectural thinking.[82]

While acknowledging links that go back at least a century, Bradley Quinn shows that the architecture – fashion design relationship has rarely been deeply examined. His study fills that gap with historical, technical, and cultural analysis, repositioning both disciplines in relation to each other.[83] Quinn argues that the two disciplines influence each other in ways that go far beyond superficial style analogies. Rather than treating fashion and architecture as separate fields, he shows they share techniques, spatial thinking, and cultural roles. Moreover art, fashion and architecture intersect through a mutual desire to turn lived experience into artistic expression.[84] From this perspective, he identifies a relative disadvantage of architecture in comparison to dress fashion, namely its need to become more populist and less elitist[85] – a transition that fashion had successfully achieved much earlier.

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81 Val Warke, "'In' Architecture: Observing the Mechanisms of Fashion," in *Architecture: In Fashion*, ed. Deborah Fausch et al. (Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), 124, 131, 142.

82 Mary McLeod, "Undressing Architecture: Fashion, Gender, and Modernity," in *Architecture: In Fashion*, ed. Deborah Fausch et al. (Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), 38-42, 48-49.

83 Bradley Quinn, *The Fashion of Architecture* (Berg, 2003), 8, 36.

84 Quinn, *The Fashion of Architecture*, 133.

85 Quinn, *The Fashion of Architecture*, 40.

This sense of architectural arrogance and, ultimately, superficiality, is traced by many authors back at least to the Modern period. Karen Franck, for instance, critiques the modernist tradition's tendency to treat architecture as pure, distant, and exclusively visual. She demonstrates that the clothing metaphor, largely employed by modernists, has frequently overlooked the actually experienced body within space.[86] Instead, she argues, architecture's relationship with fashion is far more complex and conflicted than the clothing metaphor would suggest. As she notes:

> "Associated as it was with the feminine, the frivolous, the irrational, the misleading and the sensory, 'fashion' captured all the values modernism sought to reject."[87]

This rejection is particularly striking given that the worlds of art, architecture, and clothing design were deeply intertwined within the broader project of the avant-garde, she argues. Architects and artists of the period were by no means unfamiliar with couture experimentation; yet contemporary theoretical discourse largely succeeded in omitting or marginalising this affiliation.[88]

Nevertheless, several authors identify a series of important parallels within modernity. The social, industrial, and cultural transformations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries formed a shared context in which debates about style, function, ornament, and reform in both clothing and building articulated broader struggles over progress and cultural values. In this regard, McLeod argues that fashion, particularly dress reform and modern architecture developed within parallel cultural frameworks, each responding to evolving conceptions of modernity, the body, and social change. She shows that architects and dress designers were not operating in isolated domains, but were instead engaged in shared debates concerning form, surface, and style.[89]

A step further, Mark Wigley argues that modern architecture, contrary to the bombastic rhetoric, did not reject fashion, but in fact operated through the logic of dress design, especially the way clothing reform influenced how architects thought about surface, form, and representation. Modern architecture's claims to purity and timelessness are themselves fashion-like, rather than completely opposite to fashion.[90] Wigley further demonstrates that modern architects' repeated assertions that architecture is not fashionable, that it is rational, functional, and timeless - paradoxically reveal the extent to which the mechanisms of fashion are deeply internalised within architectural

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86 Karen A. Franck, "Yes, We Wear Buildings," in *Fashion + Architecture*, *Architectural Design* 70:6, ed. Helen Castle (Wiley Academy, 2000), 94-97.

87 Franck, "Yes, We Wear Buildings," 96.

88 Franck, "Yes, We Wear Buildings," 96.

89 McLeod, "Undressing Architecture," 87-92.

90 Mark Wigley, "White Out: Fashioning the Modern," in *Architecture: In Fashion*, ed. Deborah Fausch et al. (Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), 152-53, 197, 212.

culture. The very intensity of these denials signals proximity rather than distance between the two fields.[91] A similar observation is made by Franck, who notes:

> "The rejection of fashion by the modern movement was also fuelled by a rejection of its rapid change and its emphasis on appearance. This is curious considering that what was being advocated was exactly such a rapid change in architecture and appearance."[92]

"Being modern is not a fashion, it is a state" Le Corbusier famously asserted.[93] And while "one does not design a new architecture every Monday morning" – a phrase famously attributed to Mies van der Rohe and often invoked to underscore his commitment to enduring principles rather than the transient trends of contemporary design – it is equally true that no one designs a new clothing style every Monday morning either. The mechanisms of clothing fashion, as well as their complexity in terms of reception, distribution, and temporality, suggest in deeper scrutiny something quite different from the notion of an excessively rapid or superficial cyclicality in dress. With that in mind, one might notice that a significant number of buildings barely a decade old already appear more outdated than many garments of the same age, raising the question whether the building sector and the architecture it engages have understood enough of the dress fashion's market proficiency or of Mies's discipline.

It is precisely this tension between perceived and actual temporalities that Val Warke examines in his analysis of fashion's broader impact on architectural culture, particularly in relation to the formation of trends. He asks how ideas in architecture acquire, circulate, and eventually lose prestige over time, in ways analogous to seasonal shifts in clothing fashion. While the latter is commonly understood as cyclical, seasonal, and characterised by rapid turnover, architecture is conventionally assumed to be slow and durable. By juxtaposing these divergent temporal logics, Warke demonstrates how architecture nonetheless absorbs dress fashion's speed and cyclicality in its own modes of creation and critique.[94]

Warke further observes that even the terminology used within architectural discourse reveals an implicit temporal narrative in which rise, consolidation and diffusion are clearly legible, modernism being particularly instructive in this regard. Initially, the term Modern Movement functioned as a marker of the avant-garde; modern architecture subsequently emerged as a more stabilised field of intent and practice; modern style, by explicitly adopting the language

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91 Wigley, "White Out: Fashioning the Modern," 173, 182-83, 204.

92 Franck, "Yes, We Wear Buildings," 96.

93 «Être moderne n'est pas une mode, c'est un état.» Jean Petit, *Le Corbusier lui-même* (Editions Rousseau, 1970), 184.

94 Warke, "'In' Architecture," 136-38.

of style, laid claim to differentiation from other styles while simultaneously asserting a form of internal stability within the logic of fashion; finally, the designation International Style signalled a broader opening of the market and increased transnational circulation – what Warke describes as enhanced marketability.[95]

In his exploration of architectural style and its cultural meanings, Witold Rybczynski argues that style is a central mechanism through which buildings communicate and engage. Style is, in his words, the visual language of architecture.[96] To him, rather than being timeless, the best architecture is often precisely of its age, shaped by the cultural and aesthetic currents of that moment, much like fashion responds to its cultural context,[97] concluding that style, and by extension, architectural fashion, is not incidental but essential to architecture's impact. Recognising this condition, he argues, opens the possibility for buildings that are more deeply connected to culture, to people, and to everyday life, rather than remaining confined within the self-referential sphere of architectural theory:

> "An architecture that recognises style - and fashion - would not be an architecture that is introspective and self-referential, as are so many contemporary buildings. It would be part of the world: not architecture for architects, but architecture for the rest of us. And that would not be a bad thing."[98]

This position is notably shared by Quinn, who similarly advocates for a more outward - facing and culturally embedded architectural practice.

Commenting further on the elitism of architecture, Witold Rybczynski observes that this detachment operates not only at the level of theory, but also through modes of representation. He notes that architectural photography too often strips buildings of life, even though architecture is best understood within the context of lived experience rather than as an abstract object.[99] In doing so, representational practices reinforce the distance between architecture and everyday use.

In a related vein, Mark Wigley critiques the historiographical tradition that privileges volumetric abstraction and a certain whiteness while suppressing colour in modern architecture. Nevertheless, he argues that the preference for white is not rooted in any pure architectural essence, but is instead shaped by cultural, and even eroticised ideas derived from debates surrounding fashion

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95 Warke, "'In' Architecture," 136.

96 Witold Rybczynski, *The Look of Architecture* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 98.

97 Rybczynski, *The Look of Architecture*, 47.

98 Rybczynski, *The Look of Architecture*, 110.

99 Rybczynski, *The Look of Architecture*, 14-16.

and clothing.[100] The central motif is the white wall, usually seen as the essence of modern architecture's anti-decoration stance. Wigley reframes it as a form of clothing, literally and metaphorically. Rather than being a "naked" architecture free of ornament, the white wall is a garment that represents the building's "athletic body" in a fashion system.[101] For Wigley, the white surface is not merely an absence of decoration, but a deliberately designed surface with its own internal logic, one that is nevertheless not foreign to aesthetic conceptions of fashion and the human body. In his view, modern architects implicitly drew on fashion, particularly nineteenth century debates on clothing reform, in order to reconceptualise the architectural surface as a form of dress rather than as a purely structural expression.[102]

In an almost literal reading of the clothing metaphor, Franck reframes architecture as a kind of dress that we "wear" with our bodies, arguing that buildings, like garments, mediate our experience of the world and shape how we feel and remember.[103] Rather than seeing architecture as distant objects to be viewed from afar, Franck suggests we should think of buildings as envelopes of space we occupy, similar to clothes that surround and affect the body's experience. Just as clothing involves texture, drape, material, warmth, movement and touch, architecture engages the senses and the body.

The same idea is present also in Rybczynski's narrative, who makes a compelling case that the way we build and decorate our spaces has deep connections with how we dress ourselves,[104] as well as in Quinn's, for whom architecture and fashion both deal with identity and spatial boundaries: clothes and buildings alike frame the human body and mediate between private and public space.[105] McLeod uses undressing as a metaphor to explore how both disciplines think about surface, interior/exterior, and the body. Coming to terms with the general key of interpretation, she conveys the same idea of dress and buildings both covering, exposing and constructing bodies and spaces, whether literally or conceptually,[106] but brings forth a deeper, more nuanced, layer of lecture. She focuses on how gender shapes the meanings of fashion and architecture, highlighting how theoretical discourse often aligns clothing and ornament with the feminine and private sphere, while structural logic, function, and the public realm are coded masculine. And that in effect, these gendered hierarchies influence how both architecture and clothing design are discussed and valued.[107]

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100 Wigley, "White Out: Fashioning the Modern," 177, 198.
101 Wigley, "White Out: Fashioning the Modern," 155, 172.
102 Wigley, "White Out: Fashioning the Modern," 173, 240.
103 Franck, "Yes, We Wear Buildings," 94.
104 Rybczynski, *The Look of Architecture*, 21-25.
105 Quinn, *The Fashion of Architecture*, 15.
106 McLeod, "Undressing Architecture," 75-76, 80.
107 McLeod, "Undressing Architecture," 38, 64-66, 89.

Coming loose of the body - space - veil entanglement, other critics notice that "fashioning" is an appropriate term to describe how cities are actively produced and performed through practices, behaviours and representations that shape commercial, and not completely indirectly - urban - identity. In this larger than building design process, architecture still participates in ongoing tactical urban enactments that fashion places, routines, and meanings. In his essay "Fashioning the City: Architectural Tactics and Identity Statements," Iain Borden examines how retail architecture and in particular interiors and ambiance, but also frontages and signage, produce urban gestures and habits and therefore operate as identity statements. They communicate who belongs, who is fashionable, and what is culturally significant in the city. Like fashion, these urban identity markers are fluid and socially negotiated rather than merely planned. Instead of seeing architecture as fixed objects or timeless forms, he emphasises tactics, everyday actions, movements, performances and interventions that produce and reshape urban space and identity. In this view, buildings acquire meaning through temporal and tactical processes embedded in lived urban contexts.[108] The city itself is continually fashioned through everyday practices, movement, consumption, display, and the negotiation of identities, ranging from the highly formal integration of major brands into the urban fabric to more informal, spontaneous uses of streets and public space.

Finally, looking not only at the effect of architecture being co-opted by the mechanisms of fashion, but also at the internal logic and functioning of the profession within its accelerated cultural sphere, Dietmar Steiner notices that in contemporary culture architecture increasingly operates like a commodity itself within its market, where visibility matters more than critical evaluation alone. Architects and their work are promoted through exhibitions, media coverage, awards, and branding strategies, similar to how fashion products are marketed to create appeal. This shifts architectural value from pure formal or functional criteria toward visibility and recognition in public culture.[109] Project choice, exhibition participation, and publication often become part of a broader cultural economy, where architecture is shaped by market logic, branding, and exposure. The built environment thus becomes interwoven with consumer culture, mirroring the way fashion operates within commercial and media systems.

If, according to Baudrillard's insight, fashion is "the emblem of modernity," understanding architecture's entanglements with the latter is also telling with regard to fashion. While in Baudrillard's view modernity ultimately is a binary code, a never-ending game of simulacra staging its "innocuous revolutions,"[110] for Hilde Heynen, modernity is a liberating, yet contradictory project which, in

108 Iain Borden, "Fashioning the City: Architectural Tactics and Identity Statements," in *Fashion + Architecture*, *Architectural Design* 70:6, ed. Helen Castle, (Wiley Academy, 2000), 12-19.

109 Dietmar M. Steiner, "Promotional Architecture," in *Fashion + Architecture*, *Architectural Design* 70:6, ed. Helen Castle (Wiley Academy, 2000), 20-23.

110 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 626, 625.

order to remain authentic, needs to be continuously rewritten. Heynen confronts the architectural discourse of the modern movement with the most seminal cultural theories on modernity of the twentieth century arguing that, although conditioned by modernity's contradictions, architecture is nevertheless in a privileged position of criticising it, because architecture forms the framework of every-day life.[111] Evoking Lyotard's vision of modernity, as the unfulfilled desire for the domus, while inhabiting the uninhabitable megalopolis,[112] she sees the process of dwelling under modernity's project in terms that are reminiscent of the clothing metaphor and of fashion's persistent self-renewal: "Dwelling means a permanent quest for an ever-new enclosure, because no dwelling can be more than momentary at present: dwelling is continually permeated by its opposite."[113] Hence, architecture's uneasy task is coming to terms with both the uprooting experience of modernity and the desire for dwelling, in their very inextricable intertwining.[114] Not unlike Baudrillard's suggested escape from fashion through the deconstruction of the fashion sign, or Lipovetsky's invitation to disentangle the best from the worst inseparably produced by fashion, for Heynen "[r]ewriting modernity means a face-to-face confrontation with its failures and perversities; an anamnesis of the past is the precondition for taking any step into the future."[115]

Peter Eisenman and Elisa Iturbe's Lateness engage in a reflection about architecture and time, formulating a critique of the urge for timeliness inscribed within the project of modernity, and suggesting lateness "as a form of release from the restraints of the moment."[116] Without talking of fashion proper, the authors nevertheless implicitly formulate a critique thereof, by imagining lateness as "something that could resist adherence to an ideology of the ever-changing new"[117] and by "uncovering a critical mode in which the invention of new form is no longer the stated goal of a critical architecture."[118] The implicit suggestion of a way out of fashion is further detectable in the opposition between architecture, understood as excess, on the one hand, and design, understood as surplus cost, on the other hand, thus criticising an "architecture that gives way to design" submitting to "a politic of the media where the marketing of a work becomes more important than the work itself."[119] In contrast, and echoing Baudrillard's vision of modernity as a binary code of

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111 Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity* (MIT Press, 2000).

112 Heynen, Architecture, 222.

113 Heynen, Architecture, 223.

114 Heynen, Architecture, 223.

115 Heynen, Architecture, 222.

116 Peter Eisenman, and Elisa Iturbe, *Lateness* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

117 Eisenman and Iturbe, *Lateness*, 98-99.

118 Eisenman and Iturbe, *Lateness*, 21.

119 Peter Eisenman, and Michael Wang, "Peter Eisenman, with Michael Wang, argues on behalf of lateness, an ideology with a plan," The Architect's Newspaper, February 16, 2011, https://www.archpaper.com/2011/02/peter-eisenman-with-michael-wang-argues-on-behalf-of-lateness-an-ideology-with-a-plan/.

simulated differences, "the untimeliness of lateness stems from an ability to fall outside of a constantly resolving dialectic," facilitating "a different critical mode – one that alludes to the idea of *ohne Leitbild*, which could be translated as without a model, a term used by Adorno to indicate the critical potential of a weakened formal order, one that could facilitate the unforeseen without fetishizing the notion of invention."[120] By untimely pursuing the centrality of the plan, once underpinning the autonomy of the modern, lateness takes distance from the on-going "ascendancy of the architectural surface [which] represents contemporary architecture's dominant mode (and accords with the time of the spectacle), [while] late work continues the unfolding of a modernist temporality" whereby "[l]ateness frustrates the zeitgeist."[121]

120 Eisenman and Iturbe, *Lateness*, 98-99.

121 Eisenman and Wang, "On behalf of lateness."

Structure and Contents of This Book

Authored by researchers from different institutions of higher education in architecture, all of the 13 included contributions address, from different thematic and chronological viewpoints, the paradigm of modernity in architecture and / or in the applied or fine arts. Each of them attempts to reveal some of these disciplines' entanglements with fashion, be it over the post-Mediaeval 'long modernity,' over different sections of the post-industrial revolution 'short modernity,' or over brief time spans of contemporary history. Some of the studies explicitly make use of fashion as an analytical tool, while others focus on some of its symptoms, such as the change dynamics of cultural forms, the formation processes of collective taste, the social validation resorts of aesthetic options, etc; some explore national or local avatars of modernity, while others are interested in seizing the studied phenomena on a European or global scale. Although, given this diversity, delineating thematic sections has not been an evident task, the papers have been grouped into four thematic parts, according to four of the problematic aspects of fashion highlighted in the theoretical survey presented in the second section of this introductory chapter, aspects that we have considered especially relevant in architecture: the model, the ethics and aesthetics of superficiality, the domestic as an object of consumption, and the interplay between 'the new' and 'the old' – the four parts being respectively titled:

1. Modernity and the Model,
2. Depth of the Surface,
3. Fashioning Housing,
4. Layered Modernities.

1.

Both Baudrillard and Blumer identify the model as an essential element in the working of fashion, functioning as a vehicle, or a medium. Blumer explains the non-linear trajectory of models, which are permanent objects of negotiation, from the innovators that propose several competing ones, to the collective selection intermediated by the choices of production or disseminated leaders. For Blumer the model acquires a certain respectability through its sanctioning by an elite, and one of the check points to identify whether a certain field is open to fashion is that the field must be open to the recurrent presentation of new models.[1] In Baudrillard's critique instead, the accent lies on the alienating nature of the model, the different areas of human activity are "haunted by fashion," which occurs as soon as cultural forms are *re*produced from models, abandoning their own reference systems in the process.[2] The book's first part, "Modernity and the Model," groups three contributions sharing a concern with fashion's circulation of models, with processes of emulation or rejection, tracking the emergence, dissemination and significations attached to these models, as well as their dissolution, in architecture and design.

1 Blumer, "Fashion," 348, 349, 341-42, 350-51.

2 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 624, 629.

Camelia Sisak investigates architecture competitions as sources of professional models that mediate the dissemination of fashions. After tracing the thematic evolution of competition culture in Romania the study analyses recent architecture contest in Cluj, which, due to the relatively large number of organised competitions at national level, provides consistent case studies and compelling conclusions: the winners appear to increasingly opt for temperate architectural expression, for sensibly adapting to the existing values of sites, while their success and ensuing visibility are argued to have influenced subsequent competitions.

Alexandra Marinescu examines alternative creations in architecture from the last decade of the socialist regime in Romania, when off-the-shelf projects reacted to both the harshness of the socio-political environment and to the models elaborated by Western postmodernism. The paper argues that these visionary practices functioned as a form of dissidence towards and the regime's ideological control, embodying a counter-fashion to the shortage of intellectual opportunities characteristic of the official architectural production.

Andrei Teacă follows another thread of relating to models, analysing digital ornament as a cross-fertilising area between dress design and architecture, by showcasing the creations of Dutch dress designer Iris van Herpen in relation to contemporary architectural practice. The transdisciplinary mobility of models is highlighted along with the formal possibilities offered by digital modelling for architectural detail design. Discussing historic precedents of both ornamental theory and ornamental poiesis, the study proposes the idea of an ornamental intelligence based on common references from the living and non-living nature and on affinities with the ethical concerns of contemporary ecology.

2.

To the longstanding philosophical and ethical discreditation of superficiality, Lipovetsky opposes a revanchist argument for what he considers the ill-understood virtues of seduction and the spectacular. Rather than condemning superficiality, Lipovetsky pleads for carefully discerning, that within fashion's ambivalence and its compelling negative effects, within what he calls "the frivolous new deal" lie, he argues,

> "fashion's greatest and most interesting historical lesson: […] that seduction now serves to limit irrationality; that the artificial facilitates access to the real; that superficiality permits increased use of reason; that playful displays are springboards to subjective judgement."[3]

The second part of the book, "Depth of the Surface," brings together three works that investigate the dialectic between the visible and the hidden, the denoted and the connoted, a theme that foregrounds the semiotic valences

3 Lipovetsky, "The Empire of Fashion," 32.

of fashion through by conceiving of art, architecture, or graphic design as languages, as sign systems.

Daniel Tudor Munteanu traces the manifestations and contestations of nationalism in the history of the Venice Biennale, through an in-depth analysis of Mark Wallinger's installation dedicated to the British Pavilion (2001), grounded on a rich historical contextualisation of the pavilion and its site within the Giardini. The research traces the way in which ideological nationalism appears, becomes fashion-like imperative, and is contested throughout the history of the Biennale. Wallinger's staging of the pavilion's natural scale image in guise of its very architectural presence subtly thematises the debate around fashion's alleged superficiality.

Ruxandra Vasile attempts to trace a cultural history of the facade and of the truth value of ornament in expressing architectural authenticity. Again, fashion's deep superficiality is implicitly thematised in a reappraisal of what is called "the tradition of the façade," highlighting an essential architectural theme of the Renaissance – and, surely, a most fashionable one of that time. The paper draws on key works by the Renaissance masters Alberti and Palladio in order to substantiate a historical background for analysing, in the light of the façade tradition, contemporary works by David Chipperfield and Valerio Olgiati.

Tiberiu Teodor-Stanciu and Nely Vînău present the pedagogical concept and the achievements of a series of extra-curricular and trans-disciplinary workshops, coordinated within the "Gheorghe Asachi" University of Technology in Iaşi, in which participants create alternative posters for fiction films. The paper explores how the two-dimensional graphics of the posters make surface deep dives into the complexities of modern and contemporary culture. The alternative poster is presented as the result – both personal ("alter") and referential ("native") – of a profound engagement with the film's original cultural universe and context, as well as with contemporary culture, in order to update the film's message for today's audience.

3.

Baudrillard's above-cited question, whether a house was an object – in his understanding, meaning an object of fashion, of consumption – is haunting, not only because it directly connects architecture to his philosophical inquiry, but also for raising the question of his very motivation for having chosen the house, along with the ring, rather than any other artefacts, in order to exemplify his reasoning on "the ideological genesis of needs." Comparing the symbolic- versus the pure sign values embedded within the wedding- versus the ordinary ring, as well as within the house, versus "your lodgings, your apartment," he argues that

> "[a]n object is not an object of consumption unless it is released from its psychic determinations as *symbol*; from its functional determinations as *instrument*; from its commercial determinations

> as *product*; and is thus *liberated as a sign* to be recaptured by the formal logic of fashion, i.e., by the logic of differentiation."[4]

"Fashioning Housing," the third part of this volume, focuses on how fashion can act a hermeneutic filter in research on housing, through four contributions with different temporal and geographical outlines, yet sharing an understanding of fashion as verb, as ways of making, in the unceasing search for an always-redefined modernity.

Tina Mikrou, Chrysostomos Theodoropoulos, Maria Balodimou, and Ionas Moutogiannakis discuss the heritage of modernist social housing in Athens, highlighting the positive impact of these collective ensembles, endowed with consistent open and green spaces, on the spatial and environmental quality of the capital's dense urban fabric. Presenting some of the most emblematic housing projects diachronically, along with the shifts in their architectural and urban layouts, the research shows that along with architecture, the ideal of modernity also shifted, continuously refashioned according to the values prevailing within the different periods of the twentieth century.

Diana Galoș (Pogăcean) analyses the fashioning or refashioning of single-family housing in the peri-urban area of Cluj, highlighting processes of urban–rural hybridisation in domestic architecture and detecting competing models and influences informing ways of life and taste within this highly dynamic territory. Through a mixed methodology involving both architectural and sociological ways of investigation, such as field observation and resident interviews, the study discerns how the rural-urban fashioning of housing occurs through architectural form, construction materials, and building techniques, shaped through mechanisms such as imitation, assimilation, interpretation.

Verona Musteață, in an almost complementary analysis with the previous one, researches the historical, geographical, social and cultural premises that inform the architecture of new or transformed homes in a series of villages from Cluj County. Mapping the still deep rurality of the county, the paper discusses the production of contemporary residential buildings in these areas as pertinent and efficient responses to present-day needs, fashioning rural domesticity through a continuous renovation of the "traditional." Aware of the researcher's problematic position with regard to her study object, the work endeavours to both expose and avoid the bias of objectifying the village as a nostalgic, urban fabrication of idealised "rurality."

Gabriel and Ana-Cristina Tudora, together with Florina Pantilimonescu-Cioancă explore the international tiny houses trend from cultural and practical points of view. The paper outlines the state of knowledge through a literature review that helps ponder upon the ecological, urban, and economic problems and opportunities brought about by the potential wider-spread adoption of this

4 Baudrillard, "The Ideological Genesis of Needs," 614.

housing type. The work also discusses the authors' own prize-winning tiny house projects in the contexts of two competitions. The analysis synthesises the pros and cons to a housing type only emerging as a trend in some countries, while allegedly already a movement in others, raising awareness of the possible slippages engendered by this apparently "sustainable fashion," such as the enhancement of consumerism and wasteful practices.

4.

As seen above, Blumer and Lipovetsky seem to confer upon 'the new' the reality of being, seeing fashion as a social, respectively increasingly individual technology, continuously adapted, through an ethic of resilience, in order to deal with the challenges of 'the new.' Contrarily, in Baudrillard's understanding "fashion is always retro" because it actually consists in "the recurrence of forms on the basis of their death and their stockpiling, like signs, in an a-temporal reserve," engendering an "aesthetic of renewal."[5] This insight strikingly yet uncannily resonates with the present-day affluence of architectural and urban practices of reuse, whereby the new image of sites undergoing regeneration consists rather in a stripping, a rendering transparent of their historicity. While the palimpsest has become one of the privileged contemporary expressions of 'the new,' the prospective roles of documentation, description, and analysis come to the fore. The fourth part of this collection, "Layered Modernities," looks at the historical and social strata of modernity. It includes three studies in which the reading of historical or contemporary realities through the lens of fashion brings to light forms of stratification, not only in the palimpsest of urban or rural built space, but also in the dynamics of "social tapestries."

Silviu Borș analyses Liviu Rebreanu's novel *Ion* both as a complex document of the Romanian Transylvanian village around World War I, on the verge of profound transformations (the Great Union and the agrarian reform of 1921) and, simultaneously, as the result of an emancipatory distancing from the village world. Objectified in order to be realistically analysed, the village world is the one from which the writer – representing himself in the figure of the Romanian provincial intellectual from Transylvania in search for success – detaches himself in a twofold movement: while reconstructing the rural as an artistic image, as 'modern' man's perspective on the 'traditional' village, by the same token emerges his own image, as 'modern' author.

Alex-Gabriel Bolasz explores literature too, comparing the ways Hugo and Zola critically represent Haussmannian Paris, highlighting two complementary attitudes towards the transformations that were going to make a vogue far beyond the French capital. Depicting a romantic nostalgia for the loss of emblematic places, the author shows that Hugo fosters a modern taste for the old city, anticipating the late twentieth century appreciation of the context. Zola criticises the social effects of urban rewriting such as the relocation of the poor,

5 Baudrillard, "Fashion," 625.

the related gentrification, or speculators' arrivisme, exposing the violence and trauma sometimes inflicted by fashion's transactions between 'new' and 'old.'

Anca-Andreia Fati looks at the contemporary interest in regeneration practices, proposing "rearchitecture" as a centralising concept, along with and its semantic field, mediating between intention and reception discourses, between the social, political, and economical stakes of an urban practice marked by tensions and contradictions. The transformations of three reused former industrial production sites from Cluj are interpreted through the linguistic notions of morphology, semantics, and pragmatism, highlighting the fashionable ethos of a modernization based on the perpetuation and upgrading of found layers and traces.

Openings

Instead of a conclusion to this introduction, we resume a few more threads of inquiry, included in our Call for Papers, which have so far remained unaddressed, as additional possible openings towards understanding fashion's operations in architecture.

Notwithstanding the above delineations of fashion's range as far exceeding the realm of dress, this specific research direction might prove highly rewarding. Appropriating Hegel's *Zeitgeist* as *Zeitkostüm*, Wölfflin's famous parallels between clothing and architecture were attempts to grasp the historicity of form as style, through the mediation of bodily experience. The models populating architectural representations can be read as taste indications, as ingredients through which architects confer certain accents to architectural creations, accents not unlike clothing accessories. What are the messages conveyed by the clothing, postures, and positioning of the figures included in presentation images of architecture and urbanism, today and in the past? From the centrality of the human figure in the Renaissance treatises, to the elegant bourgeoisie in Schinkel's perspectives, to Le Corbusier's Modulor, to the rather expressionistic characters of Rob Krier's watercolours, to the wormhole-type simulations of urban flows, or to the angelic characters in some recent post digital collages, how do architects imagine the subject of architecture and what are the values denoted by their figurative choices in perspectives, facades, "renderings" and diagrams?

If Walter Benjamin first memorably exposed the "spectacle of commodities" in what he famously called "the capital of the nineteenth century," from the boulevard shop windows and commercial galleries (*passages*) to the department stores and the world exhibitions, it should be worth asking what are their current architectural avatars? What are the new urban commerce typologies and what are the spatial and cultural mutations brought about by the department stores and the fashion houses of communist regimes, the flea markets having now become chic, the second-hand shops, the outlets, the small alternative workshops accessible through online orders, the 'easy boxes'? Refusing to only be the designers of exclusive commercial layouts, of "forms

without utopia," (in Tafuri's terms from *Architecture and Utopia. Design and Capitalist Development*), how could architects reinvent (or reassume) their mission, co-creating more responsible networks and productive-commercial spaces, which sustainably valorise local resources and integrate prosumption?

Finally, if architecture's ecological turn is more than a fashion sign (in the Baudrillardian sense), society should confront the responsibility for the waste generated by the massive adherence to a multitude of increasingly rapid fashion changes. What does the urban geography of consumption look like, what does the architecture of consumer goods production and consumption look like, and what was / is the role of architects in defining it? Wherefrom and through which channels are raw materials sourced, where and how are clothes produced, sold and bought, as well as disposed of as waste, and possibly recycled? If one could talk, for example, about a clothing ecology, then what is its impact on the city and on the home, today, but also in less wasteful times? Along with the right to housing, food, work, how could consuming justice be spatialized within the current climate crisis and in societies with multiple contrasts? How can one move from architectures of waste to architectures of solidarity and empathy, both in clothing ecology and in other, increasingly dependent on consumption – hence fashion – fields?

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Modernity and the Model

The Role of Architecture Competitions in Creating Architectural Fashions in Romania

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Keywords
architectural competition; simplicity; architecture trends; iconic architecture; competition history

Abstract
Architecture competitions are essential tools in shaping the contemporary urban landscape, fostering innovation and influencing architectural trends. These competitions provide valuable platforms for architects, encouraging experimentation, pushing disciplinary boundaries, and gaining professional recognition. In Romania, competitions have historically addressed aesthetic and functional challenges, evolving from the promotion of a national style to interwar monumental modernism and, later, to an architectural language increasingly associated with what juries describe as *simplicity* and *modesty*. In this context, *simplicity* refers to clarity of form, functional coherence, and avoidance of superfluous detail, while *modesty* signals a conscious restraint, privileging contextual integration over iconic gestures. These terms, frequently invoked in jury reports and architectural discourse, thus operate not merely as descriptive labels, but as critical categories for understanding the stylistic and cultural shifts produced through competitions. After 2000, Romanian competitions underwent a significant transformation, emphasising functionality, sustainability, and contextual integration over monumentality. Cluj-Napoca has emerged as a key reference point, organising competitions that prioritise *modest*, eco-friendly, and user-oriented solutions. This focus on public spaces and green areas reflects global trends towards sustainable urban development. Although this restrained approach might be criticised for limiting bold innovation, recent competition outcomes in Cluj have had a significant role in shaping Romania's architectural discourse, demonstrating a balance between aesthetics and functionality.

Introduction

Fashion in architecture is a subjective and time-bound phenomenon. It might refer to the dominant aesthetic, materiality and conceptual tendencies that gain popularity within the architectural field at a given moment. These design fashions can be shaped and disseminated through exhibitions, journals, and academia, and can be legitimised by juries or schools of architecture. According to Pierre Bourdieu[1] cultural preferences, whether in art, music, diet, or lifestyle - are not just personal choices, but expressions of one's cultural trajectory and social position. Access to "high" culture is not only linked to economic capital, but especially to cultural capital: education, leisure time, and exposure to prestigious cultural symbols. In the context of architectural competitions, this framework helps understand how certain design solutions become "legitimate" not only through technical quality, but also through alignment with the dominant tastes of the jury or involved institutions. Analysing the dynamics of competitions through Bourdieu's concepts - particularly dominant taste and the cultural field - provides a critical lens for understanding not only the outcomes, but also jury decisions, winner strategies, and prevailing stylistic orientations. In the logic of the cultural field, each actor, whether jury member, competitor, or institutional observer - occupies a position shaped by their cultural capital and by the power relations within the field. Choosing a "modest" or a "spectacular" solution can be a symbolic struggle between different forms of taste, legitimacy, and professional authority.

Starting from the idea of competition either establishing a fashion or following the fashion, this article seeks to critically analyse this phenomenon, positioning it within the broader context of Romanian architectural competitions. The primary objective is to examine how these contests have positioned themselves. This involves contextualising current tendencies within historical precedents, assessing their resonance with broader European trends, and exploring their implications for contemporary Romanian architecture. The aim is to define the most recent architectural fashion characterised as *simplicity* and *modesty* – an approach that favours clarity, contextual sensitivity, and restrained expression over formal extravagance.

Architecture competitions play an important role in shaping the contemporary urban landscape. These competitions offer architects a platform to develop new creative ideas, but also to enhance old concepts that are present in the architectural contemporary discourse. Therefore, they can influence and create architectural fashions by acting as platforms for experimentation, idea dissemination, and professional recognition. Because they are visible projects, they can establish trends, shape public and professional preferences, and define

1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984): 1-7, 170-175.

the direction of architectural discourse. As Guilherme[2] notes, they are a form of research where architects respond to specific challenges, crafting innovative solutions that reflect their professional ethos and methodology. This process of experimentation often leads to the emergence of novel architectural styles, which can gain traction and evolve into broader trends.

Winning designs in architecture competitions often serve as examples, having significant visibility and being frequently published in architectural journals, showcased in exhibitions, and discussed in academic and professional circles. This allows their core ideas and style to spread within the architectural community. As Vera Borges[3] highlights, the originality of competition entries is subjectively evaluated, but the visibility provided by awards and rankings plays a crucial role in defining what is considered fashionable or avant-garde. For example, in Romania since the first issue of *Analele Architecturei*,[4] the oldest architecture journal in Romania, competitions have consistently been a central topic of discussion and a source of critical analysis within the architectural community. Over time, the journal[5] has played a pivotal role in documenting and influencing architectural trends, shaping the narrative around competitions as a tool for experimentation, professional development, and the advancement of architectural discourse. Sometimes they were analysed in detail, by presenting the brief, the participating projects and even the jury reports.[6] The juries in architecture competitions act as curators of taste, if we rapport to Bourdieu[7] theory. As Stevens[8] describes, jurors often include critics, academics, and prominent architects who are deeply embedded in the architectural system. Their decisions reflect and reinforce prevailing trends, shaping the trajectory of architectural discourse. They can play a decisive role in legitimising certain

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2 Pedro Miguel Hernandez Salvador Guilherme, "Competitions Serve a Larger Purpose in Architectural Knowledge," *AE... Revista Lusófona de Arquitectura e Educação*, no. 11 (2014): 439.

3 Vera Borges, "Reputação, mercado e território: O caso dos arquitectos," *Sociologia, Problemas e Práticas*, no. 74 (2014): 73–92, accessed December 10th, 2014, https://journals.openedition.org/spp/1457.

4 The inaugural issue of *Analele Arhitecturei și ale artelor cu care se leagă* (Year I, 1890, Bucharest, p. 1) prominently featured, on its first page, the announcement of the International Competition for the Administrative Building of the Railway.

5 *Analele Arhitecturii și ale artelor cu care se leagă* (*The Annals of Architecture and Related Arts*) was the first professional architecture magazine in Romania, first published in 1890, with the aim of promoting architecture and related arts. This publishing tradition was later continued by *Revista Arhitectura* (*The Architecture Journal*), founded in 1906, which became the main platform for debates, the publication of projects, and the promotion of modern architecture in Romania.

6 Ana Maria Zahariade, "Concursul de Arhitectură, atunci și acum," *Revista Arhitectura*, no. 5–6 (2019), accessed February 1st, 2024, https://arhitectura-1906.ro/2020/01/concursul-de-arhitectura-atunci-si-acum/.

7 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

8 Garry Stevens, *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

styles while sidelining others, contributing to the establishment of new fashions. Recent trends in architectural competitions, such as the emphasis on *simplicity* and *modesty* in jury reports, demonstrate how competitions can create a certain architectural fashion. This minimalist approach, favouring harmony with the existing urban fabric, contrasts sharply with more expressive and emblematic designs seen in other contexts, highlighting how competitions can regionalise or globalise certain architectural ideals.

At the same time, competition entries and jury decisions reflect a specific moment in time, shaped by the political, social, economic, and architectural context. As such, they are inevitably influenced by contemporary trends. As Gonzales[9] argues while analysing Kant, fashion can be understood as a form of imitation - an essential mechanism through which ideas circulate and evolve - suggesting that imitation itself plays a significant role in the development of civilisation. Applied to architectural competitions, this perspective positions them as mirrors of contemporary values, either reinforcing or challenging prevailing architectural fashions.

The methodology combines historical research, case studies, and comparative analysis to explore the evolution and impact of architectural competitions in Romania, with a focus on those from Cluj. Graphic charts trace the evolution of architectural competitions in Romania, emphasising their influence. Case studies of the recent competitions are examined to identify recurring themes and design priorities. The focus is primarily on the results of the competitions and on how they were perceived at the time they were held. Few of the winning projects have been implemented, which limits the ability to fully assess their long-term impact on the built environment and architectural practice.

Historical Context and Evolution of Architecture Competitions in Romania before 2000

The historical evolution of architectural competitions in Romania until 2000 aligns with the idea of creating architectural fashions, playing a significant role in defining architectural styles and professional discourse. Throughout the twentieth century, several dominant themes emerged, each reflecting the shifting priorities of their time. Public buildings often occupied a central role in architectural competitions. These structures, ranging from administrative centres to cultural institutions, were seen as embodiments of national identity and symbols of modernisation. Another critical theme was the design of churches, which had a unique trajectory due to the relationship between religion and politics in Romania and became platforms for exploring Romania's spiritual heritage while experimenting with other architectural languages. Housing emerged as another dominant focus of architectural competitions,

9 Ana Marta González, "Imitation, Fashion, and Emulation: On the Nature of Fashion Trends," *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty* 1, no. 1 (2010): 65–83, https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb.1.1.65_1

particularly in response to urbanisation and industrialisation in the mid-twentieth century. It is my opinion that architectural competitions in these three domains - public buildings, churches, and housing - acted as catalysts for broader stylistic and ideological shifts.

In the early stages of Romania's modernisation, architectural competitions primarily focused on designing public buildings. These structures were intended to symbolise national progress and embody a sense of authority and grandeur. From administrative offices to cultural institutions, such projects were seen as opportunities to establish a monumental and representative architectural language.[10] Public buildings became the physical manifestation of state power and cultural ambition, setting the tone for what was considered prestigious architecture at the time (Fig. 1).

The first recorded public competition in Romania with international participation was held in 1859 for the Palace of Justice in Bucharest. Although the winning project was never realised due to a lack of funding, this competition was a significant moment for the architectural community, sparking widespread interest and discussion among architects and in professional publications.[11] Competitions during this early period became an essential tool for shaping Romania's architectural identity. They helped to define a Romanian style that fused local and foreign elements, characterised by monumental designs that were richly decorated.[12] These competitions played a pivotal role in fostering a style that would resonate across public institutions, many of which were developed based on competition outcomes. As such, competitions were not just about addressing immediate design needs, they established trends that guided architectural practices for specific periods, creating a distinct architectural fashion among certain groups of architects. The Romanian style, described as "more of a programmatic movement than a unified style,"[13] integrated traditional elements with modern trends, primarily through iconic structures.

After World War I, the focus shifted significantly towards religious architecture (Fig. 1). This shift was driven by the political need to establish a national identity,

10 Gabriela Petrescu, "Concursurile publice de arhitectură organizate până la primul război Mondial," *Revista Arhitectura*, no. 5–6 (2019), accessed January 10th, 2024, https://arhitectura-1906.ro/2020/01/concursurile-publice-de-arhitectura-organizate-pana-la-primul-razboi-mondial/.

11 Alexandru Panaitescu and Iuliana Mircea, "Un veac și jumătate de concursuri de arhitectură 1859–1990," *Revista Arhitectura*, no. 5–6 (2019), accessed December 30th, 2023, https://arhitectura-1906.ro/2020/01/un-veac-si-jumatate-de-concursuri-de-arhitectura-1859-1990/.

12 Alexandru Popescu, *Casele și Palatele Bucureștilor* (Bucharest: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2018), 69.

13 Ana Maria Zahariade, "Căutări naționale," *Enciclopedie. Un secol de arhitectură românească*, accessed January 18th, 2024, https://www.metacult.ro/architecture/istoria_arhitecturii.php?id=664&page=5.

particularly in regions like Transylvania, where Romanian influence was not dominant. Architectural competitions for Orthodox churches were laden with political symbolism. They were tasked with reflecting the "Romanian spirit" and countering the architectural narratives of other ethnic or religious groups in the region. The designs had to be visually striking yet rooted in Orthodox tradition, creating a delicate balance between innovation and heritage. Despite their cultural and political importance, this category of competitions remained more constrained by traditional style, limiting opportunities for radical architectural experimentation.

The 1942 competition for the design of an Orthodox cathedral in Odessa stands as a significant moment in the history of Romanian architectural competitions, illustrating an unfulfilled potential to establish a new "fashion" in religious architecture. The Odessa competition, which was evaluated by a jury led by architect Horia Creangă, represented a shift in how religious buildings were conceived in Romania. The design proposals for the cathedral went beyond traditional Orthodox architectural forms and explored new possibilities for sacred space. Despite the innovative nature of these proposals, as noted by Augustin Ioan,[14] the competition was ultimately a missed opportunity for a radical rethinking of Romanian religious architecture. The design was too avant-garde for its time and did not gain widespread support, ultimately failing to initiate a new architectural fashion for religious buildings in Romania. It can therefore be regarded as a missed opportunity to shape a new architectural fashion in the realm of Romanian religious architecture. There were also other competitions where modernist approaches to church architecture were attempted, yet all were ultimately rejected - some even after winning[15] - by the ecclesiastical authorities.

As Romania entered the interwar period and later the communist era, the topic of housing[16] was increasingly incorporated into architectural competition themes (Fig. 1). During the interwar years, these competitions embraced modernist principles, emphasising functional design, efficiency, and the use of new materials. This was a period of significant innovation, as architects sought to address the growing demand for affordable and practical housing in rapidly urbanising cities. Yet most of these competitions organised after 1950 remained on paper without a definitive outcome.

A landmark moment in Romania's architectural evolution came in 1929 with the competition organised by *Asigurarea Românească* to design a new building on Magheru Boulevard, one of Bucharest's main streets. This competition marked the first major introduction of modernism in Romanian architecture. The winner,

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14 Augustin Ioan, "Arhitectura ortodoxă și tema identitară 1900–1942," *Ianus* 5–6 (2002), accessed February 9th, 2024, https://ianus.inoe.ro/Nr%205-6_2002.htm.

15 Architectural Competition for the Domenii–Cașin Park Church

16 Miruna Stroe, *Locuirea între proiect și decizie politică. România 1954–1966* (Bucharest: Editura Simetria, 2015).

architect Horia Creangă, presented a design that was radically different from the traditional monumental style. Completed in 1931, the ARO Building broke away from the decorative style of the past and embraced the clean lines and functional principles of modernism. This building became a turning point in Romanian architecture, demonstrating the growing influence of international style while also pushing the boundaries of local architectural practice. The ARO Building stood as a model for subsequent modernist projects in Romania and marked the emergence of a new architectural direction that would later define much of Romania's interwar urban landscape. Creangă's work, although appreciated by a segment of architects, was a highly unusual sight for its time, especially as it appeared right in the center of Bucharest.[17] In his book "The Anarchy of Styles and the Art of the Future," Creangă argues that the public's taste can be educated by exposure to modernist architecture, with public institutions being encouraged to build in the future based on modern urban planning principles and "through carefully supervised competitions."[18]

Under the communist regime, housing competitions took on a more utilitarian character, aligning with the state's agenda of mass urbanisation and industrialised construction. While these competitions were often framed as design exercises to promote innovation, in practice, the outcomes were frequently limited by political and economic constraints. Despite these limitations, housing competitions served as a platform to explore modernist ideas within a constrained context.

In contrast to other historical periods, architectural competitions organised in Romania during the communist decades (especially between the 1960s and 1980s) had less impact in shaping architectural fashions. Two of the most notable competitions of this era were those for the theatres in Bucharest and Craiova. The other competitions during this period were systematisation exercises - urban plans for city centers or general schemes for residential districts. Their function was primarily consultative, with little chance of implementation, reflecting the centralised planning system that limited architectural autonomy. This formal and often symbolic character was further emphasised by the way results were announced: many competitions avoided awarding a definitive first prize, opting instead for multiple ex-aequo prizes, or recommending hybrid solutions combining elements from several proposals - a nearly impossible task in practice.

In the 90's, architectural competitions in Romania reflected the country's search for a new identity after the communist period. The most emblematic example is the "Bucharest 2000" competition, the largest post-communist

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17 Ana Maria Sandu, "La început au fost doi, Iancu și Creangă – interviu cu Ana Maria Zahariade și Ștefan Ghenciulescu," *Dilema Veche*, no. 833 (2020), accessed February 9th, 2024, https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/regimul-artelor-si-munitiilor/la-inceput-au-fost-doi-iancu-si-creanga-629519.html.

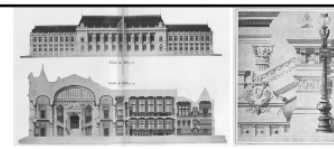
18 Horia Creangă, "Anarhia stilurilor și arta viitorului," *Către o arhitectură a Bucureștilor*, (Bucharest: Ed. Tribuna Edilitară, 1934): 23-30.

1859

- first recorded public competition
- french inspiration
- neorenascentist

1860

Palatul de Justiție



1870



1880

The National Museum, the Romanian Academy, the State Archives and the Library

The Administration Building of the Romanian Railways

1890

The Chamber of Deputies and the Palace of the Senate

Bucharest Central Station



The City Hall of the Capital 1

The Bucharest Military Circle



1900

Galați Cathedral

The Administrative Palace in Craiova and Bucharest



The Bucharest Stock Exchange Palace

1910

The Palace of the Agricultural Insurance Society

The City Hall of the Capital 2

Madona Dudu Cathedral Craiova

The Palace of Rural Land Credit

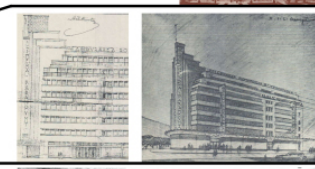


public institutions

- Romanian style
- fused local and foreign elements
- monumental designs
- richly decorated

1920

Catedrala din Cluj



The Headquarters of the Association of Engineers and Technicians in the Mining Industry

The City Hall of the Capital 3

churches

- symbol of national identity
- monumentality
- traditional space
- one, central dome

1930



8 June Square București

Timișoara Cathedral / The City Hall of the Capital 4

Parcul Domenii Church- Casin

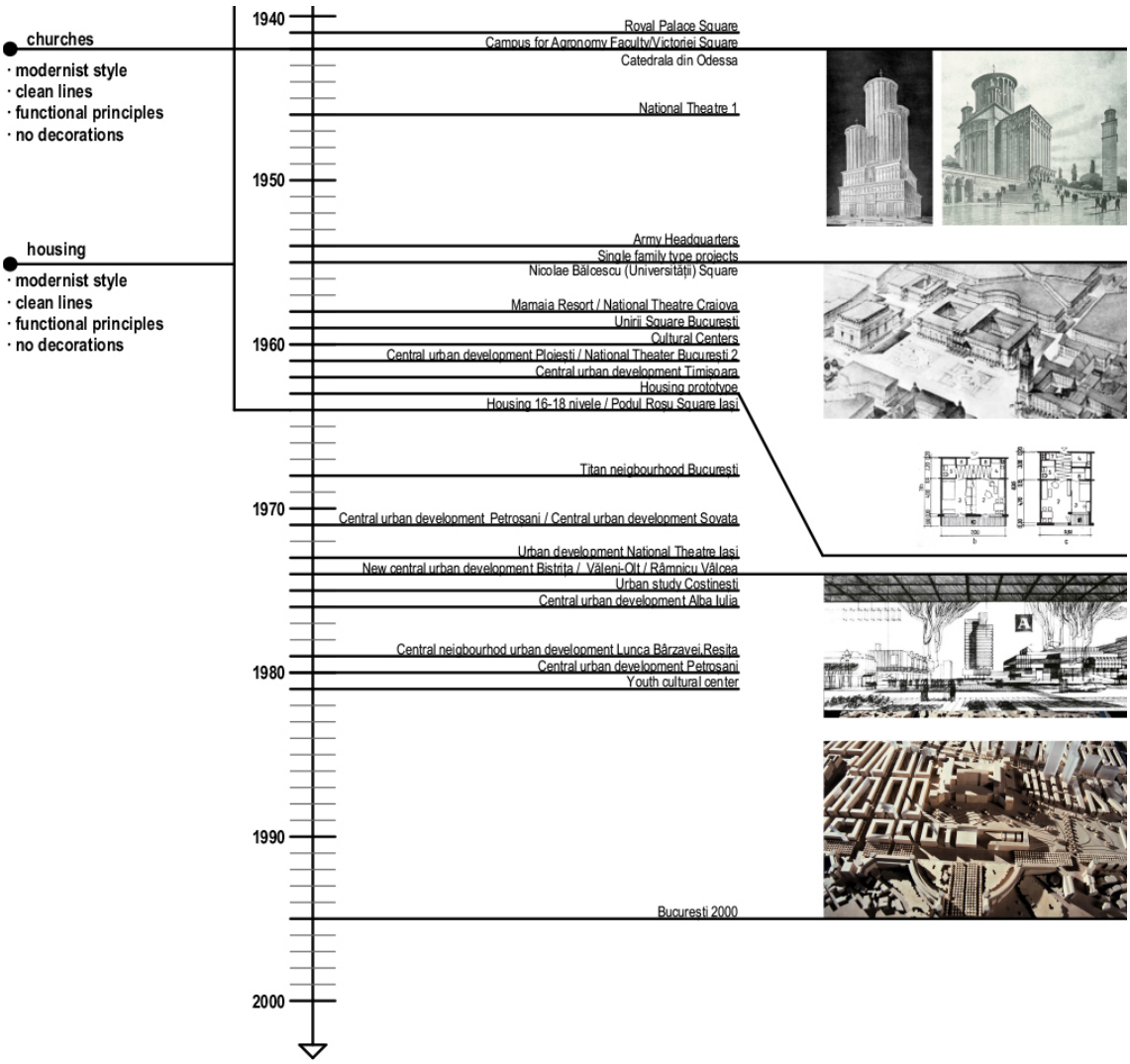


Figure 1. Timeline of the competitions held in Romania until 2000.

urban design competition in Romania, which attracted more than 650 teams from 45 countries. Conceived as both a professional and political manifesto, it aimed to propose solutions for reconstructing the central area destroyed by massive demolitions during the dictatorship. The winning project, by the German architect Meinhard von Gerkan, received international acclaim, but the competition ultimately had no concrete implementation, largely due to institutional weaknesses and unresolved property issues.

Competitions after 2000

The historical trajectory demonstrates how architectural competitions in Romania evolved from being powerful tools for defining national style to being shaped by broader political and economic forces. This chapter will explore the trends and "fashions" in architecture shaped by competitions held after 2000. The study will analyse to what extent recent competitions have contributed to defining a current style.

A comparative analysis of competitions across Romanian cities (Fig. 2), highlights a more condensed interest in Cluj and the area covered by these events is considerably large.[19] In other cities competitions may be sporadic or focused on a limited range of themes, while in Cluj there was a steady rhythm of competitions across diverse urban areas. Unlike cities such as Bucharest or Timișoara, where many projects remain halted or partially completed, Cluj is slowly turning competition outcomes into realised projects. This contrasts with cities like Craiova or Râmnicu Vâlcea, where competitions are sporadic and often fail to progress beyond the conceptual stage. However, in the past year, no competitions have been organised in Cluj, while major competitions have taken place in Constanța, Timișoara, and Brașov. This pause in new competitions may indicate a focus on the implementation of previous projects, before starting new ones or a growing recognition of competitions as a valuable urban development tool in other cities.

Defining the Characteristic of Competitions that can be Considered as Trends

The recent competitions are not focused on creating emblematic buildings, but rather have multi-dimensional themes, prioritising large public and green space. The projects reflect some main categories: buildings (public programs: schools, hospitals, administration buildings), public spaces, green areas and urban developments (Fig. 3). The paper starts from the premise that the projects selected in architectural competitions in Cluj-Napoca are characterised by simplicity and modesty. To gain a coherent understanding of this phenomenon, three key factors must be analysed: the competition brief, the jury report, and the winning projects.

The evolution of competition briefs has significantly influenced architectural outcomes. While earlier briefs were basic and function-focused, since 2017 they have become more complex and vision-oriented. In two notable cases, the brief

19 17 competitions in Cluj-Napoca, while only 10 in Bucharest, the capital.

asked for an iconic or avant-garde proposal.[20] Nevertheless, in these cases the juries disagreed with the brief, selecting simpler, more modest, contextually integrated proposals - revealing a shift in preference and the interpretive power of juries. For example, the Firefighters' Tower competition demonstrated this approach, as the jury selected a proposal that avoided bold gestures in favor of a subtle, contemporary reinterpretation of the existing structure,[21] even though the brief explicitly called for an avant-garde approach.[22]

The jury is typically composed of architects, urban planners, and landscape designers, with additional specialists as needed, for example, medical professionals for hospital competitions and there are usually two foreign members, recognised for their expertise in the type of program that is the subject of the competition. On one hand, the presence of specialists with diverse backgrounds introduces multiple perspectives, ensuring that proposals are assessed not only for their aesthetic and formal qualities but also for technical feasibility and programmatic appropriateness. On the other hand, the common ground shared by all members - their professional culture and shared understanding of what constitutes a "practical" or "implementable" solution - often directs the jury toward choices that are more cautious and achievable, rather than radical or experimental.

Insights from an interview with Ștefan Ghenciulescu[23] shed light on the complex dynamics within architectural juries. According to Ghenciulescu, a jury composed of members with radically different visions can make it nearly impossible to reach a coherent decision. In such cases, the outcome may be the absence of a clear award, the granting of a second prize, or a compromise that satisfies no one. In the juries he participated in, decisions were not imposed by forced voting but emerged from long, often intense discussions. These observations highlight the delicate balance between diversity and consensus in jury composition: while a mix of specialists ensures multiple perspectives, it also requires careful negotiation to prevent domination or stalemate. Understanding these dynamics is essential for interpreting why certain projects are selected and others overlooked, as the outcome reflects both architectural quality and the social and professional culture of the jury.

Simplicity is often highlighted as a defining quality of the winning entries, an analysis of jury reports highlighting a consistent emphasis on simplicity as a

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20 Previously discussed in - Camelia Sisak, "The Art of Competition. Superordinary Changes in the Cultural Landscape of Cluj-Napoca." *studies in History and Theory of Architecture*, no. 12, 2024, 75.

21 Ligia Subțirica et al., "Jury Report Solutions Competition: The Tower of the Three Ages – Revitalization of the Firemen's Tower in Cluj-Napoca," accessed March 1st, 2024, https://oar.archi/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2_proces_verbal_jurizare_concurs_pdf_1486396489.pdf.

22 Dan Clinci and Florin V. Lazăr, "Competition Brief Firemen's Tower," accessed March 1st, 2024, https://oar.archi/concursuri/oar/turnul-pompierilor-cluj-napoca/.

23 Ștefan Ghenciulescu, interview by Camelia Sisak, February 2025.

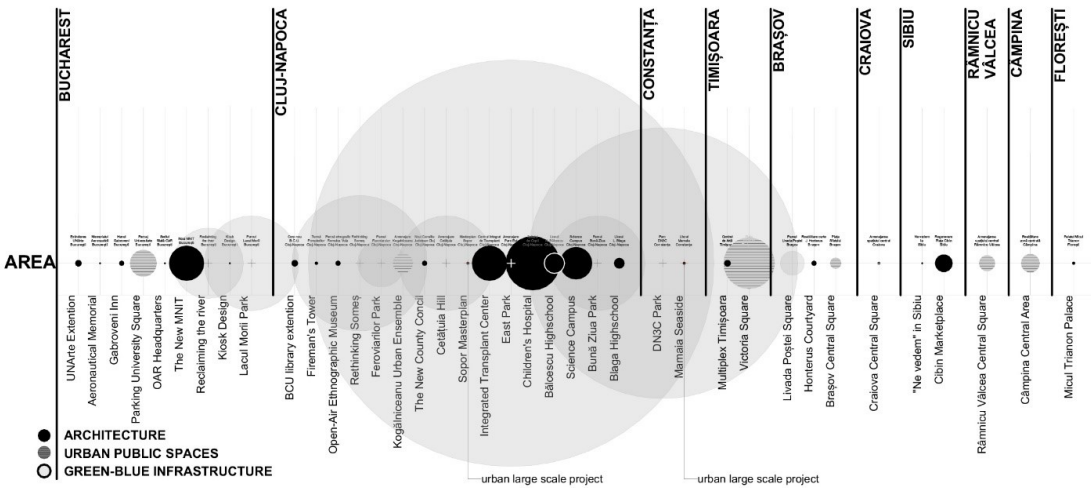


Figure 2. Representation of the area of the competitions on different themes and area square meters.

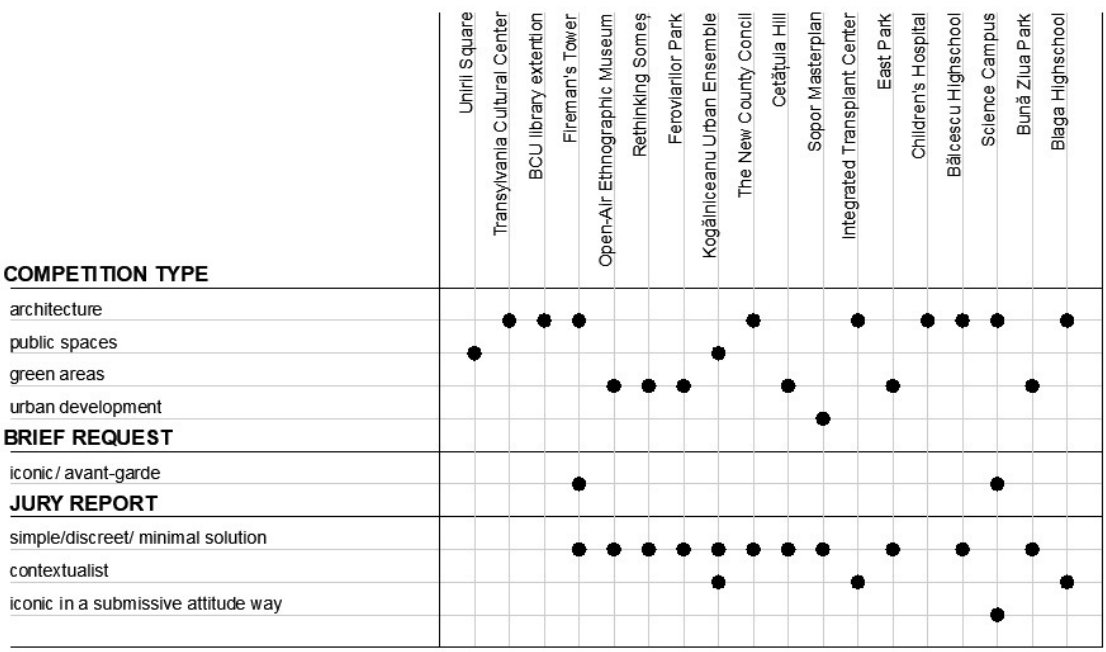


Figure 3. Diagram of the competition types, brief specifically requests and jury reports.

central criterion for evaluating entries.[24] The recurrent use of the term *simple*[25] underscores the preference for designs that prioritise clarity, functionality, and understated elegance over complexity (Fig. 3). This reflects the juries' inclination toward refined and practical solutions, aligned with an architectural ethos that values restraint and coherence. After 2017, there seems to be a cohesive vision shared by juries, emphasising modesty, rationality, and sustainability over extravagance.

The winning proposal for the New Integrated Transplant Centre (Fig. 4) featured a neutral architectural expression, seamlessly integrating with the city's diverse urban fabric. The design emphasised accessibility, transparency, and moderation, demonstrating the jury's preference for restraint and balance.[26] The jury commended the winning project of Bălcescu High School (Fig. 5) for its modest, consistent, and rational approach, emphasising its alignment with the spirit of the place. The proposal excelled in its suitability, avoiding extravagance, and was praised for its balanced proportions, simplicity of form, and harmonious dialogue between old and new.[27] In the competition for Blaga High School, the jury made a decisive statement, emphasising the importance of a balanced and contextually responsive solution over grand gestures. They reinforced the value of timeless, efficient, and adaptable architecture, which respects and enhances the existing urban environment.[28]

Other competitions further illustrate Cluj's pragmatic architectural ethos. The Firefighters' Tower (Fig. 6 right) competition marked a pivotal moment, showcasing the evolving nature of briefs and jury preferences. While the brief emphasised avant-garde aspirations, the jury favored a subtle and contemporary reinterpretation, reflecting the city's preference for pragmatic and context-sensitive solutions. Demonstrating Cluj's ambition to establish itself as a regional hub for innovation and culture, the competition for Science Campus reinforced the trend of understated designs. Despite the brief's emphasis on iconicity, the jury selected a proposal that prioritised integration, functionality, and understated elegance.

One defining characteristic of Cluj's competitions is their alignment with the "less is more" philosophy. This stands in contrast to the more striking projects

24 Previously discussed in - Camelia Sisak, "The Art of Competition. Superordinary Changes in the Cultural Landscape of Cluj-Napoca." *studies in History and Theory of Architecture*, no. 12, 2024, 76.

25 Jury reports for every competition held in Cluj between 2000-2025.

26 Oana Gavriliu et al., "Jury Report 2020 Comprehensive Transplant Centre," accessed March 1st, 2024, https://oar.archi/concursuri/oar/centrul-integrat-de-transplant-cluj-napoca/.

27 Horia Marinescu et al., "Jury Report Bălcescu High School," accessed March 1st, 2024, https://oar.archi/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/BALCESCU-RAPORT-JURIU-ROMANA.pdf.

28 Michal Cohen et al., "Jury Report Lucian Blaga High School," accessed March 1st, 2024, https://oar.archi/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/LUCIAN-BLAGA-HIGHSCHOOL-RAPORT-JURIU-ROMANA.pdf.

seen in cities like Bucharest. For example, while Bucharest's UNArte winning project appears to be bolder, Cluj's Firefighters' Tower competition favoured a subtle reinterpretation, despite an avant-garde brief (Fig. 6). This restrained approach appears to be visible in other cities like Sibiu and Timișoara that are beginning to adopt similar themes, with recent competitions emphasising *modesty* over bold gestures.

There has been an increased focus on public parks and green spaces, recognising the role of nature in enhancing urban life. Projects like "Rethinking Someș," "Parcul Est," and "Parcul Feroviarilor" (Fig. 7) were influenced by civil society movements, as residents and community groups demand for green spaces. The approach to recent urban green spaces reflects a commitment to restore nature, to adaptability, and minimal intervention, where simplicity in design elements fosters a rich, evolving experience for users. This design philosophy emphasises non-invasive strategies that prioritise natural landscapes, creating continuous, flexible spaces that seamlessly integrate with their environment and adapt to future needs.

Organising an interpretative framework to analyse the discussed competitions, between "dominant taste"[29] and the structure of the professional field, can offer an image of how architectural fashion can emerge. The analytical chart (Fig. 8) provides a comparative overview of competition winners, interpreted through aesthetic, sociological, and cultural lenses. It categorises each project based on five key dimensions: aesthetic orientation, position within the architectural field, type of "taste," level of spectacularity, and degree of formal originality. The data reveals a strong prevalence of restrained and contextualist approaches, with most projects aligning with international mainstream trends rather than counter-current or expressive alternatives. The dominant type of "taste" initially operates autonomously, but once widely adopted, it becomes a fashion trend. High spectacularity scores reflected visually striking elements - unusual forms, bold gestures, or innovative compositions - while low scores indicated discreet, context-sensitive designs. High formal originality rewarded inventive massing, composition, or detailing, whereas low scores denoted conventional solutions. Spectacularity and formal originality remain generally low to medium, indicating a preference for restraint and contextual integration over bold, iconic gestures. What becomes evident when tracing the evolution of competition proposals in Cluj is the gradual transformation of certain approaches into recognisable formulas - and in some cases, the slight imitation of previous winning strategies. While the earlier competitions tended to produce more autonomous and diverse solutions, over time the ideals of simplicity, clarity, and modesty have crystallised into a prevailing trend. For instance, in the Firefighters' Tower competition, it was still relatively common to find bold or unconventional proposals. However, in subsequent competitions, projects began to converge - not through visual similarity, but through a shared conceptual restraint. The

29 In the Bourdieusian sense.



Figure 4. Winning proposal for the Comprehensive Transplant Center Competition, Cluj-Napoca, 2020, author Pinearq, S.L.P., S.C. Dico& Tigănaș birou de proiectare S.R.L.



Figure 5. Winning project for Bălcescu High School, author Filip S Concept SRL, SQM Architecture, Hab Pro Creativ.

emphasis moved toward solutions that are contextually appropriate, formally discreet, and are more feasible.

Critical Reflection on Simplicity and Modesty in Contemporary Competitions
Defining "simplicity and modesty" in Cluj's architecture means prioritising subtle, thoughtful design that emphasises functionality without the use of excessive ornamentation or striking gestures. Simple, balanced architecture is often expressed through orthogonal compositions, straightforward volumes, rhythmic façades, and neutral or subdued color palettes. Modesty is reflected in respectful scale, harmonious integration with the urban context, restrained detailing, and materials that blend with existing textures and tones. Such architecture is responsive and adaptable, allowing new structures to blend seamlessly into the cityscape while also serving practical needs. The preference for "no big gestures" reinforces the notion of architecture as a supportive backdrop to urban life rather than an imposing feature. The focus on modesty and simplicity offers an opportunity to shift architectural discourse away from spectacle and toward meaningful, human-centered design. Moreover, simplicity often requires architects to distill complex ideas into clear, elegant solutions, demonstrating ingenuity within the boundaries of restraint.

However, the emphasis on simplicity also raises concerns about its potential to stifle architectural innovation. Prioritising restraint may inadvertently discourage bold experimentation or the exploration of unconventional ideas. Avant-garde designs often challenge societal norms and push the boundaries of what architecture can achieve inspiring new directions for the field. By focusing on modesty, competitions may risk sidelining visionary concepts that could redefine urban spaces or create iconic landmarks. Nevertheless, one could argue that the constraints imposed by simplicity and modesty do not necessarily limit creativity but rather redirect it. Architects are challenged to innovate within these parameters, exploring how subtlety, balance, and context can generate groundbreaking solutions. This paradigm encourages a shift from the pursuit of iconicity for its own sake to a deeper exploration of how architecture can serve its users and surroundings.

The trend of simplicity and modesty in contemporary competitions reflects a broader shift toward responsible and thoughtful architecture. This tendency can be understood on two levels. On one hand, it represents a deliberate attempt to respond effectively to the competition brief, embracing a philosophy of restraint and avoiding "big gestures," in keeping with the context and spirit of the time. On the other hand, it spreads through emulation: the success of such approaches in jury evaluations encourages their replication, shaping patterns of design and establishing models for future projects - a process that can be seen as both a motor and a vector in the development of architectural culture. While the emphasis on simplicity may limit certain forms of formal experimentation, it simultaneously challenges architects to be inventive within constraints.

Do "Simplicity and Modesty" Reflect a Broader Trend?

While Cluj's competitions certainly prioritise simplicity and modesty, these values are not unique to the city. For example, Denmark's focus on human-centered design has led to urban interventions that emphasise pedestrian accessibility, social engagement, and sustainability, which are often executed with simple, clean lines and understated materials. Similarly, Swedish architectural language has long favored restraint and simple[30] buildings that harmonise with the landscape and prioritise durability and environmental responsiveness. A study by Ronn[31] reflects on the jury process in the Northern countries, noting that the competition jury is responsible for envisioning how the winning design will evolve and be used in the future, recognising that buildings must remain adaptable and relevant for decades. This long-term focus presents challenges, as jurors must anticipate how architectural solutions will withstand the test of time and shifting societal needs. The competition system, therefore, is dynamic and continuously evolving. In a similar vein, de Graaf characterises contemporary architecture not merely as a creative act of an architectural object but as an ongoing intervention. He views architecture as a verb[32] - rather an action in which the architect plays an active, evolving role, rather than being seen solely as a creator of forms.

The Open Call competitions in Belgium provide another example of how these values resonate on an international scale. In the case of Open Call, many winning designs favor local materials, context-sensitive solutions, and a focus on creating spaces that foster community interaction and sustainability.[33] Flemish architecture is valued for its modesty and integration into the local context, evolving from restrained simplicity to a bolder yet functional approach. Belgium's architectural education fosters context-aware architects, significantly influencing competition outcomes. Marcel Smets characterizes Flemish architecture as restrained, simple, modest, and unspectacular - yet undeniably high-quality architecture.[34] "Flemish architecture is modest in the positive sense of the word, because it has the courage to engage with surroundings that demand modesty. We should see this not as a shortcoming, but rather as a positive evolution."[35]

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30 William C. Miller, "Nordic Architecture: A Continuing Modernism, Post-War to 2000," *Nordics.info*, Aarhus University, April 10th, 2019, https://nordics.info/show/artikel/nordic-architecture-a-continuing-modernism-post-war-to-2000-1.

31 Magnus Ronn, "Judgment in the Architectural Competition – Rules, Policies and Dilemmas," *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research* 21, no. 2/3 (2009): 64.

32 Reinier de Graaf, *Architect, Verb (The New Language of Buildings)* (London, 2023).

33 Maarten Liefooghe and Maarten Van Den Driessche, eds. *More Than a Competition: The Open Call in a Changing Building Culture*. Antwerp: Flanders Architecture Institute; Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, 2021.

34 Hans Ibeling, "Flemish Architectural Policy and the Architectural Revival," in *Designing for the Public: Government Architect 1999–2009* (Amsterdam, 2009): 26.

35 Vlaams Bouwmeester, "Three Bouwmeesters and the Open Call: An Oral History," in *Open Call: A Public Principal's Companion* (Bruxelles, 2013): 210.

Conclusions

Recent architectural competitions in Cluj-Napoca reveal a clear and consistent preference for simplicity and modesty, both in design approach and in the values promoted by juries. Despite briefs that occasionally requested iconic or avant-garde proposals, winning entries typically favored clarity, restraint, contextual integration, and balanced proportions. This recurring preference suggests that simplicity has become not only an aesthetic choice but also a professional norm - one that reflects an ethical and cultural orientation toward responsibility, sustainability, and coherence. As such, these competitions function not merely as selection tools but as mechanisms for validating a new architectural fashion grounded in discretion and contextual sensitivity, with growing influence on national architectural trends.

Architectural competitions in Romania have played a crucial role in defining new fashions. These contests have evolved from their original role as a tool for selecting designs to become key drivers of architectural fashion. Competitions were, in the past and are, right now, a powerful influence on contemporary architecture, as they are highly visible and engage multiple city stakeholders. Winning projects are particularly prominent, impacting architects, the municipality, and the public alike, with significant community involvement in the process. The juries feel a responsibility to select feasible, implementable projects, especially given examples of past proposals that remained unbuilt due to budget constraints.

If we compare the two periods that we discussed, before and after 2000, the competitions from the beginning of the twentieth century were more concentrated in the capital and often involved prominent buildings like imposing administrative institutions and monumental churches. While these competitions served as platforms for innovation and professional growth, they were also shaped by the constraints and priorities of their times. From asserting national identity to addressing urbanisation and modernisation, architectural competitions played a critical role in shaping Romania's built environment and its architectural trajectory. They were often focused on grand structures, emphasising symbolic value, aiming to evoke a sense of pride and continuity with the past.

The themes explored in these competitions have shifted significantly, moving away from emblematic, standalone architectural statements and instead embracing comprehensive, multi-dimensional projects, with an increased focus on public and green spaces. This strategic approach transforms competitions into guiding frameworks for the city's urban evolution, encouraging a vision of architecture as a tool for both immediate needs and future development.

The traits of *simplicity* and *modesty* emerging from Cluj's architectural competitions reflect both broader global trends and the city's specific local priorities. These competitions shape architectural discourse by promoting





Figure 6. left - winning project for UNArte, author ADNBA;
right - winning project for Firefighters' Tower, author VLAD SEBASTIAN RUSU BIA.







Figure 7. Winning project for Rethinking Someș, author PRÁCTICA; winning project for Feroviarilor Park, author ASIZA BIROU DE ARHITECTURA S.R.L.; winning project for East Park, author Metapolis Architects S.P.R.L. în asociere cu S.C. Studio de peisaj Ana Horhat S.R.L. și S.C. Atelier Mass S.R.L.

designs that balance aesthetic restraint with functional and cultural relevance. They offer a counter-narrative to the "Bilbao effect," where iconic architecture often overshadows local needs, emphasising subtlety and long-term urban integration over monumental gestures. Moreover, the repeated success of restrained, contextually sensitive designs in these competitions has encouraged emulation among architects, contributing not only to the consolidation of this approach locally, but potentially influencing architectural practices at a national level.

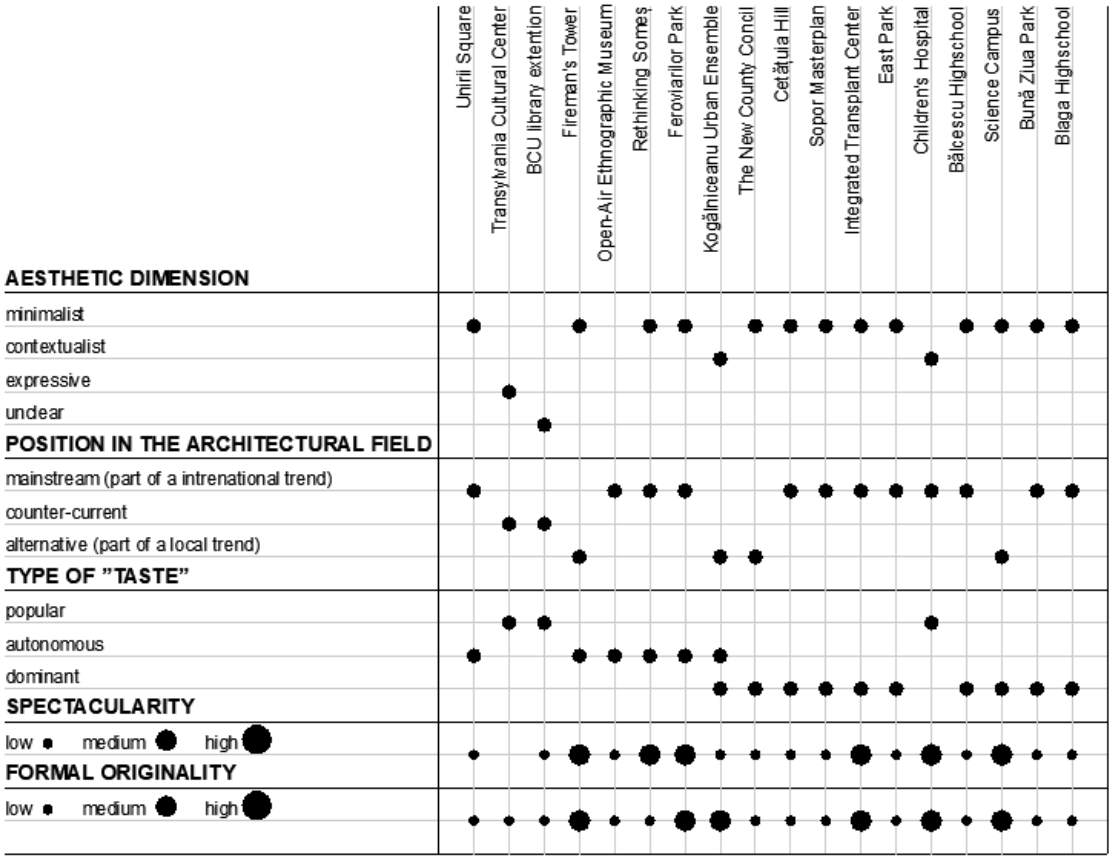


Figure 8. Analysis of the winning proposals.

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Fig. 8: author.

The Counterpoint of Resistance Within Romanian Eighties
Counter-Fashion within Fashion

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Keywords
resistance; eighties; encrypted speech; visionary drawing; edified escapism

Abstract
The article presents the complex junction of events unfolding within the cultural sphere of architecture during the eighties period in the Romanian context. The universal dichotomy of dictatorship – resistance takes on multiple forms of existence through various methods of assimilation inspired by international models. One could argue that a mode of opposition, represented by cultural resistance, emerges within the framework of the regimented communist system. This tendency to repress implosion manifests both in poetic discourse and visionary drawing, often showcased in competitions, as well as in a subtle escapism within the built environment. All three layers in turn will be analysed, critically extracting and examining case studies that are defining for the tendency to shape a lyrical quality in architecture. Accustomed to expressing itself through an artistic lexicon layered with successive strata and imbued with subtle hidden messages, the cultural landscape after the December Revolution of 1989 will take on palimpsest-like introspective qualities.

Introduction

The chronological milestone on which we will dwell in this article represents the final gasp of a regime that maximally ostracised freedom – a period where absurdity crystallised into normality. The eighties period in the Romanian context materialises a universe where the everyday idiom is dictated by the ideology of the time, and political discourse becomes redundant and (un) masked. All this culminates in a leviathan-like societal trend, particularly in the cultural sphere, where censorship of the lyricism of artistic acts reached its peak, the multivalence of creative expression was forgotten, and exposure was driven solely by political approval. Nevertheless, within the tautology of official discourse, a tendency of resistance emerged, rooted in the intrinsic desire of artists, poets, and, not least, architects to escape the thickets of communist ideology, which stifled all creative flow. In other words, one could say that within the fashion of the communist propaganda system (deliberately capitalised as a satirical affront to the regime), a counter-fashion of opposition, represented by cultural resistance, took shape, marked by expressions assimilated from fashionable movements outside the Soviet bloc. The resulting palimpsest is a complex cultural landscape that continues to echo the artistic narrative of the local space. The practice of resistance against the communist regime manifested across all levels of cultural endeavor of the time. This entailed a synoptic map of cultural life involving all cultural actors, influenced by Western trends and driven by a desire to escape propagandist rhetoric. The architectural, literary, and artistic landscapes were destabilised, and the implosion of creative acts spilled into a series of underground initiatives. Regarding architecture, the question concerning the ninth decade of the past century interrogates and balances the absence of architectural lyricism-a trend of specificity and symbolic richness flourishing in Western postmodernism-against the concept of the "puppet-architect". Was there still a *spirit* of the profession during this period?

The range of communist architecture, and the way it intertwins with post-1989 identity has been documented, both in books published during the regime (to which we will return), and in several works appearing after 1989. Notable among the latter are: (1) *Architecture in the Communist Project. Romania 1944–1989*,[1] which explores the political forces behind the architectural language, presented emotionally to evoke collective trauma; (2) T*he History of the Romanians from the Origins to the Present Day*,[2] which emphasizes 1989 as a pivotal moment of national identity shaped by lost freedoms, propaganda, and isolation; (3) *Paper Architecture: Alternative Forms of Architectural Creation in 1980s Romania*,[3] which links the end of communism to postmodernity through a selective analysis of visionary and drawn architecture in Romania. The present research focuses on those counter-fashions that challenge the fashion of the

1 Ana Maria Zahariade, *Arhitectura în Proiectul Comunist. România 1944-1989* (Simetria, 2011).

2 Vlad Georgescu, I*storia Românilor de la origini până în zilele noastre* (Humanitas, 1922).

3 Alexandru Sabău, *Arhitectura de Hârtie. Forme Alternative de Creație Arhitecturală În România Anilor 1980* (Ozalid, 2022).

regime, placing them both in relation to historical-political moments and to the resources of architectural thought, through the infusion of reflections from outside Romanian territory.

Regarding bibliographic sources from the communist period, I will briefly mention two works published in 1981: *Architecture on the Territory of Romania through the Centuries*[4] and *The History of Architecture in Romania*,[5] which remain not only the last extensive syntheses before the post-1989 rupture, but also the official narratives of modern Romanian architecture – an interpretation resulting from the insertion into the text of passages from Ceaușescu's speeches, and from the authors' extremely restrained and rigid language. Viewed today, they are not just documents of an era, but also testimonies of the effort to keep professional memory alive at a time when the very idea of memory was under close surveillance. Yet, perhaps the most faithful mirror of fashion and counter-fashion in architecture during the 1952–1989 period remains the *Arhitectura* magazine. Seemingly a technical publication, it was a tense space of critical reflection survival, of subtle and indirect codes. *Arhitectura* offers an uninterrupted reading - even today, a disturbing one - of the transformations, illusions, and withdrawals of a profession constantly seeking a balance between aesthetics, ethics, and ideology.

It is important to clarify from the outset the meaning of the terms that will be used in the present text: fashion–encompasses the characteristics of the aesthetic language developed within the communist regime (moderate modernism, neoclassicism, art deco, radical modernism, socialist realism, the intersection between the rhetoric of socialist realism and the modern movement, the critique of modernism through a *Ceausist* postmodernism[6]); counter-fashion–seeks to embrace those actions (discourse, visionary drawing, built works) that break away from the communist aesthetic and align, occasionally or partially, with certain sub-currents from outside the Soviet bloc; trends–used to describe architectural theories and languages from the Western sphere (postmodernism with its various techniques: double coding, radical eclecticism, contextual counterpoint, historicism).[7]

From an aesthetic perspective, communist fashion undergoes successive mutations, which I will outline in order to contextualise the emergence of counter-fashion. In the immediate postwar years, interwar styles-moderate modernism, neoclassicism, and Art Deco–persist, while more radical modernists introduce a diverse vocabulary reflecting growing expressive freedom. In the beginning, socialist realism in Romania appears as a careful blend of classicism

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4 Grigore Ionescu, *Arhitectura României de-a lungul veacurilor* (Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1981).

5 Gheorghe Curinshi Vorona, *Istoria Arhitecturii în România* (Editura Tehnică București, 1981).

6 The taxonomy is the chronological evolution of communist aesthetics and is developed in the following paragraphs of the introduction.

7 As presented by Charkes JENCKS, *Story of Post-Modernism-Five Decades of Ironic, Iconic and Critical in Architecture* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

and national motifs, with moderate ornamentation gradually stripped down by the late 1950s. The year 1952 is pivotal, marking the rise of Stalinist centralism and the formation of a centralised architectural apparatus[8]-design approvals, studies, codes, and research-cementing a rigid, politically controlled system that grew more complex and ideologically constrained, until the regime's end.

Following Khrushchev's 1954 speech, economy[9] becomes central in architecture, with 1960s rhetoric aligning superficially with modernism. This leads to the rise of large housing blocks on city outskirts, the end of individual plots, and the decline of traditional urbanism. Naturally, with differing ideological origins, the architectural language adopted becomes modernist, with a *free urbanism* organised within a functionalist city. In 1971, Ceaușescu denounces *free urbanism* for lacking national character. Though his critique echoes postmodern arguments, the resulting constructions reflect his personal vision. Urban densification accelerates - green spaces vanish, dormitory neighbourhoods expand, and boulevards become lined with infill architecture. Facades lose plasticity with prefabricated panels bearing national motifs, far from postmodern critical regionalism. Modernism's simplicity gives way to ornate rezalits and awkward decoration. "Lyricism can be considered the second major influence that permeates our contemporary architecture."[10]

In architecture, the mirror of the binomial building-resignation and secrecy-dreaming reflects the intertwining of trends that coexisted within the architecture of the time. Thus, the construction of the most significant *Ceausist* architectural landscapes, representing the process of building, stands in counterbalance to the suppression of creative flow, embodied by the

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8 Following the publication of the final document of the Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers' Party and the Council of Ministers on November 13, the State Committee for Architecture and Construction (CSAC) of the Council of Ministers was established-an institution that was to control and approve all actions in the field of construction. It would oversee a network of regional and municipal design institutes (SAS), as well as the central design institutes: ISPROR-focused on special projects throughout the country, and IPB-for projects in Bucharest. At the same time, the Union of Architects was established-an organization with an unclear role in consulting the entire creative apparatus in the field of architecture, which benefited both from its own publication (*Arhitectura RPR*-renamed *Arhitectura* in 1971) and from the Architecture Fund-an account with a role in promoting cultural activities. The Faculty of Architecture was separated from the Polytechnic, becoming the Institute of Architecture, based on the Soviet model, thus resuming the organizational form of an independent educational institution (as it had in fact functioned from 1904-when it broke away from the tutelage of the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest-until 1938). Despite being restructured several times, CSAC and the entire system it coordinated functioned continuously until 1989 in various forms.

9 The idea of economy is paradoxically pushed to the extreme by replacing key construction materials prioritized in other sectors. For instance, wood-valuable as an export-is substituted with legal mandates for concrete, leading to the use of standardized prefabricated frames despite their greater weight and higher cost. Similarly, iron, essential for machinery, was banned from construction in the late 1960s, even though experts argued it was more cost-effective than concrete in certain structures, such as industrial buildings. Source: Zahariade, Ana Maria, *Arhitectura în Proiectul Comunist. România 1944-1989* (Simetria, 2011): 35.

10 Mircea Lupu, *Școli naționale în arhitectură* (Editura Tehnică București, n.d.): 153.

resignation of architects. At the same time, the counter-fashion operating in the cultural suburbs, essentially in secrecy, managed, through subtle manifestations, to activate its creative acts through encrypted discourse, visionary drawing, and the built sphere. Across all three paths, we can observe forms of assimilation drawn both from ongoing Western movements-postmodernism in all its facets-and from Asian influences, particularly Japanese ones.

Resistance Through Discourse. The Trend of Encrypted Discourse

Evaluating the palliative context - resistance to the architectural system or counter-fashion - requires first transgressing into the core of the communist system before and during the 1980s. Thus, reading communist-era publications becomes a hermeneutic task, going beyond technical decoding. To grasp their essence, one must situate them within the ideological and institutional framework that shaped and distorted the discourse. The lack of engagement with primary sources-archives, plans, and testimonies-has led to epistemological fragility. This opens space for a nuanced, yet uncertain interpretation, shaped by ambiguity and hypothesis. Outside official documents like laws or codes, most specialised communist texts appear encrypted, opaque, and marked by double meaning.

One of the most eloquent places for the complexity of architectural discourse is provided by the "Mișcarea Ideilor" section, inaugurated by professor Mircea Lupu in 1981, in the *Arhitectura* magazine. The magazine of the Union of Architects of the Socialist Republic of Romania represents the only officially accepted publication - within the fashion - from inside the profession. This section of the magazine aimed to analyse, in the form of elliptical and cryptic texts, the creative flows within universal architecture. The texts, which have a deeply manifest character, written by authors such as Dorin Ștefan and Mihai Opriș, embrace the expression of postmodernist movements from the West.

To begin, we mention the article "Deschideri arhetipale," written by Dorin Ștefan, from issue 6/1982, where the topic of archetypes represents searches that break the dictatorial pattern of rigid modernist functionalism imposed by the regime. He invokes a series of myths to support the process of architectural creation as a "meta-historical architectural motif": the cosmogonic myth and the Romanian spiritual tradition inspired by Mircea Eliade's writings, the myth of the spherical androgyne and the primordial egg, exemplified through Boullee's cenotaph, the myth of the column of the sky or the cosmic tree, expressed through Schinkel's hunting lodge at Antonin.[11] Beyond the idyllic direction of myths, all these statements represent attempts to find architectural depths and relationships with the cultural sphere, developed along the line of historicism-a (*sub*)current within the broader sphere of postmodernism.

We continue with a text by Mihai Opriș, which reviews the panoply of micro-trends within the postmodernist movement, so often interpreted and distorted by the critics of the time. The article is a critical examination of these trends, presented to the reader by geographical areas and representative architects

11 Dorin Ștefan, "Deschideri arhetipale," *Revista Arhitectura 6* (1982): 79–80.

from each one of them. The resulting informational matrix serves as a valuable glossary of international events from recent years, useful for architects in Romania, thanks to the abundance of examples presented and critically analysed. Moreover, the conclusions presented are in total antithesis to the unfolding actions within the country, especially by emphasising the significance of architecture and the idea of sensitivity towards history and the specificity of place.[12] These denote the architects' search for an understanding of architecture beyond the standardised designs imposed by the regime.

The series of eight articles collected under the title *Contextualism*, written by Dorin Ștefan, addresses the complex topic of context. It is viewed from all possible angles: on one hand, through the principles of juxtaposition, and on the other hand, through historicism expressed via radical eclecticism or, conversely, through archetypal forms.[13] All these ideas develop under the lens specific to each author, with the discourse revolving around the idea of hybridism, which essentially represents the theoretical essence specific to postmodernism-pluralism. We also mention the article *Contextualism II*, where postmodern architecture is seen merely as an identifier for mannerism oriented towards the meta-historical category. In other words, it acknowledges that the past is a given, which cannot be eradicated and therefore must be revisited without simplism. In the article *Contextualism III*, the analysis focuses on form, which takes precedence over any intervention on site; the relationship between the new form and the existing one must be designed so that it results in harmony with the overall unity. In the article *Contextualism VI* from the same series, one finds a self-denunciation of Dorin Ștefan's own proposal for the competition regarding the arrangement of the Halls District in Paris. Herein, the article presents an analysis of several participating projects, examined through the lens of conceptual tautology in architecture: the architectural model is derived from the processing of initial data-restricted and expanded urban context or icon connected to the memory of the place - through deductive reasoning, ultimately culminating in "that project of logical truth". All the other proposals are nothing more than iterations of the "head of the series", tautological proposals by increasing models of similar intentions, but which, in the end, result in a gradual decline in both the general and detailed value until unnatural architectural expressions emerge.

From an extensive interview dedicated to Viorel Simion in issue 6 of 1987, we note his heightened interest in the architecture from outside the Soviet bloc and, more importantly, his perpetual search for escape from the functional simplism promoted by the standardisation imposed by the party. He speaks, in turn, about great international names such as Richard Meier, Mario Botta, James Stirling, Tadao Ando, Hans Hollein, Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Carlo Scarpa, whom he critically analyses and later stores in his subconscious, which he likely draws upon in his projects. He particularly appreciates Louis Kahn and Richard Meier, whose purity of form obsesses him. He often uses the circle,

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12 Mihai Opriș, "Demersuri postmoderne," *Revista Arhitectura 6* (1982): 81–85.

13 Sabău, *Arhitectura de Hârtie. Forme Alternative de Creație Arhitecturală În România Anilor 1980*: 81, 88-89.

triangle, and square, as he imagines that their purity will be reflected in the stylistic purity of the building. At the same time, he mentions Romanian values that feature those same characteristics, such as the sculptures of Brâncuși or his sources of inspiration-the Oltenian towers, which denote a refined sense of the relationship between solid and void, favoring massiveness.[14] Thus, we observe a strong dialogue imbued with the theoretical, poetic, and even empirical sides of architecture, touching on matters related to the psychological aspect of the creative act.

Another manifest article, eloquent for the study of creative flows, is the one dedicated to the competition for the *House of Youth*.[15] Through the description of his own concept in the *Arhitectura* magazine, Dorin Ștefan proposed the fundamental aesthetic of architectural creation as the process of thinking, the unspoken space, the project *per se*, which governs the act of building in the architectural matrix. At the same time, he adheres to American postmodern principles by embracing the visions of Charles Jencks, Aldo Rossi, and Robert Venturi regarding the use of archetypal structures to complete the architectural discourse.

> "Through the efforts made so far, aiming for the integration of the archetype, there is a search for reintroducing the connotative and opening the theme of functionalism towards an architecture of depths, in the hope of restoring the unity of the architectural discourse. The logic of contradiction and ambiguity, supported by the high-tech quality, is attempted in order to achieve the contrapuntal harmony of *conjunctio oppositorium*, combining, for the benefit of architectural space, the scientific approach with the poetic one".[16]

The solution proposes spaces developed around an atrium and a spatial succession of the portico as basic elements that he composes under technological principles, objectifying architectural delirium through the legitimacy of mathematics. By abstracting the concepts of unit of measure (U_m) and unit of ideas (U_i) into mathematical formulas, the author proposes a morphology of the determining factors for the project, starting from the archetype. Thus, the result is connected to the context through interpolation with space and time, paradoxically evoking the similarity between a typological project and one that vehemently opposes it.

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14 Radu Drăgan, "Convorbire cu arhitectul Viorel Simion," *Revista Arhitectura 6* (1987): 26–38.

15 Ștefan Radu Ionescu, "Concurs pentru Casa de Cultură a Tineretului," *Revista Arhitectura 6* (1981): 64–75.

16 Dorin Ștefan, "Concurs pentru Casa de Cultură a Tineretului," *Revista Arhitectura 6* (1981): n. Author's translation from Romanian text, 69. „Prin demersurile de până acum, vizând integrarea arhetipului, se caută reintroducerea conotativului și deschiderea temei funcționalismului spre o arhitectură a profunzimilor, în speranța refacerii unității discursului arhitectural. Se încearcă ca prin logica contradicției și ambiguității, susținută de calitatea high-tech, să se realizeze armonia contrapunctică a conjunctio oppositorium, îmbinând în beneficiul spațiului arhitectural abordarea științifică cu cea poetică."

$O.A. = /U_m, U_i/$[17] (1)

where:
O.A. - architectural object
U_m - Unit of Measure
U_i - Unit of Ideas

The process of design at t_0 moment is:

$O.A.(t_0) = U_i (\beta, \Delta, t) \ \Sigma \ U_m (\alpha, x, y, z)$ (2)

where:
$t \rightarrow \infty$; $t \rightarrow 0$ (3)

and:
β - socio-cultural nature
Δ - contextual determinants
t - time
α - archetypal support
x,y,z - spatial coordinates

The solution brings together key elements - porticos, an inner courtyard, basilical sections, and a cascading section for the accommodation area- organised around the architectural program of a youth cultural center, a program specific to the social and political context of the time. As an attempt to manifest opposition to postmodernism, the proposal represents a return to an archetypal historicism, stripped of any postmodernist artifice. The theoretical discourse - following a logic of contradiction and ambiguity, supported by high-tech quality - functions as a subtle underpinning of the project. However, while it explores the polyvalence characteristic of postmodernism, the approach retains a rational spirit inspired by modernism, oriented towards the pursuit of scientific legitimacy.

We can conclude that during the 1980s, there existed a counter–fashion expressed in the *Arhitectura* magazine, whose discourse gradually transformed into a kind of literary cenacle, analysing postmodern themes and projects from other parts of the world, and presenting studies or designs that diverged from the accepted standard - works that were meant to remain on paper. The scattered series of events that mark the architects' resistance indicate a deep-seated fear regarding the risks they might face for opposing the fashion.

17 Dorin Ștefan, *My modernism (Autodenunț)* (Paideia, 2015).

Resistance Through Visionary Drawing. The Architecture Competition

The second place where architects find their much-desired freedom of expression is represented by participation in architecture competitions, unrestricted projects unburdened by constraints, visionary ideas in deep opposition to the mirror of the build reality. The architecture competition addressed, also at a theoretical level, but in a different form - through drawing - the valences of a metaphorical discourse of architecture. In other words, a competition project recalibrates at its roots an utopian idea, which it presents in a critical attitude towards a given theme, outside the realm of the built environment.

One of the architecture competitions that multiple groups of Romanian architects participated in was the design competition for Victor Baltard's halls-Les Halles in Paris, organised in 1979 by the magazine *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* together with the Ile-de-France Architecture Union (over 1900 entries). Jean Nouvel launched an international consultation-a contestation of the project that was being put into operation following the prior demolition of the halls. The proposals from Romanian collectives were based on, on the one hand, a critical regionalism (based on a structuralist exercise of a macrostructure), and on the other hand, on postmodernist influences-from the cult of megastructures to the revitalization of architectural drawing as both a goal and a means of representation. Among these groups, we note the collective formed by architects Mircea Lupu and Alexandru Sandu, along with architecture students[18] who focused their proposal on a contextualism responsing to the immediate surroundings. Avoiding grandiose compositions, favoring connections with the surrounding urban fabric and recently completed amenities-such as the forum and subway stations, the project became a series of transitional spaces towards these. The fluidity of spaces characterized the entire intervention, entering into a pedestrian system enhanced by its breadth, along with other representative spaces such as the Stock Exchange, Eustache Street, or Innocents Square. A macrostructure, a concept coming from structuralist exercises (with vertical elements made of embedded steel profiles and three-dimensional surfaces with transparent coverings for roofing) became an urban landmark in this amplified pedestrian system, an attractor point, intimately connected with the surroundings, which, through its generous openness, could accommodate multiple outdoor events[19].

Another group, formed by Viorel Simion, Zoltan Takacs, Radu Florescu, Dinu Patriciu, and Dorin Ștefan participated in this competition with two solutions, alongside various collectives of architecture students. One of their two

18 Aurel Constantin, Răzvan Lăzărescu, Vlad Simionescu.

19 Mircea Lupu, "Participări românești la Consultarea Internațională pentru Amenajarea Cartierului Halelor din Paris," *Revista Arhitectura 5* (1980): 49.

interventions[20] (by far more interesting than the other one) was conducted within the *Romconsult Design Institute* (Romanian Institute of Consulting), starts from the convergence of two trends in architecture outside the Soviet bloc. On one hand, it aims at revitalizing architectural drawing as a goal (Hejduk or Raymond Abraham) and as a means (Stirling) of representing a possible architectural reality, inspired by the urban theories of Leon and Rob Krier, where the theoretical foundation is outlined around the Nolli plan. On the other hand, it is based on ultra-humanist groups oriented towards exploring new relationships between the surrounding environment and social issues, aesthetic experiments, and research activities into cultural models, such as OMA or Superstudio. The combination of theoretical and utopian states under the social coordinates of reality became the epitome of the proposal. The entire approach follows the contextualist model, attempting to push the rigidity of urban and architectural patterns by creating a pedestrian diagonal (both physical and conceptual) that would group a series of spaces for a potential living architecture museum.

Emerging from the ideational sphere of formalism derived from the writings of prominent figures from the past century, as sources of ideas for competition proposals, we will dwell on one more competition formulation whose vision seems to detach itself from a highly contemporary context - that of modularity. Although theories about the benefits of modularity appeared long after this competition, it is interesting to observe how the proposal in question seemed to anticipate what would become one of the principles used in the trends of ecologicalism and sustainability. Designed by architect Florin Biciușcă, who was awarded the Bronze Medal at the Sofia Young Architects Forum in 1985, the Silver Medal, and the Special Prize of the City of Toulouse at the World Architecture Biennale - INTERARCH '85, the project titled "Locuința evolutivă" - Evolving Housing proposes, through a modular composition system, a single-family house with a low height regime of only two levels. Inspired by the architecture of Romanian villages, with a volumetric expression evoking the idea of a vernacular shaped over time, the spatial composition of the resulting volumes is diverse, depending on the roof form with a truss and the elements connecting to the exterior - the portico and the loggia on the upper floor. The implementation of these compositional elements is determined by the number of family members, accommodating anywhere from one to nine people, and the array of possibilities presented refers to a product of seriality. Despite the modularity of the composition, each evolving house seems to construct a personal individuality and recognisability through the arrangement of modules.

Perpetuating the idea of modularity within the exhibition - competition on the theme "Noul concept de unitate urbană"-"The New Concept of Urban Unity" at the 1987 World Forum of Young Architects Interarch '87 in Sofia, Bulgaria, Florin Biciușcă was awarded the third prize for his study on the city and the

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20 Mircea Lupu, "Participări românești la Consultarea Internațională pentru Amenajarea Cartierului Halelor din Paris," *Revista Arhitectura 5* (1980): n. together with students in architecture Mihnea Dorobanțu, Adrian Zerva, Georgeta Marin, Andrei Molnar, Angelo Rovența, Hacig Tacvorian, Manciulea Virgil, Cornealia Bîrlega: 53.

housing of the post-industrial era, titled "În același timp, în același loc"-"At the Same Time, in the Same Place".The proposed urban cores featured a functional mix aimed at resolving the functional segregation promoted by the modern movement after the industrial revolution, with the intervention's syllogism based on the explosion of accelerated life rhythm-all happening *at the same time, in the same place*. As such, the social structure that Florin Biciușcă outlines includes a street grid predominantly designed for pedestrians, underground parking, workspaces, social interaction spaces, and living spaces. The placement of all these functions is subordinated to a transitional spatial hierarchy, from the basic cell (the family) to complex social activities and vice versa[21].

Beyond the theoretical idealism and modularity, we propose for further analysis a project indebted to high-tech architecture. The Docklands Museum in London represents a competition organised by the British magazine *Architectural Review* in 1986, aiming to revitalise the waterfront front of an abandoned storage area[22]. The proposal, created by Dan Bolomey and Matei Lykiardopol, draws inspiration from the technological aesthetics of utilitarian port structures, particularly the complex structures used for lifting and moving heavy loads, such as cranes. It is characterised by thin metal elements supported by cables and glass enclosures - a form of contextual memory. The proposal is presented in a sketchy and playful manner, including a zeppelin displaying the name of the museum from a height and various signaling elements. The graphic representations, in the same style, feature sailing ships docked, whose juxtaposition with the project suggests a second conceptual borrowing of the architectural solution. The raised longitudinal axis area symbolises the dichotomous dialogue between water and land, the place where large objects will be exhibited, evoking the vibrancy of the docks during their heyday in the nineteenth century. The entire exhibition and workshop layout brings the visitor back to the central area, with interior exhibition halls and exterior spaces characterized by geometry, openness, and colour. The atmosphere of the project and the visual quality of the representations evoke unbuilt projects, such as *Cedric Price's Fun Palace* (1961), which later influenced the famous architecture of the Centre Pompidou in Paris (1977).

The competitions above constitute a selection of projects that are representative of the range of topics explored during that period. They are part of a vast series of competitions published in the *Arhitectura* magazine. Each one expresses in turn counter–fashions that were circulating outside the Soviet bloc: from a certain critical regionalism, evolutionary historicism, ultra-humanist directions guided by social coordinates, to principles of modularity and high-tech architecture. All of them demonstrate a deliberate departure from socialist dogmas and an (at least partial) alignment with Western trends - a form of

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21 Ștefan Radu Ionescu, "Proiect românesc premiat la concursul internațional Muzeul Docurilor din Londra," *Revista Arhitectura 2* (1987): 81–82.

22 Ionescu, "Proiect românesc premiat la concursul internațional Muzeul Docurilor din Londra,": 63–69.

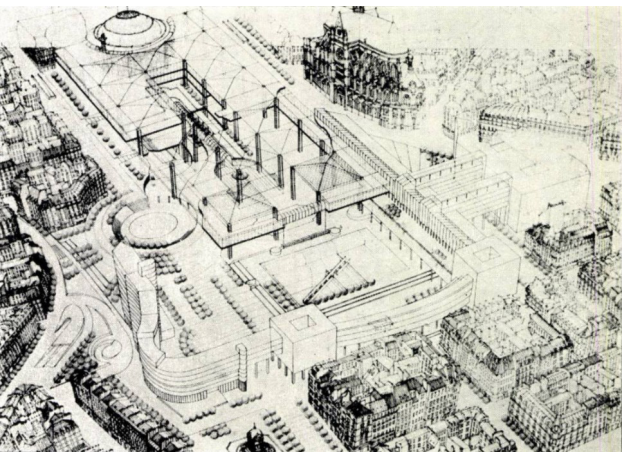


Figure 1. Architectural Competition *Les Halles* from Paris, Mircea Lupu and Alexandru Sandu.

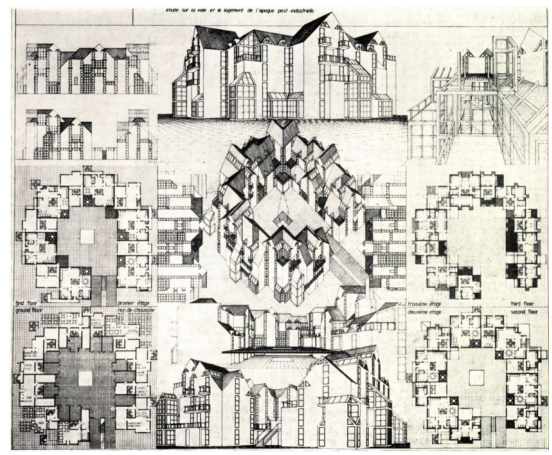


Figure 2. At the Same Time, in the Same Place - Florin Biciușcă.

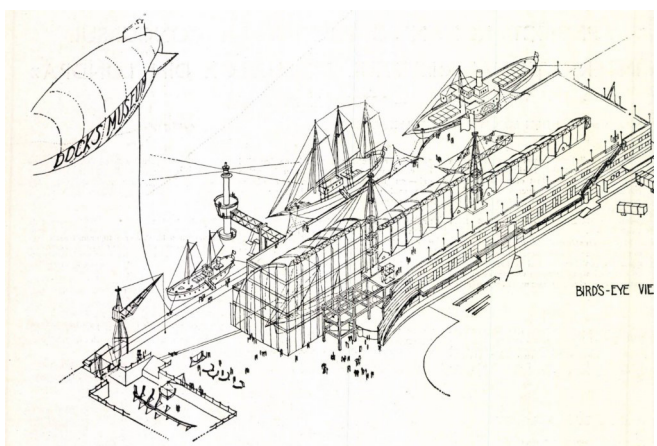


Figure 3. Dock Museum-Dan Bolomey and Matei Lykiardopol.

subversion that remained largely within the conceptual realm of print and not in the physical sphere of built architecture.

Resistance Through Built Architecture

Regarding the sphere of construction, the buildings discussed hereunder exhibit a certain reverence towards the socialist regime, and the examples that break free from the rigor and oppression of the *vogue* are few, most often characterised by very subtle gestures.

One example of timid escapism is the House of Science and Technology for Youth in Slatina, designed by Emil Barbu Popescu and Dorin Ștefan[23], which has received multiple awards[24], including the Special Prize of the City of Kardjali, Honorary Diploma, and Silver Medal at Interarch '87 in Sofia, Bulgaria, and the Prize from the Union of Architects of the Socialist Republic of Romania in 1986. As described by the authors in the magazine *Arhitectura*, no. 5, 1987, in an extensive presentation of the project, the construction promotes contacts outside the rigor of the national program that had been in place for several years under the generic title "Casa Științei și Tehnicii pentru Tineret - House of Science and Technology for Youth."[25]

Next, a brief description of these "stars" in Romanian architectural history, as they are perceived today, is appropriate. The cultural houses became an established architectural program in the late 1960s with an unique aesthetic, heavily promoted by communist politics as a diffuser of politicised culture, while also being presented to citizens as a pearl shining in the public space of the city. From a pragmatic perspective, we can say they are the consequence of a quantitative view of urban growth, aiming at a party propaganda as an expression of the prosperity of the city in which they are built. The cultural house goes through a series of stages: in the 1950s, the program is exuberant with outdated details inspired by historical architecture. The following decade amplifies the efficiency process, and the standardisation of the program becomes a goal, losing its identity. The 1970s bring a reconsideration of buildings with cultural function, with specificity revisited, focusing on spatial poetics, tradition, emotion, and subtlety, while by the early 1980s, it descends again into acute standardisation.[26]

A broader temporal presentation of the national program, though briefly considering the details provided, allows for a different positioning of the

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23 Ștefan Radu Ionescu, "Casa Științei și Tehnicii pentru Tineret Slatina," *Revista Arhitectura 5* (1987): n. Collaborating with: Dana Ștefan, Călin Irimescu, Albin Toth, Andrei Molnar, Mircea Corcodel, Ștefan Mântulescu și Adina Alexiu. page 10-17.

24 Special prize from the city of Kardjali, honorary diploma and silver medal at Interarch, 87 in Sofia, Bulgaria, and prize from the Union of Architects of the Socialist Republic of Romania in 1986.

25 Colectivul redacției, "Casa științei și tehnicii pentru tineret, Slatina," *Revista Arhitectura 5* (1987): 10–17.

26 Irina Tulbure, "Casa de cultură-despre ieri, despre azi, despre mâine," in *Shrinking Cities în România. Orașe românești în declin*, ed. Ilinca Păun Constantinescu, vol. 1 (MNAC, 2019).

authors' proposal for the House of Youth in Slatina. As Dorin Ștefan stated, an inner struggle arose to find a conceptual support of his own, driven by a desire to be saved from the perfect insensitive box[27]. Thus, the hybrid serves as the conceptual framework for the project's development within the collective, through detours imposed from outside and due to the belief, they had formed regarding the "unfinished project"[28] idea with improvisations and imperfections. Therefore, the result aims at a hybrid between the formalism promoted by the party and Western influences stemming from post-Corbusian rationalism formalised by Richard Meier, subtly influenced in some parts by the Japanese architecture of Takamatsu. In other words, the intention is to avoid hierarchical facades by diversifying access points and outlining volumetric and functional displays around the ensemble. As a result, the main, classical facade was dedicated to the communist regime (which allowed the construction), the left lateral facade is indebted to Japanese architecture, the right lateral facade is finely divided by balconies for the accommodation area, and the rear facade breaks away from any stylistic rigor accepted at that time by proposing a large exterior amphitheater leading up to the terrace. In the composition of the facades and the volume, we find archetypal elements such as colonnades, porticoes, and atriums, and what unites their stylistic diversity is a grid design of light gray mosaic bands. Additionally, regarding the windows, we observe a postmodernist grid by Richard Meier or Giuseppe Terragni (the latter being the one invoked in discussions with the author about the project; an advocate of late modernism, which strays from the historicist, classical modernism promoted by the Germans). In terms of functional distribution, both inside and outside, along the longitudinal section, three main categories of functions are interwoven: in the basement-the discotheque with a bar and technical annexes, on the ground floor and mezzanine-the performance hall around which the lobby, exhibition halls, meeting spaces, or rehearsal areas gravitate, while on the opposite side, the amplified exterior amphitheater, which, together with the terrace, allowed its use as an open-air performance hall or cinema. Transversally, the spaces for accommodation and public dining are distributed over five levels. [29] Therefore, we can say that the facade hybridisation process was successfully completed.

Another cultural house we focuse on is the House of Youth in Galați, designed by Emil Barbu Popescu and Viorel Simion, in collaboration with Mircea Chira[30], and awarded with the Union of Architects' Mention in 1986. Both the volumetry and the spatial sequence of the interior areas are influenced by late mannerist modernism, inspired by the works of American architects such as Richard Meier, Louis Kahn, and Mario Botta. The calibration of spaces develops along genuine compositional axes, which in turn create rectangular spaces to which primary geometries, expressed volumetrically and functionally, are asymmetrically

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27 Ștefan, *My modernism* (Autodenunț): 88.

28 Ștefan, *My modernism* (Autodenunț): 86.

29 Ștefan Radu Ionescu, "Casa de cultură din Slatina," *Revista Arhitectura 3* (1985): 16.

30 Ștefan Radu Ionescu, "Casa tineretului din Galați," *Revista Arhitectura 3* (1982): n. Designed in 1979 and finished in 1986. The design team also includes Petre Ciută and as architectural collaborators Dorin Ștefan and Zoltan Takacs.

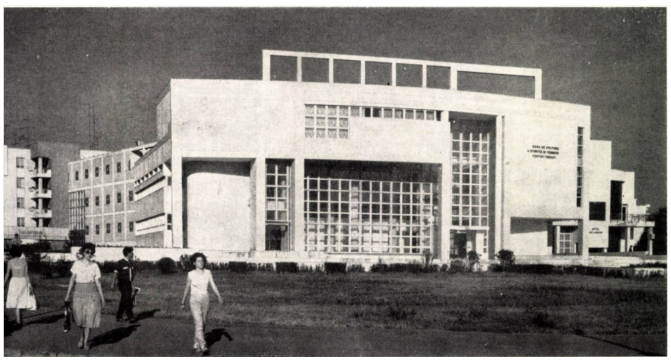


Figure 4. House of Science and Technology for Youth, Slatina, 1986-arch. Emil Barbu Popescu, arch. Dorin Ștefan et all.

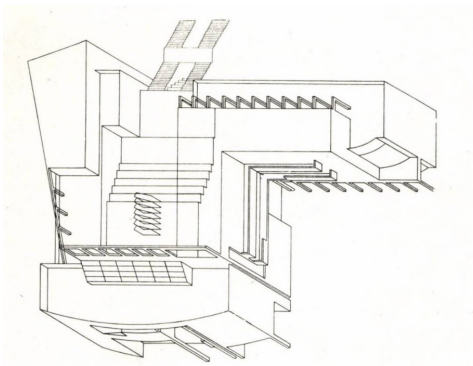


Figure 5. House of Science and Technology for Youth, Slatina, 1986 - arch. Emil Barbu Popescu, arch. Dorin Ștefan et all.



Figure 6. House of Culture, Galați - arch. Emil Barbu Popescu, arch. Viorel Simion et all.

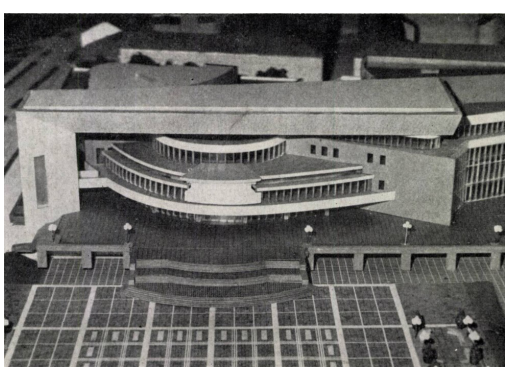


Figure 7. Multifunctional Cultural Center from Timișoara - final model of the intervention, 1989, arch. Șerban Sturdza et all.

attached. The emphatic diagonal is introduced here as an ordering element of the interior space, particularly felt inside, where the two volumes are functionally connected through a walkway. The two volumes house performance halls, a discotheque, technical-applied circles, a hotel, and public dining spaces[31]. The postmodern grid is also felt here in the guise of the glazing recessed from the main plane of the facade. The portico and double-height columns rhythmically enhance the volumetry, alongside the progressively rising positioning of the facade on each level. Additionally, it is worth mentioning the circular lunettes positioned in the massiveness of the top floor, with the ratio between solid and void favoring the former - through a well-controlled balance of masses, which might subtly, yet distinctly, hint at the inspirational sources from Kahn and Botta's works.

Among the cultural centers, the Multifunctional Cultural Center in Timișoara is worth being mentioned as a project that was part of a large-scale urban planning process for the city's civic center. The project was never realised due to the fall of the communist regime, despite receiving a distinction from the Union of Architects in 1986[32]. The design team included Șerban Șturdza, Dan Popa, Ioan Andreescu, Mihai Botescu, Nicolae Bușilă, Doru Covrig, and Vlad Gaivoronschi. Interestingly, there is a legend about the origin of the competition that led to the project's creation. It was rumored that the Opera Square (now Victory Square), the place (from the balcony) where Ceaușescu gave his speeches to the people of Timișoara in the 1970s, 1983, and 1986, had the Metropolitan Cathedral as its vanishing point, which created a profound sense of dissatisfaction for him. As a result, he ordered a civic center to close off the square and simultaneously accommodate a large number of people for his speeches. The civic square was to be developed in the area of the former Transylvania barracks, a site that had remained vacant after their demolition in the 1960s (now the park behind the Bega Store and Continental Hotel). The rectangular square is strictly delineated, with the longitudinal axis polarised at both ends by the two major functions proposed - the cultural center and the political-administrative headquarters. The long sides would have been dedicated to housing and commercial spaces. The epitome of this intervention would reflect the idea of stratification, on both the urban and architectural levels. When considering the nexus with the exterior, stratification becomes evident through attention to the integration with the context in terms of scale, treatment, and rhythm. A series of plazas - vestibules - announce the monumentality, which is fully realised inside without disturbing the adjacent areas of the intervention. The next level of stratification occurs in the vertical plane of the square, where a complex system of successive pedestrian platforms borders it, while functionally and visually forming an amphitheater, which becomes the main organising element of the entire square. This pedestrian matrix intersects the cultural center along the long axis of the building, thus delineating the two major zones of the construction. The stratification mantle

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31 Drăgan, "Convorbire cu arhitectul Viorel Simion."

32 Ștefan Radu Ionescu, "Actualitate în proiectare, Între contextualism și modernitate-un centru cultural multifuncțional-studiu sistematizarea ansamblului distinsă cu premiu U.A.-1986," in *Revista Arhitectura*, vol. 6 (Editata de colectivul redacției, 1987).

is felt here through the fluid transition between exterior and interior, in the area facing the square (through a 60-meter-wide portal - the crown jewel of the monumentality of the space), and on the exterior wing through a gradual transition to the external volume. The core is materialised through an interior square, with spaces gradually opening up-stratified. The entire intervention is a blend of contextualism specific to postmodernism - through the careful transition to the context, Corbusian modernism - through the use of large glazed surfaces, the open plan, and generous openings, and, last but not least, it is indebted to realist socialism - through the monumentality and typicality of the interior spaces. All these elements converge towards a polyphonic result,[33] mediating in a context filled with diverse social, political, and urban qualities. Nevertheless, the principal author, Șerban Șturdza, later declared that this intervention, which he described as brutal, would have led to the destruction of an important green space in the city.

In the entire oppressive context of the time (briefly described in the introductory part of this article), there are very few buildings constructed in the 1980s that can be classified as unique, counter-fashion projects, thus departing from the pompous emptiness or excessive decorativism imposed by the dictatorship. Among these, in addition to those mentioned above, we recall the Postăvăria Română building, in Bucharest, designed by architect Zoltan Takacs and the student hotel-restaurant at Lacul Tei, also in Bucharest, designed by Emil-Barbu Popescu and Petre Ciută, alongside other cultural centers designed by Emil Barbu Popescu and others, such as those in Slobozia and Râmnicu Vâlcea. Nevertheless, the variety and expressive freedom of these projects are contradicted by the vast, uniform fashion of standardised buildings and urban spaces, which define the dominant tone of the era.

Conclusion

The 1980s mark the complex unfolding of the universal dichotomy of dictatorship and resistance, in which these two states coexist, giving rise to a counter-fashion within the fashion. This *status quo* manifested itself across all levels of the cultural sphere, although it was probably most deeply rooted in the field of literature-where, in fact, the term *optzecism* was also used in post-December specialist writings.The question remains open as to whether the junction between the official overall image of the ninth decade and the component of resistance within the architectural system was strong enough to attribute the phenomenon of optzecism to this cultural field as well.
This study delved into the architecture that managed to break free from the grim scenario imposed by the cadence of the regime. The examples mentioned above are by no means exhaustive, representing only a connecting thread in the synoptic map of architects' escape movements from the constraints of the Ceaușist system. These sparks amid the gray monotony gave rise to new depths in architectural discourse, building on frugal information gleaned from the few specialised magazines from outside the Soviet bloc, to which romanian architects had limited and restricted access at the time. Even so, these

33 Ionescu, "Actualitate în proiectare, Între contextualism și modernitate-un centru cultural multifuncțional-studiu sistematizarea ansamblului distinsă cu premiu U.A.-1986."

magazines allowed at least the visionary thought and drawing, and occasionally even its materialisation, to converge towards a freedom shaped by the critical assimilation of various international trends.

The ninth decade of the past century remains a ubiquitous operational balance between the two dichotomous spheres of architecture: the official one, manifested through a censored stylistic language in a fashion governed by the dictator's coveted monumentality, and the sphere of resistance, materialised through a counter-fashion in which specificity and symbolic charge became paramount. These actions were orchestrated by Western trends (the subcurrents of postmodernism), which found their cohesion in the discourse, the visionary drawing, and (sporadically) in the built environment of the 1980s.

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Fig. 5: *Revista Arhitectura*, 5 (1987): 15.
Fig. 6: *Revista Arhitectura*, 6 (1987): 27.
Fig. 7: *Revista Arhitectura*, 6 (1987): 20.

Reflections on Digital Ornament in Architecture Through the Lens of Couture
The Case of Iris van Herpen

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Keywords
digital ornament; fashion design; architecture; interdisciplinary design; biomorphic design

Abstract
This article explores the concept of digital ornament at the intersection of fashion design and architecture. The link between these disciplines – historically supported by theories such as Gottfried Semper's – remains relevant in the context of digital design. The study examines how Iris van Herpen's creations offer a context for formal and chromatic experimentation through digital modelling and fabrication, generating ornamental configurations that blur the boundaries between abstraction and naturalism. Although developed within the realm of fashion design, these approaches suggest directions of interest for architecture, particularly at the scale of ornamental detail, where formal freedom can coexist with technical feasibility. The article proposes a classification of digital ornamental forms – derived from structures of inorganic matter and living systems – as a tool for understanding how digital design relates to material imagination, the associative potential of form, and contemporary visual culture.

Introduction

Architecture and clothing have long shared a close historical relationship, with ornament as a key element of connection. For Gottfried Semper, the textile arts are not only the origin of architectural ornament[1] but also the first means of enclosing space.[2]

Today, the relationship between fashion design and architecture is renewed through emerging digital modelling and fabrication techniques – especially additive manufacturing, which Neil Leach links to the idea of "3D printed body architecture."[3] Architects, familiar with computational techniques through their training, are increasingly involved in related design fields that deal with smaller objects, closer to the human scale.

New computational tools enable performance-based analysis, intricate geometries, and explorations of material agency. In this context, the term ornament is embraced by key figures of the digital avant-garde in architecture – for example, Bernard Cache, Greg Lynn, Lars Spuybroek, Michael Hansmeyer, Marc Fornes, Marcos Cruz, Oliver Domeisen, and Studio RAP. Marjan Colletti treats ornament as a fundamental notion for shaping a poetics of digital design, transposed into contemporary imagery, and even issues a manifesto for "the abundance of digi-bio-techno ornamentation."[4]

The article proposes "digital ornament" as the expressive, small-scale treatment of matter that transcends strictly technical and functional considerations. The concept does not imply historicism, but acknowledges the formal and symbolic richness of ornament's history while seeking new expressive means through modern technologies.

While much has been written on the instrumental aspects of digitally intricate forms – optimised production, morphogenetic logics, and fabrication tools – less attention has been paid to form itself, particularly in light of ornament's history and its enduring tensions between abstraction and figuration, and between matter's constraints and its imaginative transformation.

This study addresses that gap by examining digital ornament primarily as a formal and imaginative phenomenon, rather than merely as a technical outcome. It aims to show how tracing a continuum from abstraction to figuration can expand our understanding of ornament's role in contemporary design.

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1 Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Getty Research Institute, 2004), 113.

2 Gottfried Semper, *The four elements of architecture and other writings / Gottfried Semper*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave, Wolfgang Herrmann, introduction by Harry Francis Mallgrave (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 103-04.

3 Neil Leach, "What is 3D-Printed Body Architecture?," *Architectural Design* 87, Issue 6 (November/December 2017), 8.

4 Marjan Colletti, "Introduction," *Architectural Design* 80, Issue 2 (March/April 2010), 8.

Fashion design is freer than architecture to explore ornamental treatments, and architecture has often drawn from the decorative arts. Iris van Herpen's couture provides a concentrated case: a wide range of forms developed through advanced digital techniques. Through her work, the article examines digital ornament across a spectrum from abstraction to figuration, from affective intensity to symbolism. The paper considers how forms are perceived and what imaginative resources they draw upon, and synthesising these into a classification that maps a continuous formal field.

Related Work

Semper's concept of *Bekleidung* – the dressing of structure – draws on historical and anthropological origins, establishing a foundational link between architecture and textiles.[5] As Mallgrave notes, for Semper, architecture is fundamentally an "ornamental activity."[6] Wölfflin's notion of *Zeitkostüm* similarly frames architecture as an expression of an epoch's sensibility, situating ornament within broader cultural shifts.[7] Modernism reframed this terrain: Loos's polemic cast ornament as waste and moral lapse,[8] underwriting a lineage of restraint that still informs today's suspicion toward symbolism and preference for ostensibly objective, tool- or performance-led accounts. Worringer's polarity between abstraction and empathy explains how ornament arises from a psychic necessity for abstraction rather than naturalistic imitation,[9] an idea that resonates with certain tendencies in computational design. More recent theorists have expanded on these foundations: Moussavi and Kubo approach ornament through function and affect,[10] Picon frames ornament as a political and subjective agent, shaping architectural meaning and experience within contemporary culture.[11] Spuybroek seeks resources for an ornamental digital poetics in the past, reinterpreting theories from Ruskin, Lipps, and Worringer in light of computational design,[12] and Lynn brings ornament into a Deleuzian discourse where it emerges from process and the fusion of ornament and structure.[13]

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5 Semper, *The four elements of architecture*, 103-04.

6 Mallgrave, "Introduction," in Semper, *The four elements of architecture*, 29.

7 Heinrich Wölfflin, *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur* (F. Bruckmann, 1886), 46, accessed August 11th, 2025, https://www.cloud-cuckoo.net/openarchive/Autoren/Woelfflin/Woelfflin1886.htm.

8 Adolf Loos, "Ornament and crime," in *The theory of decorative art: An anthology of European and American writings, 1750-1940,* ed. Isabelle Frank (Yale University, 2000), 290-91.

9 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and empathy: A contribution to the psychology of style* (Elephant Paperbacks, 1997), 60-61.

10 Farshid Moussavi and Michael Kubo, *The Function of Ornament* (Actar, 2008), 8-9.

11 Antoine Picon, *Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity* (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2013), 11-13.

12 Lars Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design* (Bloomsbury, 2016), xvi-xvii.

13 Greg Lynn, "The Structure of Ornament," in *Digital tectonics*, ed. Neil Leach, David Turnbull, and Chris Williams (Wiley-Academy, 2004), 65.

A second intellectual thread situates digital form generation within process philosophy and material theory: Bernard Cache, drawing on Simondon's theory of individuation, reconceives architectural surfaces as continuous, variably inflected forms generated through parametric description, as outlined in *Earth Moves*.[14] Manuel DeLanda, drawing on Deleuze, contrasts the traditional hylomorphic model[15] with materialist accounts in which form emerges from the self-organisation of matter, guided by intensive properties that can be operationalised in design.[16] These perspectives help position digital ornament not as applied decoration but as emergent articulation driven by material–algorithmic processes. Cross-scalar exchanges further connect fashion design and architecture: Leach's term "3D-printed body architecture" captures modelling and fabrication logics moving between scales.[17] Smelik's new materialist reading of van Herpen shows how bodies, materials and technologies co-produce form, shifting ornament from applied sign to processual behaviour.[18] Horvath's doctoral research surveys living and non-living natural models in computational architecture, with a stronger emphasis on modelling techniques and digital tool applications.[19]

Against this literature, the article examines formal analogies to natural phenomena in Iris van Herpen's work, traces the sources of her visual imagination and proposes a formal classification of digitally mediated ornament.

Method

This study reads Iris van Herpen's work as a concentrated exploration field for digital ornament. The analysis draws primarily on runway images as visual evidence, supported by official lookbooks and collection texts on the designer's site, curatorial and scholarly sources on her practice, and selected writing on ornament and digital design.

The approach combines close formal observation with interpretive framing. For each look, I identify prominent morphological tendencies and relate them to natural phenomena – either material images (domains of the amorphous,

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14 Bernard Cache, *Earth moves: The Furnishing of Territories*, trans. Anne Boyman (MIT Press, 1995).

15 The hylomorphic model, derived from Aristotle, describes form as something imposed on passive matter. DeLanda, following Deleuze, contrasts this with materialist morphogenetic models in which form emerges from self-organizing material processes and their intrinsic properties.

16 Manuel DeLanda, "Material Complexity," in *Digital Tectonics*, ed. Neil Leach, David Turnbull, and Chris Williams (Wiley-Academy, 2004), 14–21.

17 Leach, "What is 3D-Printed Body Architecture?," 8.

18 Anneke Smelik, "New materialism: A theoretical framework for fashion in the age of technological innovation," *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018), 49-50, doi: 10.1386/infs.5.1.33_1.

19 Anca Horvath, "Arhitectură, computație și natură: Modele din natura vie și nevie în arhitectura computațională" (PhD diss., Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, 2015).

fluidity, crystalline formations) or life-related images (cellular patterns, structures of organisms, figural motifs suggesting complex living beings).

The resulting observations are synthesized into a typology of recurrent families of form. Intended as a heuristic rather than a rigid taxonomy, the proposed typology enables comparative analysis across different degrees of abstraction and individuation, while accommodating overlaps, hybrids, and gradations. This interpretive layer complements Manuel DeLanda's account of morphogenesis and intensive properties as drivers of form.[20]

The Case of Iris van Herpen

Relevance of the Case: Iris van Herpen and Digital Ornament

The practice of fashion designer Iris van Herpen exemplifies the fertile exchange between fashion design and architecture. Her collaborations include working with architects adept in digital techniques for her couture, as well as with Neutelings Riedijk Architects on the Naturalis Biodiversity Center in Leiden, where she designed fluidly undulating façade bands that evoke the finesse of textiles transposed into the hardness of exposed white concrete.[21] Her interdisciplinary approach – engaging scientists, architects, and artists – reflects a contemporary ideal of emulating the complexity of nature, both as morphogenetic process and as performance, an aspiration also visible in architectural research by designers such as Marcos Cruz[22] and Neri Oxman.[23]

This case study examines her work through two key categories of ornamental form, each with its own resources of imagination: *material images*, which evoke the amorphous, fluid, or crystalline textures of matter, and *life images*, which draw on the organisational patterns of living systems, from cellular structures to complex organisms. Together, these categories trace a continuum between abstraction and figuration, allowing for hybrid states and subtle transitions.

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20 Manuel DeLanda, "Material Complexity," 14-21.

21 "Naturalis Biodiversity Center," Neutelings Riedijk Architects, accessed September 9th, 2024, https://neutelings-riedijk.com/projects/naturalis-biodiversity-center/.

22 Marcos Cruz, *Poikilohydric living walls* (Bartlett School of Architecture, 2022), 6-8, https://issuu.com/bartlettarchucl/docs/design-research-cruz-poikilohydric-walls-04.

23 Neri Oxman, "Material Ecology," MIT Media Lab, https://www.media.mit.edu/publications/material-ecology/.

Material Images

As she mentions herself, van Herpen is fascinated with the mystery of matter,[24] fascination which is manifested in the large span of her formal explorations which hint through textures and rhythms to the natural world, without any explicit figuration.

In some cases, the material itself, and the way it is treated, is employed to create a naturalistic material image – that is, a visual rendition of physical material phenomena, achieved through a high degree of realism rather than abstraction. Paradoxically, such realism can be effectively simulated by computational techniques that generate randomness within controlled parameters. Contrary to the crisply articulated curves with a high degree of abstraction found in many of her works, these examples use artificial materials to evoke familiar material effects as encountered in nature: the splash of water (*Capriole* collection, Look 17) suggested through a transparent material (Fig. 1); dew droplets (*Seijaku* collection, Look 11) as crystals suspended in silicon; and agglutinated blown-glass bubbles recalling foam (*Seijaku*, Look 12). Although these elements allude to fluid substances, they are marked by material accident and irregularity, lacking directional flow or continuous curvature. It is a transitional zone between fortuitous amorphousness and the defined fluid geometries found in more parametrically controlled pieces.

Photographs of material effects themselves are employed in Iris van Herpen's work – a kind of naturalism that is not figural but textural, almost abstract in its lack of clear iconographical correspondence. In *Shift Souls* (2019) she collaborated with photographer Kim Keever, renowned for images of unfolding, merging colored fluids.[25] Printed on translucent layers, these images amplify the perceived fluidity of the veils they inhabit. Such images, transposed onto artificial materials of entirely different consistencies, create a perceptual disjunction akin to alchemical transmutation. A similar strategy has been explored in architecture – for instance, by Herzog & de Meuron, who, in projects such as the Pfaffenholz Sports Centre, used stone-like photographic patterns printed on the concrete façades and fibrous textures on the glass surfaces.

In the *Hypnosis* collection, Look 3 may seem a purely abstract curvilinear geometry evoking fluidity.[26] Yet its overall symmetry – typical of garments – together with the branching of increasingly accentuated curves from a central axis and the sharp articulation of certain lines, evokes the hierarchised

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24 "Fashion designer Iris van Herpen journeys behind the forms," Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, accessed August 1st, 2025, https://www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/stories/iris-van-herpen-sculpting-the-senses-forces-behind-the-forms-brisbane-australia/.

25 "Shift Souls," Iris van Herpen, accessed August 1st, 2025, https://www.irisvanherpen.com/collections/shift-souls/shift-souls-photography-by-molly-sj-lowe.

26 "Hypnosis," Iris van Herpen, accessed August 1st, 2025, https://www.irisvanherpen.com/collections/hypnosis/runway-4.

structures of living organisms. Symmetry itself, and the almost prosthetic dependence of the garment's design on the human body, can give abstract shapes connotations that transcend the purely abstract ornamental realm – the body as the main support of clothing often transfers to them subtle allusions to the living world.

Within the fluid material images of Iris van Herpen we find not only natural but also historical connotations – yet these are already mediated through the abstract vocabulary of Art Nouveau. Such works push the abstraction process of that turn-of-the-twentieth-century style – once a revolutionary avant-garde – now propelled further by the possibilities of computational tools. This affinity is a recurrent theme in her work, visible in multiple collections. Again in *Hypnosis*, Looks 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 12, and 15 seem to rely on sinuous "whiplash" lines reminiscent of Otto Eckmann, Victor Horta, or Henry van de Velde, whose abstracted curves often feature tight inflections recalling vegetal tension. In Looks 5, 12, and 15, the similarity is most pronounced, as fluctuating-width curves flow outward from irregular blotches – close to Eckmann's AEG cover design for the 1900 Paris Exhibition.

This resonance is reinforced by van Herpen's own references to Loïe Fuller,[27] whose performances – marked by swirling fabrics and shifting light – were a recurring source of inspiration for turn-of-the-century artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec, Will Bradley, Jules Chéret, and Thomas Theodor Heine. In these depictions, Fuller's figure was frequently abstracted into asymmetrical "plastic ornaments," which Schmutzler describes as alienated into something nonhuman.[28] More broadly, Art Nouveau often subordinated the human figure to ornamental structure, integrating it into complex, flowing compositions where ornament dictated the visual logic of the whole. This ornamental decentering of the human aligns closely with contemporary posthuman and non-anthropocentric perspectives which, as Smelik observes in the work of Iris van Herpen, reimagine human embodiment as part of wider material and ecological networks.[29] In both Art Nouveau and van Herpen's approach, ornament engages with patterns, rhythms, and structures of a universal order, echoing Gottfried Semper's "cosmic arts," which include architecture alongside music and dance – rooted in nature's uniformity and lawfulness.[30]

If fluidity is a traditional quality of dress – imposed by textile properties and bodily movement – the domain of crystalline forms, traditionally associated with architecture, seems to contradict the body's organic nature and motion, making

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27 "Sympoiesis," Iris van Herpen, accessed August 2nd, 2025, https://www.irisvanherpen.com/collections/sympoiesis/about-18.

28 Robert Schmutzler, *Art Nouveau* (Harry N. Abrams, 1962), 10.

29 Smelik, "New materialism," 34.

30 Gottfried Semper, "The Attributes of Formal Beauty," Introduction to "Theory of Formal Beauty" ("Theorie des Formell-Schönen," cca. 1856/1859), in Wolfgang Herrmann, *Gottfried Semper: In Search of Architecture* (The MIT Press, 1984), 219-21.

it a radical choice in fashion design. In *Voltage* (2013), straight, angular shapes in black, white, or metallic tones – along with thin, spiked fringes – evoke electrical phenomena, drawing inspiration from the work of experimental artist Carlos van Camp.[31] In Looks 1–3, pointed triangular cutouts on straight-lined garments suggest crystal structures translated onto flexible fabric. By contrast, the fully faceted Look 11 not only possesses a crystalline form but amplifies this quality through its materiality: rigid, highly reflective surfaces that glimmer like actual crystals. A similar ornamental vocabulary appears in architecture – for instance, in Studio RAP's algorithmically generated faceted interior panelling at the Zuidplein Theatre in Rotterdam.[32]

Van Herpen's fascination with a wide range of material organizations evokes Karl Scheffler's observations (inspired by Jugendstil architect August Endell) on the ubiquity of ornamental sources in nature, from subtle textures to dynamic forms: "A drop of ink squirted in a glass of water, cigar smoke in motionless air, the wave, the plant, a waving flag, the photograph of glacial drift, bone formations, and muscle fibers – in short, ornaments are everywhere!"[33] This world evoked by her creations parallels Lars Spuybroek's reading of Ruskin's "Earth Veil"[34] defined by the English writer as "a veil of strange intermediate being,"[35] a material universe situated on the Earth's surface, both mineral and organic, alive yet motionless and devoid of consciousness. Spuybroek exemplifies this world in art through the textural abundance of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, works that seem woven from intricate details of matter.[36] It is a central theme in Spuybroek's approach to digital ornament: "In our study of ornament, we will constantly encounter this fusion of the petrified and the fibrous, of the mineral and the vegetal, of immobility and vitality."[37]

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31 "Voltage," Iris van Herpen, accessed August 1st, 2025, https://www.irisvanherpen.com/collections/voltage/voltage-show.

32 "Theatre Zuidplein," Studio RAP, accessed August 2nd, 2025, https://studiorap.nl/TheaterZuidplein.

33 Karl Scheffler, "Meditationen über das Ornament," *Dekorative Kunst* 8 (1901), 400, quoted in Morgan, "The Idea of Abstraction in German Theories of the Ornament from Kant to Kandinsky," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 236.

34 Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, 63.

35 John Ruskin, *Works*, VII, 14-15, quoted in Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, 63.

36 Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, 60-63.

37 Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, 63.

Life Images

Unlike the organic forms valued in a traditional anthropocentric conception of beauty such as Ruskin's, where familiarity with natural elements is a precondition[38] and the degree of life's development imposes an aesthetic hierarchy (flowers more noble than stones, animals more noble than flowers, and the human form the most noble),[39] van Herpen's work embraces forms less familiar to direct observation of nature, encountered via scientific knowledge accessible to the modern individual. This iconography, grounded more in intellectual acquisition rather than sensory experience, situates her designs within a contemporary imagination shaped by a scientistic fascination with the biological sphere, a tendency evident across much recent art, literature, and media.

For Paul Hamann-Rose, the microscopic world, invisible to the naked eye, is imagined in contemporary literature through two aesthetic categories: the "molecular sublime" and the "molecular grotesque."[40] Since the advent of microscopy in the seventeenth century, with Robert Hooke and Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, magnified views of minute life have often been likened to telescopic visions of the cosmos, offering a parallel sense of vastness and the limits of perception. If the immensity of celestial bodies has traditionally evoked the sublime, Hamann-Rose notes that the same response can arise at the opposite, miniature scale, a perspective in line with Edmund Burke's eighteenth century aesthetics.

The undifferentiated world at the foundation of living matter's organization sparks a strong interest in digital design, thanks to computational techniques that enable the generation, proliferation, and variation of patterns found in the organic world based on algorithmic principles. These may include Voronoi diagrams, Turing patterns, fractal patterns based on Lindenmayer systems and more.

Iris van Herpen's fascination for the invisible yet ubiquitous reality of the microscopic scale of the biologic world is stated explicitly in the description of her collection *Micro* (2012) from her website.[41] Inspired by science photographer Steve Gschmeissner, who uses SEM technology to create highly detailed images of the microorganisms, van Herpen creates "astonishing sculptural pieces whose forms refer to cell structures, armature, tentacles, or ciliate

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38 John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (George Allen, 1903), 142-43.

39 Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 154.

40 Paul Hamann-Rose, „Human Environmental Aesthetics: The Molecular Sublime and the Molecular Grotesque," in Liliane Campos, Pierre-Louis Patoine (eds.), *Life, Re-Scaled: The Biological Imagination in Twenty-First Century Literature and Performance* (Open Book Publishers, 2022), 42-46, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0303.

41 „Micro," Iris van Herpen, accessed January 25, 2025, https://www.irisvanherpen.com/collections/micro/behind-the-scenes-3.

organisms."[42] Her approach that reflects the fragile interplay between order and chaos, stability and decay, is further evoked in the description, as the collection is meant to "invite reflection on the passage from dead matter to living organism."[43]

One type of form employed in digital design alludes to the base-level organisation of the living world: undifferentiated, uniform fields of cells, tissues, organic skins, and textures. These forms are typically associated with a magnified experience of life – frequently at a microscopic scale. In the *Lucid* collection (2016), Looks 15, 16, and 17 explore such cellular or crust-like surface tessellations. Look 15 features a diaphanous, lattice-like, bidimensional cellular structure, resembling the delicate membranes of insect wings. Look 16 presents abstract white contours on a black background, forming cellular shapes whose biological reading is intensified by the dress's perfect symmetry and hierarchical organization. Look 17, with its dark colour and faceted three-dimensional development, appears as a hybrid between crystalline and organic form – its mineral-like quality intensified by the angular volumes and black palette, which suggest a geological, crystalline character.[44]

In Look 18 from the *Sensory Seas* collection (2020), printed cellular motifs evoke a biological microstructure, while the overall silhouette recalls that of a squid. The flared sleeves suggesting its lateral fins, and the wide, undulating hemline, through its folds and amplitude, resembling the fluid motion of its arms. The diaphanous layering and softened gradations of green, blue, and purple further enhance the association with a marine environment.

In many works, biological signs emerge within highly abstract ornamental rhythms, shifting perception from a lifeless material image to that of a living one. Such signs may take the form of structural organizations specific to organisms or their parts – ramifications, radial arrays, or symmetric configurations – without necessarily alluding to complete, proportioned organisms. At times, they function as subtle clues of formal differentiation that transcend an underlying abstract logic yet stop short of depicting finite living figures.

Iris van Herpen's *Henosis* dress from the *Roots of Rebirth* collection (2021) may at first be perceived as an abstract fluid form, traversed by continuous curved lines. This reading is unsettled by the pronounced terminations of the rods extending fan-like from the silhouette's outline – discontinuous accents that break away from the paradigm of fluid continuity. These rods evoke the fan-shaped fins and spines of lionfish or the elongated neck feathers of the secretary bird. In both species – despite belonging to different classes and

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42 „Micro," Iris van Herpen.

43 „Micro," Iris van Herpen.

44 "Lucid," Iris van Herpen, accessed August 2nd, 2025, https://www.irisvanherpen.com/collections/lucid.



Figure 1. Iris van Herpen, “Water dress,” 2011, exhibited in Iris van Herpen: Sculpting the Senses, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane (QAGOMA), 2024.



Figure 2. Iris van Herpen, “Skeleton dress,” 2011, exhibited in Iris van Herpen: Sculpting the Senses, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane (QAGOMA), 2024.

environments – the effect is similar: to emphasize the body or head while accentuating movement. This reflects a broader trend in fashion design, where attributes of other organisms' silhouettes or dynamics are borrowed to transfigure the human figure.

In the design of clothes, the close association with the human body as a corporeal extension makes a connection to living organisms almost inevitable. A dress is not merely an addition to the body but often becomes a metamorphic continuation of it. This intimate relationship – manifested through symmetry and echoes of the wearer's own bodily structure – can, in itself, impart organismic qualities to a garment. Even the symmetry logically imposed by the body may lead designs to acquire a zoomorphic character, reflecting organic order rarely found in the natural world, except in the sharply regular geometries of crystals.

In her debut collection in Paris, *Capriole*, Iris van Herpen presents in her unambiguously titled "Skeleton" dress an exoskeleton with its own structural logic, akin to that of an independent organism attached to the human body (Fig. 2).[45] The suggestion of bone through the solid, vertebra-like elements is reinforced by both the material and its colour, namely 3D-printed white polyamide. While its structure relies on the repetition and variation of a vertebra-like module, the proportions, branching, and overall silhouette give the impression of a secondary body that echoes the human form, suggesting a shift from a modular biological pattern toward the integrated unity of a living organism.

If earlier we examined how allusions to the living world can be suggested through developmental laws, hierarchies, symmetries, and rhythms, we will now turn to a rarer type of form in van Herpen's work – the explicitly figurative. Digital design often tends to avoid figuration, as it relies heavily on bottom-up morphogenetic processes rather than starting from a fixed intended form. Figuration – understood as the formal representation or allusion to real objects – offers a graspable meaning and familiarity that can make a work more accessible to the general public compared to pure abstraction.

In *Shift Souls* (2019), Van Herpen integrates figural hints into abstract ornamental structures developed through their own internal logic.[46] In Looks 3, 6, 8, and 15, stylized human faces emerge from superposed, curved, flat-coloured shapes with chromatic gradients. Their bold topographic-like contours are punctuated by small yet emphatic eyes that interrupt the fluid homogeneity and confirm a figural intent, adding a symbolic dimension to the sensuous ornamental curves. In Looks 9, 16, 17, and 18, similarly abstract, wave-like lines gain avian connotations through a discreet bird head perched atop the layered, amoeba-like surface, transforming the curves into wings. Both cases

45 "Capriole," Iris van Herpen, accessed August 2nd, 2025, https://www.irisvanherpen.com/collections/capriole/runway-17.

46 "Shift Souls," Iris van Herpen.

illustrate ornament's capacity for metamorphosis, embedding figuration within rhythmic abstraction, a quality that Kent Bloomer identifies as fundamental to ornament.[47]

Another notable example of Iris van Herpen's symbolic exploration appears in the *Sympoiesis* collection (2025),[48] where symmetrical figural compositions emerge from crystalline textures, as seen in a dress featuring a clear reference to the Egyptian scarab and the solar disc.

A Formal Classification of Digital Ornament

The forms identified in Iris van Herpen's work can be positioned within a synthetic classification of digital ornament, previously developed in doctoral research,[49] as shown in Table 1 and in Fig. 3. This formal classification bridges abstraction and figuration by tracing analogies with the forms of matter, organic and inorganic, across its process of individuation. The framework recognises that fluid, crystalline, vegetal or zoomorphic forms coexist into a continuum, similarly to how Wilhelm Worringer suggested, in an almost monist view, when he argued that vegetal ornament and linear ornament are both essentially abstract and they only vary in degree.[50] The model also accounts for the relative quantity of information and degree of generative potential in each category: more generic, less individuated forms – such as amorphous textures – are generally easier to produce algorithmically, while the intricate proportional particularities of evolved organisms require more targeted design control.

Each family of forms in the classification corresponds to recurring structures in nature: amorphous inorganic matter (e.g. geological formations, stone textures, clouds); fluid-dynamic forms (e.g. blobs, waves, fluids); crystalline structures (e.g. crystals, crystal lattices); base-level biological organisation (e.g. cells, tissues, spongy bone structures); simple organisms (e.g. leaves, branching patterns, flowers, vertebral columns, radial shells); and complex organisms (e.g. developed animals, humans).[51]

The families of forms proposed in the classification do not have strict boundaries; they can interact and merge, resulting in hybrid, in-between states. In many cases, this kind of juxtaposition occurs by employing different types of forms at different scales of the object. For example, in Look 1 from the *Lucid* collection, the detailing evokes the crystalline world through hexagonal pieces

47 Kent Bloomer, *The nature of ornament: rhythm and metamorphosis in architecture* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 85-86.

48 "Sympoiesis," Iris van Herpen, accessed August 1st, 2025, https://www.irisvanherpen.com/collections/sympoiesis/collection-3.

49 Andrei Teacă, "Forme ale ornamentului digital în arhitectură" (PhD diss., "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urbanism, 2024), 112-22.

50 Worringer, *Abstraction and empathy*, 60-61.

51 Andrei Teacă, "Forme ale ornamentului digital în arhitectură," 122; Andrei Teacă, "Ornament as Biomorphic Element of Continuity in Architecture," in *SIGraDI 2024 – Biodigital Intelligent Systems Conference* (iBAG-UIC Barcelona, 2024), 302.

made of a shimmering transparent material, enhancing their resemblance to ice crystals, and connected on a triangular grid by translucent tubes.[52] Yet the overall silhouette of the dress, particularly in its lower part, is conceived as a bubbly surface, belonging to the fluid category. This coexistence of distinct formal logics within the same object exemplifies the continuum along which ornamental forms can evolve – from the undulating dynamics of fluidity to the angular regularity of crystallisation – suggesting that, in digital ornament, transitions between material states can be embodied within a single design. Reminiscent of Focillon, who envisioned ornament as an oneiric dimension of continuous metamorphosis, capable of transcending natural realms and generating hybrids under its own laws,[53] this tendency toward transmutation reappears at various moments in the history of ornament. For instance, in Rococo decoration, the *rocaille* vocabulary merges the mineral and the organic in fluid rhythmic continuity.

Category of forms	Formal attributes	Examples in Iris van Herpen's work
1. Amorphous matter	Chaotic; uniform; textural	*Capriole* – Looks 8, 9; *Shift Souls* – Looks 10, 12
2. Fluid-dynamic	Continuous curvatures; sinusoidal waves	*Aeriform* – Looks 1-3, 5-14; Hypnosis – Looks 1-7, 10, 15-18
3. Crystalline	Straight lines; angular shapes; planar surfaces; geometric order	*Voltage* – Looks 1-3, 11; *Architectonics* – Looks 1-5, 7, 13, 16
4. Base level of biological organisation	Homogenous, undifferentiated low-level biologic forms	*Sensory Seas* – Looks 6, 7, 8, 15, 17, 18; *Voltage* – Look 9
5. Biological structures/ simple organisms	Repetitive, fractal structures; radial organisation; symmetries; branching structures	*Ludi Naturae* – Looks 18-20; *Roots of Rebirth* – Looks 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 17, 19-21
6. Complex organisms	Highly individualised biological forms; few symmetries and repetitions	*Shift Souls* – Looks 3, 6, 8, 15-18; *Sympoiesis* – Looks 5-8

Table 1. Classification of ornamental forms in Iris van Herpen's work.[54]

52 "Lucid," Iris van Herpen.

53 Henri Focillon, *Viața formelor* (*Vie des formes*), trans. Laura Irodoiu Aslan (Editura Meridiane, 1977), 47–48.

54 Adapted from the author's classification of ornamental forms (see Teacă, "Forme ale ornamentului digital în arhitectură," 122; Teacă, "Ornament as Biomorphic Element of Continuity in Architecture," 302).



1. Amorphous matter



4. Base-level biological organisation



2. Fluid-dynamic



5. Biological structures & simple organisms



3. Crystalline



6. Complex organisms

Figure 3. Classification of ornamental forms in Iris van Herpen's work.

This mapping concludes the case study by situating Van Herpen's work within a conceptual field that unites traditional theories of ornament with the expanded possibilities of digital design. It also prepares the ground for the discussion of how such a framework can inform ornamental thinking in contemporary architecture.

Discussion

Iris van Herpen's work demonstrates how digital design and fabrication can expand ornament's expressive language, fusing figuration, abstraction, and colour within complex, nature-inspired geometries. While developed in couture, such strategies can inform architectural expression, particularly where ornamental detailing is viable. Fashion design's relative freedom encourages direct engagement with symbolism, a quality increasingly explored in architecture through performance-integrated ornament, such as Marcos Cruz's photosynthetic branching panels[55] or Shuyi Huang's mushroom-inspired capitals.[56]

Historical styles wove multiple types of forms, organic and geometric, into cohesive systems, their ornamental richness being refined across generations. Contemporary digital ornament tends to lack such inherited frameworks, often manifestly rejecting historicism in favour of technology. This tendency stems from the lineage from Modernism to Minimalism, with its valorisation of simplicity; from the pursuit of objectivity through nature-derived logics such as morphogenetic processes and material agency; and from a reluctance toward symbolism, perceived as anachronistic in a design culture dominated by science. As Neil Leach observes, morphogenetic thinking shifts design toward performance-driven processes, privileging generative logics over representation.[57] Within this context, many digital ornaments develop from a single motif, transformed through parametric or generative systems. Even gradients – chromatic or dimensional – modulate unity rather than create multiplicity. Curvilinear forms may appear freer than straight lines, yet they still obey the rigour of continuity, reinforcing singularity.

Digital ornament challenges the modernist reduction of form to the pure expression of function, reclaiming it as a site of formal richness and symbolic depth. Emerging from generative processes rather than post-hoc application, it dissolves the historical opposition between structure and ornament. Crucially, this ornament is not an inevitable byproduct of structural logic; its autonomy affirms the expressive potential of form beyond utility.

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55 Cruz, *Poikilohydric living walls*, 8.

56 "Lamella-inspired shape variation," Digital Building Technologies, accessed January 25th, 2025, https://dbt.arch.ethz.ch/research-stream/lamella-inspired-shape-variation/.

57 Neil Leach, "Digital Morphogenesis," *Architectural Design* 79, no. 1 (2009), 34, *https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.806.*

Furthermore, in architecture, digital ornament allows for stylistic individuation without resorting to spectacle. By working at a smaller scale, it enables subtle formal differentiation that remains responsive to urban or natural contexts. In this way, it fosters a kind of contemporary contextualism – one that engages with history not through direct quotation, as in postmodern pastiche, but through symbolic, affective, and archetypal resonances embedded in formal language.

Conclusion

In *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), Owen Jones observed that new ornamental styles often emerge first in the so-called "minor" arts outside architecture, only to be later absorbed into architectural form and structure – summarised in his assertion that "architecture adopts ornament, does not create it."[58] This historical pattern suggests that fields such as clothing fashion, unburdened by architecture's technical and economic constraints, can serve as fertile testing grounds for ornamental innovation – opening new stylistic possibilities for architecture attuned to aesthetic sensibility, collective imagination, and ecological awareness.

The work of Iris van Herpen exemplifies how digital ornament can operate in this cross-disciplinary role, offering architectural design a repertoire of forms and techniques that combine symbolic richness, chromatic subtlety, and material refinement.

The classification of ornamental forms proposed here is grounded in the evolution and individuation of matter, understood not as a hierarchy but as an interconnected continuum. It also takes into account the varying degrees of information content and generative potential among different form types – recognising, for example, that certain less-individuated geometries are more easily produced through algorithmic means than highly particularised organic structures.

Digital ornament, in this perspective, becomes a forward-looking mode of expression that links deep historical traditions with emerging technologies, reconnecting the arts with the sciences, and linking ornament's rich cultural heritage with the most advanced tools of fabrication. By reactivating ornament's inherent potential for intricacy, symbolism, and material intelligence, architecture can engage more deeply with both the histories that shaped it and the futures it helps to imagine.

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58 Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (Day and Son, 1856), 155.

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Depth of the Surface

New Skin for the Old Ceremony

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Keywords
Venice Biennale; national identity; British Pavilion; Mark Wallinger; façade.

Abstract
This essay explores the complex interplay between art, architecture, fashion, and national identity at the Venice Biennale, using Mark Wallinger's *Façade* (2001) as a case study. As the world's only major recurring art exhibition structured around national (re)presentations, the Biennale offers a unique platform where national identity is both reinforced and interrogated. Wallinger's intervention - shrouding the British Pavilion in a life-size photographic replica of its own façade - exposes the constructed nature of power and its illusions of permanence and authority. Drawing on theories of fashion and architecture as symbolic coverings, the essay argues that *Façade* operates like a garment: concealing, revealing, and disrupting assumptions of authenticity and truth. Fashion and architecture are understood here not as static forms but as dynamic systems of meaning - palimpsests that embody cultural memory while enabling its transformation. In this light, the Biennale emerges not only as a global stage for cultural display, but also as a site of critical reflection and symbolic unmasking.

Fashion and architecture share a profound and intricate relationship, rooted in their roles as mediators between individuals and the world. Both disciplines shape how personal and collective identities are formed, expressed, and transformed over time. Far from being neutral, clothing and buildings act as both symbolic and material coverings - simultaneously concealing and revealing. They inscribe cultural codes and narratives onto the bodies we inhabit and the spaces we occupy, playing an active role in how identity is constructed and perceived.

Fashion is inherently anchored in the present, yet it continually engages with the past by reinterpreting and transforming inherited forms. Rather than erasing history, it builds upon it - layering new meanings onto existing structures. Architecture, when viewed not as static or timeless, but as active and temporal, operates in a similar way. Buildings become palimpsests - layered sites of memory, identity, and meaning - constantly rewritten through use, reinterpretation, and intervention.

This shared logic resists both the pursuit of the radically new and the idealisation of unchanging tradition. Instead, it promotes a sensibility that embraces fluidity, contradiction, and a critical engagement with history and culture. When art and architecture adopt fashion's transformative strategies - not as superficial decoration, but as tools for critical reflection - they open a philosophical space for negotiating change. In this context, fashion, art, and architecture become frameworks for understanding ourselves and our evolving relationship with the world. Identity and meaning are revealed not as fixed entities, but as dynamic processes in continual flux.

This essay explores the interplay between identity, fashion, and architecture through an indirect yet evocative lens: a site-specific intervention at the Venice Biennale, one of the world's most politically charged international art events. In this project, a historical building was temporarily wrapped in a symbolic new skin. Paradoxically, this act of covering revealed more than it concealed - disrupting established meanings and inviting reflection on truth, visibility, and the constructed nature of all belief systems.

The Venice Biennale embodies one of the most intricate relationships between art, architecture and national identity. It remains the world's only recurring contemporary art exhibition that upholds a model of national (re)presentations. This approach, inspired by the nineteenth century World Expositions, has been in place since the Biennale's inception in 1895 and was further solidified in the early twentieth century with the construction of permanent national pavilions within the Biennale's grounds. These structures function much like modern embassies, where the principle of extraterritoriality prevails. Although many consider the national pavilion model outdated, its continued existence not only

shapes the Biennale's distinctive identity but also paradoxically fosters some of its most radical and innovative counter-discourses.[1]

Since the 1970s, many artists have used the very architecture of the pavilions to interrogate notions of nationality, national representation, and the symbolism of power embedded in their design. In this microcosm of the world that is the *Giardini della Biennale*, pavilions have become both subjects and objects of invasive artistic interventions - temporary acts that reinterpret, challenge, and sometimes undermine the national ideologies they embody. Architecture critic Aaron Betsky compares these interventions to "an enigmatic and dangerous cut through the skin of stable society," arguing that the artists and architects behind them share "a subversive impulse to plant a bomb under existing social and economic structures as represented in building, creating the act rather than its consequences."[2] Inspired by Christo and Jeanne-Claude's large-scale wrappings and Gordon Matta-Clark's *anarchitecture*, these interventions increasingly take the form of parasitic additions, perforations, cutouts, walling-up, and full-scale coverings - disrupting, even if briefly, the ideological narratives inscribed in the architecture. According to Betsky, such artists often cultivate ambiguity in their work, whether by denying its political implications, framing it in purely formal terms, or presenting it as an expression of personal and intuitive impulses.

Art critic Solomon Brager acknowledges that "art cannot open borders, abolish apartheid, or end ethnonationalism and complicity with state violence," but he insists that art can and must "contribute to the building of a counternarrative, to the construction of a different path, a different place to turn toward."[3] Yet, in the context of the Venice Biennale, such critical projects remain the exception rather than the rule, as most participating countries favor works that reinforce, rather than challenge, state-sponsored narratives. As a result, artists may feel constrained by their home nations' political agendas, compelled to act as state representatives rather than independent creators. This dynamic limits the depth and complexity of artistic expression, reducing it to rigid, black-and-white ideological frameworks.

In 2001, artist Mark Wallinger created *Façade,* one of the most original, multilayered and memorable interventions on the architecture of a national pavilion, by hiding the entire front of the British Pavilion behind a life-size

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1 The national pavilion model—dividing art by nation—came under growing criticism from the 1950s onward, at a time when contemporary art was increasingly understood as supranational. As early as 1953, architects participating in the CIAM Summer School in Venice, led by F. Albini, I. Gardella, E. N. Rogers, G. Samonà, and G. Valle, proposed demolishing the national pavilions in the Giardini and replacing them with unified, modern exhibition spaces that reflected this new, transnational perspective. See Leonardo Zuccaro Marchi, *The Heart of the City. Legacy and Complexity of a Modern Design Idea* (Routledge, 2018), 121.

2 Aaron Betsky, *Violated perfection: Architecture and the Fragmentation of the Modern* (Rizzoli, 1990), 107.

3 Solomon Brager, "States of mind. Toward an alternative future for Jewish art," *Artforum*, August 15th, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20240404091335/https://www.artforum.com/columns/toward-an-alternative-future-for-jewish-art-251993/.

photograph of the building itself. In her introduction to the catalogue for Mark Wallinger's presentation at the British Pavilion, Andrea Rose, the pavilion's commissioner, outlines four key points that frame the cultural, architectural, and artistic context of the exhibition.[4]

Rose argues that few places intertwine art and national identity as closely as the Venice Biennale; that the national pavilions often present their countries through exaggerated and stereotypical imagery; that, despite its grand British aesthetic, the British Pavilion is not as authentically British as it seems; and that, while some view national pavilions as outdated or irrelevant, their continued presence defines the Biennale's unique character and has inspired some of its most significant exhibitions.

These four points serve as the foundation for the first part of this essay, providing a structure through which to explore the broader contextual dimensions of Wallinger's exhibition. The second part of this essay analyses *Façade*, Mark Wallinger's temporary intervention on the exterior of the British Pavilion, as a case study of how contemporary artists and architects challenge national identity and representation within the context of the Biennale.

Staging the Nation: Art, Identity, and the Venice Biennale

Andrea Rose's first assertion states, "There are few places on earth where art and national identity are as inextricably linked as within the Venice Biennale."[5] This statement raises three key aspects that require further exploration: the concept of national identity, the role of art in shaping and reflecting national identity within the broader process of nation-building, and the Venice Biennale's unique character in relation to the modern ideas of national identity and nation-building.

National identity is a modern cultural concept that connects an individual's sense of self (*Who am I?*) to their belonging to a nation. It reflects how people identify with their nation's history, traditions, values, symbols, beliefs, and sovereignty - often shaped through the experience of difference offered by interactions with *the other*.

Eric Hobsbawm argues that the modern concept of the nation - which contributed to the emergence of nation-states with fixed borders, centralised institutions, and populations identifying as unified national communities - is largely a product of the nineteenth century.[6] Although the concept of *nation* existed earlier, it typically referred to dynastic or cultural entities and did not imply political sovereignty. It was only in the 19th century that nationalism emerged as a coherent and widespread political ideology, fundamentally

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4 Andrea Rose, "Foreword," in *Mark Wallinger: British Pavilion, The Venice Biennale, 49th International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, 2001*, ed. Mark Wallinger and Ralph Rugoff (The British Council, 2001), 3.

5 Rose, "Foreword," 3.

6 Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

reshaping both political structures and collective identities. This transformation was driven by key historical forces: the French Revolution, which introduced the principles of popular sovereignty and citizenship; the spread of liberal and revolutionary ideals throughout Europe; and the effects of industrialisation, which demanded more centralised administration and mobilised mass populations. In response, both governments and nationalist movements promoted common languages, education systems, cultural symbols, and shared historical narratives as tools to cultivate national identity. These efforts laid the foundation for the modern nation-state and the widely accepted belief that nations and states should be politically congruent.

Historian Yuval Noah Harari describes nations as *imagined narratives* - shared stories that exist in collective belief rather than physical reality.[7] Like religions, money, and human rights, nations derive power from people's acceptance of them as real. Harari argues that nations are built on myths that create a common identity and enable large-scale cooperation. These narratives, reinforced through symbols (flags, anthems), institutions (governments, education systems), and rituals (national holidays, ceremonies), give citizens a sense of belonging and purpose. He emphasises that these stories are not inherently false but rather socially constructed realities that shape political and social structures. His perspective aligns with Benedict Anderson's concept of nations as *imagined communities*, where national identity unites people who may never personally meet.[8] Though nations are human inventions, they have very real-world impacts, shaping laws, borders, and global politics. However, as narratives, they are fluid and can be redefined or reshaped over time.

Nation-building is the process by which a nation-state develops and strengthens its identity, fostering unity and a shared sense of belonging among its citizens. This is often achieved through the promotion of national symbols, values, and cultural traditions. The aim is to create a cohesive national identity that transcends regional or ethnic differences, ensuring stability and instilling pride and loyalty. Cultural production plays a key role in this process by expressing and reinforcing national identity, values, and historical narratives. Visual arts and architecture help nation-states assert their uniqueness and unite citizens around common symbols and ideals. National monuments and public art reflect a country's heritage, achievements, and aspirations, strengthening collective memory and national pride. Additionally, art shapes how a nation presents itself globally, serving as a tool of cultural diplomacy and soft power. In this way, art not only preserves a nation's past but actively contributes to its ongoing identity formation and international influence.

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7 Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Vintage, 2014).

8 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983).

The Venice Biennale has often been called "the Olympics of art."[9] As modern nation-states sought to define and assert their identities, recurring international events that emerged in the late 19th century - such as the World Expositions (1851), the Venice Biennale (1895), and the modern Olympic Games (1896) - became ceremonial platforms for showcasing national achievements, values, and cultural pride. As the world's largest recurring international art exhibition of its kind, the Venice Biennale allows nation-states to present their artistic innovation, while the Olympic Games, as a global sports competition, celebrate athletic excellence and unity. These events serve as arenas of global engagement, where nation-states participate and compete in a form of international stagecraft - asserting their distinctiveness while contributing to a shared global culture. At the same time, they reinforce both national pride and international connections.

Today, the Venice Biennale remains the world's only international art and architecture exhibition that has preserved its original format based on national (re)presentations, with participating countries funding and organising their own exhibitions. This distinctive structure makes it a unique platform for cultural diplomacy, soft power, and nation-building through artistic expression.

Giardini della Biennale: Architecture as National Costume

British Pavilion's commissioner Andrea Rose's second key point asserts, "The pavilions, grouped together in an architectural theme park at the bottom end of Venice, proclaim their origins with an exaggerated air of national stereotyping."[10] Her observation highlights three important dimensions that warrant further exploration: the Biennale's location within the broader context of Venice, the uniqueness of its national pavilions, and the distinct characteristics of their architectural expression.

The main venue of the Venice Biennale is the Giardini della Biennale, located in the Sant'Antonio area of the Castello district, at the city's eastern edge. While now considered the "bottom end of Venice" due to its position relative to modern rail and road access, Sant'Antonio was historically the first part of the city visible to sea travelers entering the Basin of San Marco via the Lido-Vignole channel.

The area's transformation began in 1807, when Napoleon, having conquered the Republic of Venice after a thousand years of independence, sought to modernise the city as a key Adriatic port.[11] He commissioned Venetian neoclassical architect Giannantonio Selva to design a new public garden and

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9 While the phrase has been widely used, its exact origin in reference to the Venice Biennale remains unclear. Some of the earliest documented instances in English-language publications appear in two newspaper articles from November 1964: J. Carter Brown, "The Post Office Goes Abstract," *The Washington Post*, 87, no. 339 (Nov. 8, 1964): G6; Vivienne Kenrick, "Profile: Shojiro Ishibashi," *The Japan Times*, 68, no. 23658 (Nov. 24, 1964): 4.

10 Rose, "Foreword," 3.

11 For authoritative English-language histories of Venice, see Jonathan Keats, *La Serenissima: The Story of Venice* (Head of Zeus, 2023); John Julius Norwich, *A History of Venice* (Penguin Books, 2012); and Margaret Plant, *Venice, Fragile City: 1797–1997* (Yale University Press, 2002).



Figure 1. Aerial view of the Giardini della Biennale in 1911. In the middle right: the Exhibition Palace (Palazzo Pro Arte) flanked by the Swedish, Belgian, and Hungarian Pavilions. In the bottom right: the *square of imperial powers* at the hilltop of Sant'Antonio, with the British, French, and Bavarian Pavilions.

Cesare Tardivo / *Ministero dell'Aeronautica, Rilievo Topofotografico di Venezia*, 1911 (detail).

a grand avenue.[12] Selva covered the Rio di Castello canal to create a wide, Parisian-style boulevard leading to the Giardini Pubblici.

Selva's gardens featured a formal entrance plaza with monumental gates, followed by a route framing views of the lagoon and angling toward the Rio di San Giuseppe bridge. To make way for the gardens, much of historic Sant'Antonio was demolished, including several churches and monasteries. Only the Doric arch of the Lando Chapel, salvaged from the Church of Sant'Antonio di Castello and rebuilt in the gardens in 1822, survives as the only remaining trace of the original neighborhood.

The main section of the gardens was structured along two perpendicular axes: a longitudinal avenue extending from the Lando Arch to a small café atop the Motta di Sant'Antonio, Venice's only hill and the city's highest ground, and a transverse avenue connecting the waterfront to a coach house. While the overall layout of the gardens was largely neoclassical, Selva introduced a rare English-style garden at the hilltop, with winding paths, dense vegetation, and panoramic views over Sant'Elena and the Lido.[13]

After Venice was annexed to the newly unified Kingdom of Italy in 1866, it joined the wave of national exhibitions promoted as part of Italy's nation-building efforts. In 1887, Venice hosted the National Art Exhibition in a large temporary hall at the Giardini's waterfront, designed by Enrico Trevisanato. On this occasion, Selva's café on the hilltop was demolished and replaced by a larger cafeteria, also designed by Trevisanato.[14]

The success of the 1887 exhibition inspired the idea of a recurring international event. In 1895, the first Venice Biennale opened in a newly built exhibition palace on the site of the former coach house.[15] As international participation grew, national pavilions were added across the Giardini, gradually transforming

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12 For Giannantonio Selva's project for the Giardini Pubblici, see *Giandomenico Romanelli, Ottant'anni di architettura e allestimenti alla Biennale di Venezia* (La Biennale, 1976); Giandomenico Romanelli, "Per G.A. Selva urbanista: inediti sui giardini di Castello," *Arte Veneta* 26 (1972): 263–71; and Giandomenico Romanelli, "L'imperatore e l'architetto. Giannantonio Selva (1751–1819), architetto neoclassico veneziano. Una inedita rilettura," *YouTube* video, 1:19:44, December 2nd, 2019, https://youtu.be/jdZYMHUP0EY.

13 For detailed accounts of the landscaping of the Giardini Pubblici, see Tiziana Favaro and Francesco Trovò, *I giardini napoleonici di Castello a Venezia: Evoluzione storica e indirizzi* (Libreria Cluva Editrice, 2011); and Gino Damerini, *Giardini di Venezia: Un viaggio nel verde e nelle gemme artistiche della laguna* (Zanichelli, 1927).

14 For descriptions of the National Art Exhibition of 1887, see *Venezia e l'Esposizione Nazionale Artistica del 1887: Pubblicazione straordinaria della Illustrazione Italiana* (Fratelli Treves, 1887); Raffaello Fabris, "La Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti in Venezia," in *L'Ateneo Veneto*, XI, no.2 (1887): 125–45; and Camillo Boito, "La Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti in Venezia," in *Nuova Antologia di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, 12 (1887): 48–63.

15 For the history of the Venice Biennale, see Romolo Bazzoni, *60 anni della Biennale di Venezia* (Lombroso Editore, 1962); Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale, 1895–1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (New York Graphic Society, 1968); Adriano Donaggio, *Biennale di Venezia: Un secolo di storia* (Giunti Editore, 1998); Enzo Di Martino, *The History of the Venice Biennale, 1895–2005* (Papiro Arte, 2005); and Cecilia Alemani, *The Disquieted Muses: When La Biennale di Venezia Meets History* (La Biennale di Venezia, 2020).

the public park into a permanent exhibition site and establishing Venice as a global center for contemporary art.[16]

National identity was reflected not only in the artwork displayed at the Biennale by emerging nation-states but also in the interior design of their exhibition spaces and, later, drawing inspiration from the World Expositions, it was further expressed through the architecture of independent national pavilions. However, a fundamental distinction sets the national pavilions in Venice apart: while national pavilions at World Expositions are temporary structures, those at the Venice Biennale are permanent exhibition venues, serving as lasting symbols of each nation's artistic and cultural presence.

In 1907, the Belgian Pavilion became the first stand-alone national pavilion at the Biennale. Funded by the Kingdom of Belgium, it was designed to showcase King Leopold II's ambitions and colonial power on the world stage. Belgium's initiative quickly set a precedent. The most powerful and affluent nations soon followed, inaugurating their own national pavilions in the Giardini della Biennale: Hungary, Bavaria, and Britain in 1909, and France and Sweden in 1912. The Swedish, Belgian, and Hungarian pavilions were positioned alongside the central Exhibition Palace, while the French, British, and Bavarian pavilions were strategically grouped at the hilltop of Sant'Antonio, forming what became known as the *square of imperial powers* (Fig. 1).

Once a pavilion was built, it became the property and responsibility of the respective country, which also assumed all maintenance costs. Today, the Giardini della Biennale hosts 28 national pavilions, along with a City of Venice pavilion. The gated exhibition area continued to expand until the 1950s, eventually occupying nearly two-thirds of the original public gardens.[17] As a result, the name Giardini Pubblici no longer accurately describes the larger park in its current form. Instead, it is now commonly referred to as Giardini di Castello or Giardini Napoleonici, which are less politically charged names. The architecture of the national pavilions in the Giardini della Biennale serve as a rich research framework for exploring the semiotics of national identity representation and the interplay between built form and the experience of difference. Unlike the temporary pavilions at World Expositions, which reflect how nations wish to present themselves at a specific moment in time, the Venice Biennale's pavilions are permanent structures, subject to an ongoing process of reinterpretation and re-signification.

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16 For the architectural history of the Giardini's exhibition structures, see Marco Mulazzani, *Guide to the Pavilions of the Venice Biennale since 1887* (Electa, 2014); Giandomenico Romanelli, *Ottant'anni di architettura e allestimenti alla Biennale di Venezia* (La Biennale, 1976); Giandomenico Romanelli, "Le sedi della Biennale," in *Annuario 1976: Eventi del 1975* (ASAC, 1975); Diener & Diener, *Common Pavilions: The National Pavilions in the Giardini of the Venice Biennale in Essays and Photographs* (Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013); and Matteo Ballarin, *Padiglioni e spazi della Biennale di Venezia* (RG, 2015).

17 For the continuous expansion of the Giardini della Biennale, see Daniel Tudor Munteanu, Davide Tommaso Ferrando, *OPENGIARDINI* (Unfolding Pavilion, 2023), 2–17.

Initially, these transformations occurred through direct architectural interventions - such as redecorations, façade redesigns, and even partial or total reconstructions - mirroring the changes in the way each nation saw itself. As critic Joel Robinson reminds us, "after all, national identity is always under construction; and just like at the [World Expositions], the form of these ambassadorial edifices (each adorned with its flag) needs to match up with the most current image of the nation."[18]

However, once the pavilions were listed as historical monuments, any permanent alterations to their exterior became strictly prohibited. This has led to paradoxical situations, where some nations now occupy pavilions bearing the names of defunct states (e.g. Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia), while others find themselves represented by architectural styles that no longer align with their national identity (e.g. Germany's pavilion with its Nazi-era architecture, or the United States' pavilion with its Jeffersonian-style aesthetic).

Mark Wallinger aptly describes the Giardini della Biennale as "a sort of crazy golf course of different nations' aspirations from a hundred years ago."[19] His observation highlights the often caricatural nature of some of the national pavilions, particularly those whose architectural styles have become disconnected from their countries' contemporary self-image. As he puts it, "The German one looks like Albert Speer made it. The French one is neoclassical. The Hungarian one is Art Nouveau meets Hansel and Gretel. And the English one has pompous echoes of empire."[20]

The Coincidental Britishness of the British Pavilion

The third key point in Andrea Rose's introduction to the catalogue of Mark Wallinger's exhibition deals with the topic of the exhibition space itself: "The British Pavilion, often sought to be archetypally British, with its neo-Palladian façade" and a porch reminiscent "of some saga of Empire, is in fact not what it appears to be."[21] This statement highlights two important aspects for further examination: the ambiguity surrounding the perceived Britishness of the pavilion and its distinct architectural features.

When the British were given the opportunity to construct their own national pavilion in 1909, they declined, choosing instead to purchase and adapt the

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18 Joel Robinson, "Folkloric modernism: Venice's Giardini della Biennale and the Geopolitics of Architecture," *Open Arts Journal*, no. 2 (2013): 3, https://doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2013w04jr.

19 Martin Herbert, *Mark Wallinger* (Thames & Hudson, 2011), 134.

20 Herbert, *Mark Wallinger*, 134.

21 Rose, "Foreword," 3.

existing cafeteria on the hilltop of Sant'Antonio.[22] The modifications were minimal, leaving the original façade largely intact (Fig. 2). This makes the British Pavilion unique among those in the Biennale gardens - not only was it not purpose-built as an art gallery, but it is also the only structure older than the Biennale itself.

As mentioned earlier, the building was originally designed by Italian engineer Enrico Trevisanato for the National Art Exhibition of 1887, eight years before the first Venice Biennale of 1895. Trevisanato's cafeteria featured a symmetrical layout with a service area on the ground floor and a central hall on the first floor, flanked by two side halls and annex spaces. The main hall opened to the landscape through two grand porches: one at the front, accessible via a monumental staircase at the end of the Giardini's 300-meter-long avenue, and another at the back, offering a stunning view of Sant'Elena Island.

In 1909, British architect Edwin Alfred Rickards oversaw renovations, making only minor alterations. He added two small halls flanking the rear porch, which was enclosed and converted into a glazed loggia. In the front, he introduced side balconies in front of the annex spaces, bricked up two doors of the main hall, and enlarged the main entrance. An inscription reading *Gran Bretagna* was set above the front door, and, as with all pavilions in the Giardini, a flagpole was added for the ceremonial raising of the national flag during each Biennale's opening. These were the only modifications to the building's exterior.

Although Edwin Alfred Rickards is often credited as the architect of the British Pavilion, historical evidence shows that the real author is Venetian engineer Enrico Trevisanato.[23] Rickards made only insignificant changes during the 1909 conversion, leaving Trevisanato's structure largely intact. This misattribution reflects the enduring assumption - rooted in World Expositions traditions - that national pavilions must be designed by architects of the same nationality to express a distinct cultural identity. However, this idea does not hold true in the context of the Giardini della Biennale. Even in the early twentieth century, national authorship was inconsistent: while the Belgian, Hungarian, and Swedish pavilions were designed by architects from their respective countries, others

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22 For the architectural history of the British Pavilion, see Brooks Murray Architects, "Space and Magical Light in a Venetian Restoration," *The Architects' Journal*, July 6, 1995: 23–25; Sophie Bowness and Clive Phillpot, *Britain at the Venice Biennale, 1895–1995* (The British Council, 1995); Marco Mulazzani, *Guide to the Pavilions of the Venice Biennale since 1887* (Electa, 2014); Giandomenico Romanelli, *Ottant'anni di architettura e allestimenti alla Biennale di Venezia* (La Biennale, 1976); Diener & Diener, *Common Pavilions: The National Pavilions in the Giardini of the Venice Biennale in Essays and Photographs* (Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013); and Matteo Ballarin, *Padiglioni e spazi della Biennale di Venezia* (RG, 2015).

23 The authorship misattribution persists even in some authoritative accounts on the architecture of the Biennale's national pavilions, like: Marco Mulazzani, *Guide to the Pavilions of the Venice Biennale since 1887* (Electa, 2014), 52; Peter Cook, "On the Verandah," in Diener & Diener, *Common Pavilions: The National Pavilions in the Giardini of the Venice Biennale in Essays and Photographs* (Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013).

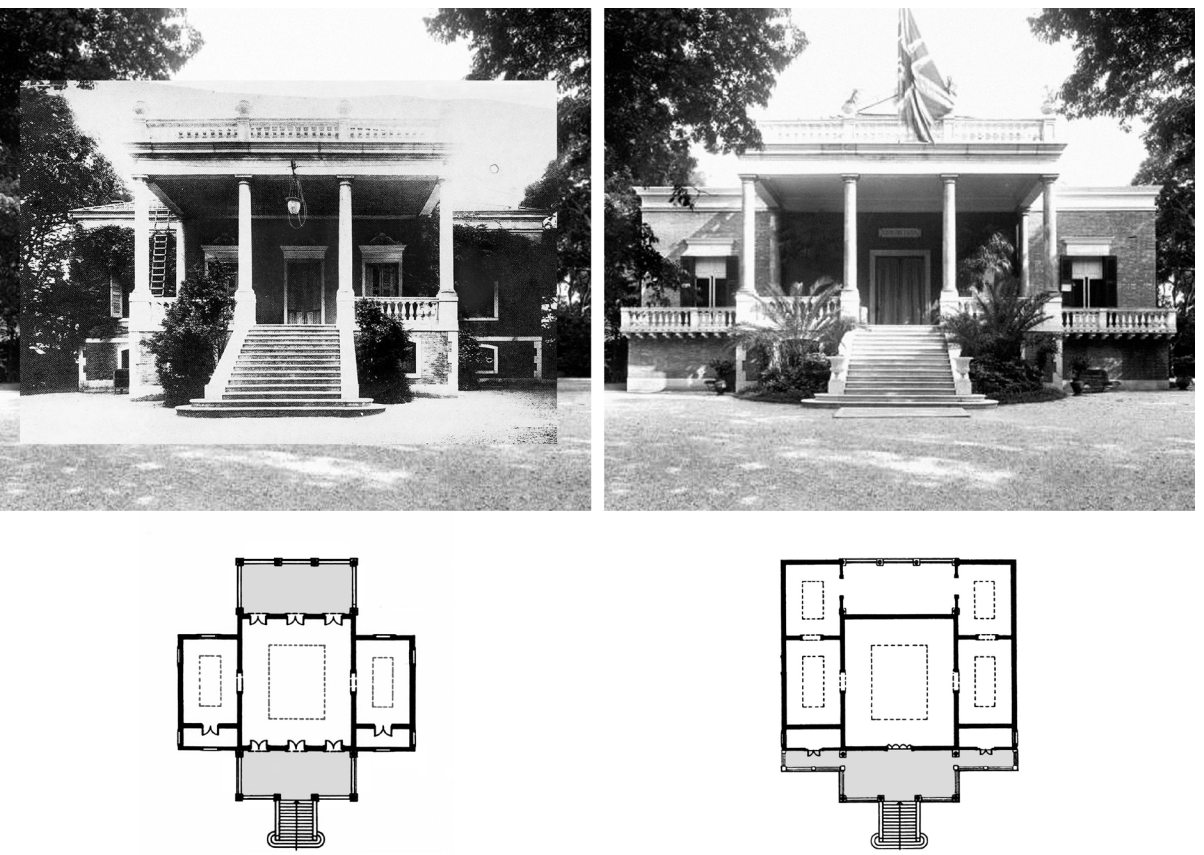


Figure 2. The façades and first floor plans of Enrico Trevisanato's Cafeteria (1887) and E.A. Rickards' British Pavilion (1909).

- such as the Bavarian, British, and French - were in fact designed by Italians.[24] Today, the pattern persists: of the 28 national pavilions in the Giardini, only about half - 15 - are by architects from the exhibiting nation.[25]

UK's pavilion, often seen as quintessentially British for its austere neo-Palladian façade, elevated *piano nobile*, exposed brickwork, and expansive porch with white columns reminiscent of Georgian architecture, is in fact "not what it appears to be," because these architectural features, which might suggest a deliberate expression of British identity, are purely coincidental. The fact that the building seems to evoke the mighty British Empire is thus not directly related to its architecture, but rather to its prominent location at the top of the only hill in Venice, and to its commanding, monumental, approach from the Giardini's lengthy longitudinal avenue.

The British Pavilion has remained largely unchanged since 1909, despite serving various purposes beyond showcasing British art. In 1920, it hosted the first-ever pavilion of the United States. In 1927, it featured an exhibition on rationalist domestic design, and in 1936, it housed the Biennale-organised exhibition *Artisti stranieri residenti in Italia* (Foreign Artists Residing in Italy). Most notably, during World War II, the Italian army took control of the pavilion in 1942, renaming it *Padiglione del Regio Esercito* (The Royal Army Pavilion). The original panel bearing the country's name was removed, and a large mural depicting St. George - the warrior saint and protector of soldiers - was added to the façade. From 1943 to 1945, the building was occupied by the Istituto Nazionale Luce, which had been relocated from Rome to Venice due to the war.

Britain resumed exhibitions at the Biennale only after the war. In 1950, a larger marble plaque inscribed *Gran Bretagna* was installed above the main entrance - the last permanent alteration to the pavilion's façade. In 1995, to mark the Biennale's centenary, Brooks Murray Architects carried out a restoration, upgrading the lower-floor facilities, adding an internal staircase, and constructing a small metal terrace in the back.

Following the 2024 removal of the two large yew trees - which had long flanked the pavilion's monumental stair and partially obscured its façade - the front of the British Pavilion now appears as it did 116 years ago. Yet while the building itself remains virtually unchanged, the United Kingdom today is no longer the vast colonial empire it once was.

Giardini as Battleground: National Monuments on Trial

The fourth, and final, key point in Andrea Rose's introduction states, "Though the idea of exhibiting art in national pavilions is considered quaint by some,

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24 The architects of the first national pavilions were: Léon Sneyers (Belgian Pavilion, 1907), Géza Maróti (Hungarian Pavilion, 1909), Ferdinand Boberg (Swedish Pavilion, 1912); respectively, the Italian architects Daniele Donghi (Bavarian Pavilion, 1909), Enrico Trevisanato (British Pavilion, 1887), and Fausto Finzi (French Pavilion, 1912).

25 Two national pavilions were co-designed by Italian architects together with architects from the exhibiting nations: the Greek Pavilion (Brenno del Giudice and Y. [?] Papandreou, 1934) and the Korean Pavilion (Franco Mancuso and Seok Chul Kim, 1995).

even irrelevant, the survival of these curious monuments to other times and other places not only gives the Venice Biennale its particular distinction, but has acted as a spur to some of its most memorable exhibitions."[26]

Indeed, the tension between, on the one hand, the Biennale's unique feature of permanent national pavilions - protected as historical monuments and therefore unable to be permanently altered - and, on the other hand, the very questioning of the concept of national representation in art and architecture, have led to some of the most striking and provocative interventions - temporary and reversible but no less impactful - on the symbolic meanings embedded in the architecture of the pavilions.[27]

As early as the 1970s, artists and architects began using the Venice Biennale's national pavilions not just as exhibition spaces but as critical subjects themselves - challenging their architectural symbolism and the national ideologies they represent.

In 1972, Hans Hollein cut through the side and rear walls of the Austrian Pavilion, extending his exhibition into the surrounding outdoor space as a deliberate attempt to escape the building's symbolically charged confines. In 1978, Nacho Criado and Juan Navarro Baldeweg radically altered the spatial experience of the Spanish Pavilion, forcing visitors to descend into a square hole in the ground - navigated by unsteady wooden ladders - before entering the pavilion. This physical descent and re-ascent metaphorically illustrated Spain's recent emergence from the Franco dictatorship.

In 1982, Tadashi Kawamata enveloped the Japanese Pavilion in an intricate timber lattice, transforming its exterior into a woven sculptural intervention that simultaneously concealed and recontextualised the building. In 1986, Daniel Buren cut, trimmed, carved, and engraved the French Pavilion, critiquing its rigid symmetrical form. Four years later, in 1990, Jean Nouvel physically sliced into the French building to challenge its monumental, neoclassical design and the imperial associations embedded in its architecture. In 1993, Hans Haacke shattered the marble floor of the German Pavilion, directly confronting its Nazi-era architecture, while Ilya Kabakov turned the Russian Pavilion into a simulated construction site, reflecting the post-Soviet state's collapse.

The Biennale's centenary in 1995 marked an escalation of these architectural critiques. The artist Takis symbolically nullified the Greek Pavilion by draping it with a banner proclaiming artists as citizens of the world who reject the legitimacy of national borders. That same year, Christian Boltanski began what has since become a recurring tradition: large-scale, site-specific interventions

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26 Rose, "Foreword," 3.

27 The history of these temporary and reversible interventions on various national pavilions is part of the original research I have conducted for my ongoing PhD thesis. Primary sources include documents from the Biennale's ASAC Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (series *Lavori e gestione delle sedi:* b. 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 10, 16; *Paesi*: b. 1–33; *Scatole nere. Padiglioni*: b. 1–21), photographs from the ASACdati Fototeca, as well as catalogues of national participations in both the Art and Architecture Biennales, consulted at the ASAC Library.

on the Italian Pavilion's fascist-era façade, challenging its imposing and authoritarian image. Meanwhile, Coop Himmelb(l)au and Eva Schlegel added an asymmetrical wing and a new glass front to the Austrian Pavilion, and Jae-Eun Choi wrapped the Japanese Pavilion in a colorful skin made of woven plastic pipes.

In 1996, Gábor Bachman overlaid the Hungarian Pavilion with a dramatic, deconstructivist structure, and Claude Parent concealed the French Pavilion behind his expansive *Fractured Monolith* sculpture. These interventions continued into the late 1990s: in 1999, Ann Hamilton obscured the U.S. Pavilion with a steel-and-glass grid that distorted the building's view due to the irregularity of the glass panes. A year later, in 2000, Massimiliano Fuksas covered the Italian Pavilion with a camouflage-like mesh printed with the slogan "Less Aesthetics, More Ethics."

These interventions - whether by artists or architects - represent a lineage of critical, site-specific actions that began as occasional updates to the frozen national symbolism projected by the pavilions, but have since become a regular feature of the Biennale. Today, pavilion architecture is routinely altered, masked, extended, or deconstructed: façades are concealed, massive sculptures, paintings, or screens engulf buildings, provisional openings are cut into historic structures, and rooftops sprout platforms and additions. While some of these gestures may serve just as marketing tools - designed to capture attention in the increasingly competitive Biennale arena - their vast majority function as deliberate critiques of the static, national narratives embodied in the pavilions themselves.

True to a certain cultural conservatism, the British Pavilion was slow to adopt this trend. It wasn't until 2001 that it saw its first major critical intervention: Mark Wallinger's *Façade,* a provocative work that questioned both the illusion of national identity and the performative surface of architectural form.

National Façades: Deception and Double Meanings

Up to this point, we have explored how the Venice Biennale uniquely intertwines art and national identity through its permanent national pavilions and lasting national representations, which, though sometimes considered outdated or irrelevant, remain integral to its character and continue to inspire its most significant exhibitions.

Next, let's examine Mark Wallinger's temporary intervention *Façade,* as a case study in how contemporary artists and architects challenge identity and nationalism within the Biennale. This investigation begins with an exploration of the theoretical foundations of Wallinger's work, proceeds with an analysis of his exhibition in the British Pavilion, and concludes with an interpretation of the meaning of *Façade* and an assessment of its broader significance.

British artist Mark Wallinger is often described as a sharp satirist of modern Britishness, critiquing its politics, historical myths, cultural conventions, and entrenched class system. His work explores how individual consciousness is

shaped by, and contributes to, a broader collective awareness, highlighting the fragmented and ever-evolving nature of our understanding of the world. Central to Wallinger's art is the concept of the *doppelgänger*, reflected in his recurring motifs of language and the mirror. Wordplay is integral to his approach, as meanings shift through reversals, mirrored texts, and signs that both signify themselves and point beyond. Just as puns manipulate language, illusions distort visual perception, blending sense and nonsense and turning reality inside out. Through mirror images, inversions, pairings, doublings, and *trompe-l'œil* effects, Wallinger probes the ambiguities of perception, the construction of identity, and the tenuous boundaries between belief and faith, knowledge and experience, fact and fiction, reality and illusion. Wallinger's art thrives on counterpoint, driven by an insistent search for the *other* of something - the verso, the secondary meaning, the other side of the border, the *doppelgänger*.

A *doppelgänger*, literally meaning double-walker, is a ghostly double of a living person, and encountering one is a profoundly uncanny experience. Sigmund Freud described the uncanny as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar, but is suddenly alien."[28] The *doppelgänger* embodies this idea in its most disturbing form, as it makes the familiar - one's own self - strangely unfamiliar. Freud noted that someone who encounters their double may identify himself with another, resulting in uncertainty about their own true identity. Cultural theorist Naomi Klein expands on this existential unease, writing that "confrontations with our *doppelgängers* inevitably raise existentially destabilising questions. Am I who I think I am, or am I who others perceive me to be? And if enough others start seeing someone else as me, who am I, then?"[29] The idea that two strangers could be indistinguishable exposes the fragile nature of identity, revealing how the self is vulnerable to external forces beyond its control. Klein also explores the paradoxical and theological dimensions of the *doppelgänger*, which represents both "our highest aspiration - the eternal soul, [the] being that supposedly outlives the body" - and "our most repressed, depraved, and rejected parts of ourselves that we cannot bear to see - the evil twin, the shadow self, the anti-self, the Hyde to our Jekyll."[30] This duality, she argues, extends beyond individuals to entire nations and cultures, which can also have their own *doppelgängers* - ghostly, monstrous reflections of their collective identities.

In his solo exhibition at the British Pavilion, Mark Wallinger presented a carefully curated ensemble of four new and four older works, seamlessly integrated into the pavilion's spaces and conceptually unified to create the impression of a

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28 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny (Das Unheimliche)* (Penguin Classics, 2003), 123.

29 Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), 30.

30 Klein, *Doppelganger*, 13.

single, site-specific transmedia installation.[31] The result was a metaphorical "hall of mirrors of false entrances and exits, where identities are doubled, reversed, inverted, and denatured."[32] Ralph Rugoff highlighted the exhibition's striking coherence, observing that each of the eight artworks is:

> a fact and a fiction. It is of this world and yet seemingly exists apart from it. It is at once recognisable and unfamiliar, ordinary and extraordinary... [And] it may evince an uncanny temporality, veering back and forth between the historical and the mythological, the present and the past, beginnings and endings...[33]

More than just a collection of individual pieces, the exhibition functioned as a unified whole, a single immersive work of art that interrogated the complex interplay between seeing, belief, and meaning. The site-specific work *Façade* (2001) served as an introductory frame to the exhibition, concealing the British Pavilion behind a massive billboard featuring a life-size color photograph of the building itself. Printed on vinyl-coated fabric and mounted on scaffolding set flush to the pavilion's front porch, this illusionary façade blurred the line between reality and representation. To enter, visitors had to ascend the pavilion's monumental stairs and step through a doorway cut into the photographic replica, literally passing through an image of the very structure they were about to enter. Another one of Wallinger's works placed outside the pavilion, hanging from the flagpole, was *Oxymoron* (1996), a flag that replaced the traditional red and blue of the British Union Jack with the complementary green and orange of the Irish tricolor.

Inside the pavilion, the central hall showcased *Ecce Homo* (1999), a life-size cast of a standing man with closed eyes, tied hands, and a shaved head crowned with golden barbed-wire thorns - an image of Christ as a political prisoner (Fig. 6). Directly behind it, in the glazed loggia, *Life Class* (2001) displayed twelve painter's donkey easels, each bearing drawings of *Ecce Homo*, as if unseen artists had the ability to see through the wall to the life model beyond. Flanking the central gallery were two video projections. *Threshold to the Kingdom* (2000)

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31 I did not personally see Mark Wallinger's 2001 exhibition at the Venice Biennale. My reconstitution is based mainly on primary sources, including John Riddy's photographic documentation from the British Council Archive and the official exhibition catalogue: Mark Wallinger and Ralph Rugoff, *Mark Wallinger: British Pavilion, the Venice Biennale, 49th International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, 2001* (The British Council, 2001). Secondary sources include interviews with the artist, such as Heinz-Norbert Jocks, "The Exhibition Inside the Head," *Kunstforum* 156 (2001): 318–29; Sandy Nairne, *Art Now: Interviews with Modern Artists* (Continuum, 2002), 79; and REcreativeUK, "An Artist's Experience: Mark Wallinger at the Venice Biennale," *YouTube* video, 8:28, October 13, 2017, *https://youtu.be/r3zKy4aRilg*. I have studied the individual works either in person or through reproductions in the artist's monographs: Lewis Biggs, Ian Hunt, and David Burrows, *Mark Wallinger: Credo* (Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000); and Martin Herbert, *Mark Wallinger* (Thames & Hudson, 2011). The video work *Threshold to the Kingdom* is also available online: Heads Above the Cloud, "Mark Wallinger – Threshold to the Kingdom," *Vimeo* video, 11:13, April 2nd, 2020, *https://vimeo.com/403313134*.

32 Ralph Rugoff, "Jesus is an Oxymoron," in *Mark Wallinger: British Pavilion, The Venice Biennale, 49th International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, 2001*, ed. Mark Wallinger and Ralph Rugoff (The British Council, 2001), 14.

33 Rugoff, "Jesus is an Oxymoron," 14.

portrayed a slow-motion procession of travelers emerging from a London airport's passport control, crossing into the United Kingdom. The dramatically slowed movements and the ethereal soundtrack of Allegri's *Miserere* detached them from everyday time and space, evoking the vision of souls arriving at the gates of Heaven. In *Angel* (1997), reversed footage showed the artist portraying a blind man walking backward through a metro station while appearing to move forward, reciting the opening verses of the Gospel of John ("In the beginning was the Word...") in reverse, making his speech sound eerie and unintelligible. The two smaller galleries at the back of the pavilion each housed a new work. *Time and Relative Dimensions in Space (TARDIS)* (2001) reimagined the iconic police box from the TV series *Doctor Who* as a mirrored structure with outlined doors but no point of access, appearing to vanish when viewed from a distance. *Ghost* (2001), a lightbox, presented a negative photographic image of George Stubbs' hyper-realistic equine portrait *Whistlejacket*, subtly altered with the addition of a horn on the horse's brow. Reproduced at its original scale, the work mimicked an X-ray, as if revealing the ghostly presence of a mythical unicorn hidden beneath its surface.

All eight works in Wallinger's exhibition explored the interplay of double meanings - where the *kingdom* is both celestial and earthly, *transport* is both physical and spiritual, the *threshold* represents both connection and division, and *reality oscillates* between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Drawing on British state symbols as well as British pop and high culture, the exhibition addressed the disorienting uncertainties of perception and the illusions and disillusionments inherent in all belief systems. Wallinger's main argument seems to be the fact that "all belief structures - whether political, cultural or religious - are essentially theological in nature, [because] all such systems require the acceptance of fundamental assumptions and conceptual props as a matter of faith."[34]

Wallinger's fascination with *doppelgängers*, double meanings, and mirror images is epitomised in his deceptive installation *Façade*. The term "façade" carries two meanings: "the principal front of a building that faces onto a street or open area," as well as a "misleading outward appearance of someone or something."[35]

While preparing for his exhibition in Venice, Wallinger asked his photographer friend John Riddy to take a frontal photograph of the British Pavilion (Fig. 3), which he then enlarged to life-size and used to cover the pavilion's exterior (Fig. 4 and 5).[36] The resulting optical illusion made the building appear unchanged from a distance, only for visitors to realize, as they approached, that what they saw was a screen replicating the pavilion's own image. This disorienting *trompe-l'œil* effect was achieved using a technique common in Venice, where photographic billboards conceal renovation work, preserving the city's

34 Rugoff, "Jesus is an Oxymoron," 9.

35 *Oxford Dictionary of English,* 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), 624.

36 John Riddy was also the official photographer for Mark Wallinger's exhibition in the British Pavilion.



Figure 3. The British Pavilion in Spring 2001.



Figure 4. Frontal view of the British Pavilion during Mark Wallinger's exhibition. *Façade* (2001), installation, scanachrome print on vinyl, life size. *Oxymoron* (1996), flag.



Figure 5. Side view of the British Pavilion during Mark Wallinger's exhibition. *Façade* (2001). *Oxymoron* (1996).

picturesque appearance while hiding the mess of construction. However, the British Pavilion was not under renovation - *Façade* served no other purpose than to mirror the building it covered. This "uncanny redundancy" challenges our trust in photography as a "transparent window, offering a one-to-one correspondence with the real world."[37] Wallinger's deadpan *Façade* not only interrogates the ambiguities of appearances but also conjures a fantasy of reconstructing the familiar. It signals to visitors that they are stepping into a space of transformation - not a site of physical construction, but one where perception itself is dismantled and rebuilt. Wallinger's exhibition explores these very ideas, probing the fluidity of identity and the elaborate rituals through which we seek belonging, ultimately revealing the illusions that underpin both faith and identity. *Façade* also satirizes the pomp and the ceremonial spectacle of state symbolism, drawing attention to how the pavilion's architecture echoes an imperial past with a lingering influence on British national identity. Positioned between the French and German pavilions, the British Pavilion - like those of these two former empires - commands the highest ground in the Giardini, serving as a spatial reminder of their historical dominance. *Façade* exposes "the crudity of such imperial one-upmanship and [undermines] state-sponsored authority by presenting the viewer with a deceitful image of the British Pavilion's frontage. What looked domineeringly majestic at first sight" proves to be, in actual fact, "nothing more than a photo-mechanical illusion, kept in place by an ugly, intransigent scaffold."[38] The illusion of perfection created by the *trompe-l'œil* is intentionally broken by the visible seams of the vinyl billboard and its rough underlying structure, exposing the artifice behind the false façade. In doing so, the work alludes to the way many of us sometimes perceive the world around us as a stage set, stripped of reality. Rachel Wells observes that Wallinger implies that "behind the façade is merely another façade," with what is hidden being:

> just another identical deceptive front. Yet even though the hidden exists as such because of its double, this potentially endless mirroring nevertheless exposes a condition of hiding relevant to Wallinger's affront to the construction of British identity at the Biennale. By exposing the hidden nature of the building behind the photograph, *Façade* undermines a sense of certainty about how much more is concealed.[39]

Architectural Power Plays: Authority and Subversion

In his article "Architecture," the first entry in the incomplete *Dictionnaire Critique* (Critical Dictionary), Georges Bataille highlights architecture's dual capacity to exert both literal power - by ordering and restricting behavior - and metaphorical power - by symbolising authority for those who move within its presence. He argues that architecture is "the expression of the very being of societies, in the same way that human physiognomy is the expression of the

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37 Rugoff, "Jesus is an Oxymoron," 8.

38 Paul Bonaventura, "Mark Wallinger: State Britain," *Parkett*, no. 79 (2007) 9.

39 Rachel Wells, *Scale in Contemporary Sculpture: Enlargement, Miniaturisation and the Life-Size* (Routledge, 2013), 111.

being of individuals."[40] However, he clarifies that this comparison applies only to the *ideal being* of a society - the entity that governs and imposes order. In this sense, only the physiognomy of Power can truly be embodied in architectural form. Bataille elaborates:

> Thus, the great monuments are raised up like dams, pitting the logic of majesty and authority against all the shady elements: it is in the form of cathedrals and palaces that Church and State speak and impose silence on the masses. It is obvious, actually, that monuments inspire socially acceptable behaviour, and often a very real fear.[41]

For Bataille, architecture is inseparable from Power - and as a result, it can never be innocent. Mark Wallinger's approach aligns with Bataille's view not only in his recognition of the British Pavilion as a monument to state power - "not the sort of space that one can pretend is a neutral, inert box for showing discrete artworks" - but also in his understanding of the physiognomy of power as embodied in architectural form.[42] When asked about the role of artists in radical politics, Wallinger stated, "the most an artist can do is unpack the rhetoric of power, really."[43] After passing through the entrance cut into the photographic billboard and stepping onto the porch behind it, visitors to the British Pavilion entered a liminal space where they could simultaneously view the pavilion's original façade and its faded, reversed mirror image, visible through the translucent vinyl screen suspended on makeshift scaffolding (Fig. 7). By flattening and exposing the artificiality of power's deceptive appearance, Wallinger revealed its seams and disrupted its illusion of authority.

The Venice Biennale's national pavilion model continues to serve as both a site of celebration and critique of national identity. Through interventions like Wallinger's *Façade*, artists and architects challenge the foundational ideologies embedded in these architectural structures, exposing the artifice of national representation. While the Biennale remains a platform for state-sponsored displays, it also paradoxically nurtures some of the most innovative and subversive artistic counter-discourses. Wallinger's work, in particular, underscores how art can unsettle entrenched narratives and invite a deeper questioning of identity, power, and the very systems that shape our perception of both the personal and the political.

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40 Georges Bataille, "Architecture," *Documents*, no. 2 (1929): 117. English translation from: Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture. A Reader in Cultural Theory* (Routledge, 1997), 21.

41 Bataille, "Architecture," 117.

42 Sandy Nairne, *Art Now: Interviews with Modern Artists* (Continuum, 2002), 79.

43 Yves Alain-Bois, Guy Brett, Margaret Iversen and Julian Stallabrass, "An Interview with Mark Wallinger," *October*, no. 123 (2008), 199.

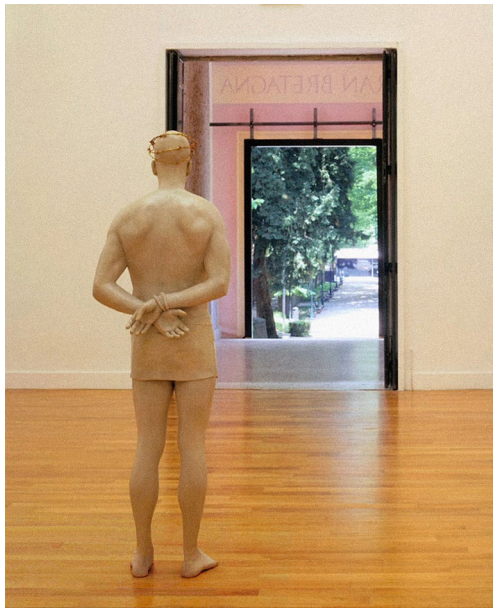


Figure 6. View of Mark Wallinger's exhibition, looking from the central hall of the British Pavilion towards the long avenue of the Giardini. *Ecce Homo* (1999), white marbleized resin, gold-painted barbed wire, life size. *Façade* (2001).



Figure. 7. View of Mark Wallinger's intervention, looking from the porch of the British Pavilion towards the long avenue of the Giardini. *Façade* (2001).

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Fig. 1: Musei Civici Veneziani, Cesare Tardivo / Ministero dell'Aeronautica, Rilievo Topofotografico di Venezia, 1911 (detail).

Fig. 2: Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia L'Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC), Musei Civici Veneziani, "Collage by the author. Photographs by Tomasso Filippi.

Fig. 3-7: British Council, photograph by John Riddy.

The Truth of Appearance
The Value of Ornament in [Fashionable] Hypostases of the Façade

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Keywords
representation; expression; ornament; shell architecture; garment; Leon Battista Alberti; Gottfried Semper

Abstract
The present article crafts an image of the idea of the façade as a truthful appearance based on the distinction between architectural "clothing" and load-bearing structure, to become an independent expression. As it unfolds, the façade embodies the truth of representation, as opposed to the structural truth, by tackling the theme of the façade within the Renaissance time frame and by tracing a line of continuity towards the contemporary approach to the matter. The limits of the research are set beginning with the notion of the word *façade* and leading to an inquiry into the *face* of the building: it must be built in an urban setting, subjected to the pressures of the public realm, ultimately addressing the public eye. Engaging with the topic of the façade necessitates confronting the link between ornament and structure, as they are interdependent and together render the building's appearance and representation.

Introduction

The following paper is based on theoretical and critical analysis using hermeneutics and phenomenology as its interpretive framework, and it aims to render the façade as the face of an urban building, which also showcases intent in its design, belongs to Western architectural culture, and its beginning can be traced back to the Renaissance period. Beginning with an etymological analysis of the word façade, the opening section of the article sets the limits of the study by evoking a definition. The notion of the façade is conceptually tied to physiognomy, marking the "public face" of architecture within the urban realm. This study adopts a precise definition of the façade as the building's surface oriented towards the city and thereby distinguishing it from private sides or rear. The article draws on contemporary scholarship, notably Antonello Boschi, to frame its typological and urban dimensions. While classical Greek temples, as autonomous objects in the landscape, are excluded from this definition, the motif of the temple is present in the expression of Renaissance façades by adopting the Roman triumphal arches. The triumphal arches are recognised, following Alessandra Capuano's perspective, as "true façades" in their two-dimensional representational quality. John Summerson's interpretation of the Colosseum further emphasises the ornamental, non-structural role of colonnades, positioning them as symbolic evocations of temple architecture rather than functional elements. The theme of the ornament, and in particular, the theme of the column as the main ornament, holds an independent section in the following article, as an emphasis on appearance and aesthetic attributes of the façade.

The Renaissance marked a decisive transformation, revealing an interest in the façade as a visual expression of architecture. In order to claim this, the study proposes a historical reading on the topic of the façade in the Renaissance, exposing two particularly relevant examples for the cause: Alberti's façade for Tempio Malatestiano at Rimini and Palladio's façade proposal for the façade of San Pietro in Bologna. The triumphal arch motif redefined the Gothic church façade of Tempio Malatestiano and initiated the phenomenon of façadism: the treatment of the façade as an autonomous, representational entity with symbolic precedence over other elevations. This period foregrounded ornament as a vehicle of beauty and civic decorum, with Alberti advocating the embellishment of the public face of the building to gain a representational value.

Intertwined in the theme of the façade is the topic of the ornament, focusing on the idea of the column as the main ornament of the façade. This section tackles the theme of the ornament and highlights its role in the composition of the façade by exploring contemporary views and architectural expressions of the column as ornament. In this section, we examine two notable examples of contemporary architecture, relevant for the theme of the column: the brick column of Fayland House, Chilterns, Buckinghamshire, designed by David Chipperfield and the concrete column of the Baloise office tower, located in Basel and designed by Valerio Olgiati.

Following the theme of the ornament, the closing chapter is dedicated to the shell attribute of the façade and examines the theory of the cladding principle on the appearance of the façade. While modernism sought beauty in the exposed skeleton, reducing the façade to "naked structure," both historical and contemporary practice demonstrate the enduring significance of appearance. Quatremère de Quincy already argued that ornament is inseparable from architecture, rooted in its execution and located at the junction of structural elements. Ornament, whether sculpted, moulded, or applied, has always served to mediate between structure and representation, projecting an image of perfection, regardless of material authenticity.

This tension resurfaces in David Chipperfield's Fayland House, where the column becomes a shell-like ornament, recalling Renaissance façades in which brick structures were clothed in marble, or nineteenth century terracotta embellishments. Such practices resonate with Gottfried Semper's "Bekleidungstheorie," which traced the origins of the façade to woven enclosures, later materialised in stone and brick, but always retaining their symbolic patterns. Similarly, Botticher's distinction between "Kernform" (core form) and "Kunstform" (art form) underscores the dialectic between load-bearing structure and representational cladding.

The façade thus emerges not as deception but as a truthful mode of representation, where structure and ornament intertwine in ways often perceptible only to the trained eye. As Vesely suggests, architectural meaning relies on a "truth of representation" rather than strict material honesty, requiring a certain departure from functional determinism in order to engage with cultural and symbolic dimensions.

Limits

The English word "façade" has its roots in the French "façade," which in turn comes from the Italian "facciata," from "facia" meaning "face," but also "appearance,"[1] ultimately from post-classical Latin "facia." The face (as in physiognomy, but also if we refer to the face of the building) is shown to the public, meaning it is a "show side" facing the public realm of the city, usually the street or the piazza. Considering this analogy between physiognomy and façade as the face of the building, in the following study, we will exclusively address "the façade" as the part of the building oriented towards the public realm and therefore assume the back and the sides as belonging to the private, intimate space. In defining the limits of the research on the façade, it was fundamental to use the definition of the façade as a criterion. We focused on contemporary research on the topic of the façade, such as Antonello Boschi's cited book and we took in consideration two essential elements in understanding its meaning: the first one is "typological in nature and it indicates that we are talking about a building; the second belongs to urbanism, and it

1 Robert Krier, *Elements of architecture* (AD Publications London, 1983), 54.

indicates that is part of an overall urban vision."[2] Those may seem trivial terms, but by accepting these constraints, we can exclude as relevant examples for the topic of the façade entire categories, such as the temples of Greek antiquity, because it would be a delicate matter to address them in terms of façade, as previously stated. In the Greek antiquity, the temples were autonomous objects facing the vast landscape, isolated from the urban fabric. Although we will not associate the notion of the façade with the classical Greek temple, it would be more appropriate to reference the Greek temple as the appearance of classical expression, being the primary source for the classical language of architecture, including the notion of ornament, such as the column.

In the cited book, the author Alessandra Capuano asserts that the triumphal arches of Roman antiquity "are the only works of Roman Architecture having a façade; in fact, since they can be seen as two-dimensional elements, they are themselves façades."[3] In addition to this statement, we would mention John Summerson's analysis of the Colosseum, emphasizing on the colonnades as having no structural contribution, "they are representations of temple architecture carved, as it were, in relief on a building which is not a temple, which is multi-storied and is built as a system of arches and vaults." The colonnade has the value of an ornament.[4] While these aspects of the temple as a triumphal arch-motif used on the colosseum show intent in expressing an appearance and also by being considered as a building and part of the urban vision of ancient Rome, the Colosseum would not have façades as it doesn't have an orientation towards a particular street, it is oval-shaped and it demands its autonomy as a consequence of its form. But the triumphal arch, the *frons scaenae*, received much importance in the Renaissance as motifs, first introduced by Leon Battista Alberti in church architecture, first at Rimini, when he designed the façade of Tempio Malatestiano, over an existing and unfinished Gothic façade. The Tempio Malatestiano provides a compelling example, serving as a precursor to future architectural trends and contributing to the development of the "façade phenomenon" or "façadism," which would define Renaissance architecture. The Renaissance hosts the rapid influence of the façade as an autonomous entity "that has a life of its own."[5] Façadism reveals a tendency towards marking a visual hierarchy between the elevations of the building in a way that the ceremonial character, or the representation seen in the frontispiece (main façade) prevails over the other façades, becoming *the façade*.[6] Behind this pursuit of an intentional façade lies a much more refined

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2 Antonello Boschi, *Between the building and the street. A phenomenology of the façade* (Quodlibet Studio, 2023), 100.

3 Alessandra Capuano, *Iconologia della facciata nell'architettura italiana: la ricerca teorico-compositiva dal trattato di Vitruvio alla manualistica razionale* (Gangemi Editore, 1995), 13.

4 John Summerson, *The classical language of architecture* (Thames and Hudson, 1991), 21.

5 Boschi, *Between the building and the street,* 130.

6 Pierre Merlin and Françoise Choay, *Dictionnaire de L'urbanisme, de L'aménagement, du Logement et de l'environnement.* 8e édition (Paris: PUF, anul), 341.

preoccupation with beauty in the exterior. As Alberti substantiates the idea of decoration (ornamentation) that is "preferable to make the parts particularly public or are intended principally to welcome guests, such as the façade, vestibule, and so on, as handsome as possible,"[7] it only highlights a grown value on ornament as an aesthetic expression and increased the presence of decoration of the public urban sphere to please the eye. The understanding of the exterior leads us to a truthful correspondence between exterior and interior, seen in Blondel's work: while the "exterior decoration has to have a close relationship with the interior, […] the façade has the role of expressing the dignity of the person for which it exists."[8]

Hypostases of the Façade in the Renaissance

The phenomenology of the façade as an autonomous identity in terms of architectural visual expression has its connection to the growing interest in classical Roman antiquity and its interpretation developed in the Renaissance. The theoretical component of the interpretation of classical Roman antiquity was laid down by Leon Battista Alberti, following Vitruvius as his (only) classical architectural theory source.

The abandonment of the Gothic design method happened gradually, favouring the design principles laid down by Alberti. In some cases, the two systems coexist due to a number of reasons, such as cultural and urban identity, tradition, or the desire for comforting continuity. Renaissance patrons held architectural contests for redesigning the façades (the western façade) of the Gothic churches or cathedrals to experience and promote the new "fashionable" Renaissance style, which gained momentum by emphasising the use of decorum, proportion and composition, developing a taste for classical beauty and representation that would please the eye. The church, widely known as Malatestiano Temple, itself is an excellent example of this duality. The Gothic church, originally named San Francesco, was consecrated in the thirteenth century and dedicated to the Franciscan order. The church received its (unfinished) Renaissance façade in 1468, facing a small alveolus adjacent to the present-day? street Via IV Novembre in the city centre of Rimini. When we look at it today, we see the original exposed brick Gothic structure, the "unfinished" façade, juxtaposed against Alberti's vision of a refined, classical surface that was never fully realised. In this unfinished state, the building seems to ask us to consider what makes a façade complete.

The Tempio Malatestiano attributed to Alberti is no exception from his general conception of designing the façade: the proposal for the façade consists in a marble-cut shell, attached on the existing Gothic façade (a load-bearing brick wall) and exhibiting classical motifs from Roman antiquity (as this was the only classical antiquity known to Alberti) in a decorative composition that would

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7 Leon Batista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, princeps Alberti – *De re aedificatoria* (MIT Press, 1991), Book VII, chapters V, VII.

8 Boschi, *Between the building and the street*, 49.

become? the visual expression of the San Francesco's church in Rimini, under Malatesta's patronage as Lord of Rimini, "who wanted to make of S.Franesco a grand memorial for himself, his wife and the great men of his court."[9]

The colossal columns resting on a pedestal support a decorated entablature and also correspond to the structural bays of the church, which has one main central nave and two adjacent secondary smaller bays, establishing a (B)-(A)-(B) rhythm of the bays. In the smaller bays, inside the triumphal arches, was going to be the elect placement for the sarcophagi of Sigismondo and his wife, Isotta: "With the closing of these niches, the special implication of Alberti's Triumph-over-Death idea has been lost. But something of it still survives at the side, where arches contain the sarcophagi of the "uomini illustri."[10] The motif of the triumphal arch is present in each bay on the lower register of the façade. Above the entablature, another triumphal arch is placed above the central nave bay, but it has not been finished; only a pilaster and half a column remain as witnesses, as it is showcased in the blue line drawing (Fig. 1). The drawing confronts two hypostases of the façade of San Francesco's church: the right side shows the existing stage of the façade following Alberti's unfinished intervention, and the left side reveals the imagined design for the façade that was never built: the upper register with the triumphal arch nesting the centred niche and also the spirals above the secondary nave's bay. There is historic proof revealing that the original design proposal involved the addition of a dome, which would have posed structural challenges and would have stressed the existing structure of the church, as shown in the correspondence between Alberti and the company of craftsmen and artists hired at the site of the church, among them Matteo de' Pasti.[11] Unfortunately, any drawn materials attached to these letters were lost, and we are only left with the 1450 medallion (Fig. 2) 1450, attributed to Matteo de', showing the Tempio Malatestiano with Alberti's façade proposal and the addition of the dome, a striking reference to the Pantheon's dome.

One could not help but notice a striking detail regarding the composition of the façade. The bays are individually perfectly designed in their interior geometry, with the triumphal arch and the niche for the sarcophagi and the addition of two oculus windows perfectly aligned with the arch in symmetry. However, the bays do not have equal spans, as the central nave is larger, yet they are organised under the same compositional principle, with the triumphal arch and two oculus windows above. As a result, the height of the central triumphal arch goes higher, and as a consequence, the two oculus windows are offset in comparison with the oculus windows of the secondary bays. This inconsistency gets even more striking for the eye that seeks beauty, as the bays are visually and structurally determined by the colossal columns. When one looks at the façade centring

9 Boschi, *Between the building and the street*, 4.

10 Boschi, *Between the building and the street*, 4.

11 Cecil Grayson, *Alberti and The Tempio Malatestiano* (The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1956), 5.

the gaze upon the column (as an axis), it renders as a striking dissonance to see the two oculus windows in a different placement, imbalanced, as an affront to the very "pleasure of the eye." While the compositional principle is individually perfect for each bay, as a whole it lacks consistency, mainly because it is subordinated to the unequal span of the bays, a given particularity of the existing Gothic church.

While the oculus opening was used in classical antiquity and later during the Byzantine era, it is not particularly common to be seen adjacent to a triumphal arch (of course, there are examples of medallions placed upon triumphal arches, such as the Arch of Constantine in Rome). It would come at hand to state that maybe the inspiration for this composition was drawn from the interior architecture of the church. The main nave is supported by Gothic arches and pilasters, and each bay is composed of the Gothic arch and two medallions with heraldic decorum (shields) symmetrically placed next to the arch. If we look at the central aisle, it bears even more resemblance to the façade, as the arch is semicircular. It could be a valid assumption that Alberti had the intention to convey this motif of the interior architecture onto its shell, the façade.

At last, Alberti's façade of San Francesco church in Rimini embodies the idea that the façade is a gift to the public face of the city, revealing attributes of beauty and a sense of urban decorum, while celebrating its independent form. In terms of trends, the new style promoted by Italian architects quickly became fashionable and desirable among patrons, even attracting the clergy and gradually leaving medieval architecture behind. The notion that Italy's Gothic churches needed a Renaissance upgrade for their façades gained popularity, and beginning with Alberti, each church, starting with San Francesco, the first church façade designed by Alberti, became a stage for the exploration of classical architectural motifs in the church façade series.[12] This façade series shows an evolution in Alberti's approach towards imposing a classical system over an existing structure "full of problematical elements, traditional features, and Gothic reminiscences."[13] The new city imagined by the Renaissance architects is an interpreted version of the classical Roman city, deeply rooted in the ancient one. This layering adds value and prestige to the new Renaissance city, but it needs an adaptation of the Gothic past.

The practice of patrons demanding a "fashionable" façade encouraged the architects of the Renaissance, even in the later period, to engage in the façade phenomenon. A notable example is the unfinished façade of San Petronio's Cathedral in Bologna. Some of its sections are completed in polychrome stone, while others gradually expose the naked brick wall. The Cathedral of

12 To name the main architectural explorations, also analysed in Wittkower's work (*Architectural Principles: In the Age of Humanism*): the first San Francesco (Tempio Malatestiano) in Rimini, 1450; Santa Maria Novella in Florence, 1456; San Sebastiano in Mantua, 1460, 1470; Sant'Andrea in Mantua, 1470.

13 Rudolf Wittkower, "Alberti's Approach to Antiquity in Architecture," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 4, no. ½ (1940): 21.



Figure 1. Drawing showcasing the two hypostases of the façade of San Francesco's church, collage: the drawing in red lines represents Alberti's intended design, while the drawing in blue lines represents the existing built facade (stone cladding). In the background, in blue infill, is the brick wall of the Gothic façade.



Figure 2. Matteo de' Pasti, medaglia di Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta col Tempio Malatestiano, verso 1450 (Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta's medallion depicting the façade of the church Tempio Malatestiano, envisioned by Leon Battista Alberti in 1450).

San Petronio holds deep emotional significance for the city's inhabitants, as its construction marked the moment the city gained administrative autonomy from previous rulers.[14] The building process was slow and stretched over a long period of time, during which the two models illustrating the original design were lost. At the time the façade cladding began, changes in the city's administration resulted in the halting of the work, effectively "freezing" the appearance of the cathedral as it stands today.

Following these changes, the incomplete façade of San Petronio became the focus of architectural studies, with proposals for its completion being explored through a competition in the late Renaissance period. This competition brought together various influences: the new Renaissance style, the ancient classical methods practised by contemporary architects, political aspirations, and the collective desire of the city's inhabitants, who were deeply connected to the Gothic style prominent in the city. The 1531 competition presented multiple façade possibilities, some of which were contradictory in their expression (Gothic designs in the locally preferred style, and innovative Renaissance variants).[15] However, this set a precedent, showing that the façade could be independent of the load-bearing structure and could adopt any stylistic guise. In this case, a Romanesque structure, with clearly articulated aisles, is dressed in a façade featuring classical orders, registers, and motifs. The polychrome decorative appearance of the Romanesque tradition is replaced with classical "clothing." In its present state, the façade of San Petronio consists of two layers: an inferior, marble-clad register, designed by Antonio di Vicenzo at the end of the thirteenth century, while above, the façade appears naked, exposing the load-bearing brick wall (Fig. 3). Looking into the competition entries for the façade, some of them well-preserved in the original drawings of the architect, one stands apart from the others: Andrea Palladio's proposal of a façade (Fig. 4) in full late Renaissance style, combining the Classical temple front in a juxtaposed manner, such as to accommodate what was going to be known as the *Palladian* model to the Gothic section of the basilica. Similar to his unrealised design for San Petronio in Bologna, Palladio often proposed combining three overlapping temple fronts to include all five bays of the Gothic church, highlighting the top of the central bay. Overlapping the temple front onto the basilica cross section is a challenge, considering the overall volumetry with a dominant central nave and lower side bays. Wittkower appreciates this solution as an innovative approach to unifying disparate spatial elements.[16] He sees Palladio's San Pietro façade proposal as emblematic of the Renaissance struggle to reinterpret classical forms for the Christian ecclesiastical architecture

14 Guido Beltramini, conference on: "What was history for patrons and architects in Bologna in 1579?," Paul Desmarais Theatre, 5 October 2017, 6:30 pm.

15 Guido Beltramini, "What was history for patrons and architects in Bologna in 1579?," Canadian Centre for Architecture, online version, source: https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/issues/25/a-history-of-references/53847/what-was-history-for-patrons-and-architects-in-bologna-in-1579?, accessed 25th of August, 2025.

16 Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles In the Age of Humanism* (Hassell Street Press, 2021), 24.

and underscores Palladio's unique genius in adapting ancient principles to modern needs, while remaining faithful to the ideals of harmony and proportion. However, the acceptance of the proposal was dependent on the approval of Pope Gregory XIII, him being "Bolognese by birth, could express his opinion on Palladio's project. The pope looked at it and said, "No." After Palladio's unsuccessful design, work resumed on Varignana's project in 1579. But then, everything ground to a halt again."[17]

One could easily observe the abrupt fracture that happened between Renaissance architects and their recent past, in their ambition to reconnect with the classical Roman antiquity, while rejecting the Gothic style as "an old-fashioned way of building without grace or beauty whatsoever. […] The new architecture proposed order where there had been disorder, beauty instead of confusion, principles instead of arbitrariness, and imitation of the best models instead of wild inventions. In a plate in his Seventh Book, Serlio shows how to convert a medieval façade into a well-ordered, symmetrical modern façade."[18]

The formal liberation of the façade, still developing in the late Renaissance and subsequent historic periods, became an architectural theme in itself, raising various interpretations over the constitutive, load-bearing elements of classical Greek antiquity, already filtered through Roman antiquity (which was the only historical source for Renaissance architects). Although this was not (yet) a structural liberation, the façade could take any desired appearance. Consoles, elements of classical antiquity, used to transfer the load-bearing weight of the entablature or cornice, have been incorporated into architecture since the time architects began studying the ruins of antiquity. Stone consoles evolved into attached plaster elements - thin sheaths that still depict the tectonic transfer of forces. Even though, in their internal composition, we can identify the profiles that bear the static load (separated by the plaster ornament), the viewer's eye does not perceive this as untrue but as a preservation of appearance. According to Renaissance aesthetics, the truth conveyed by the appearance of the façade is preferable to the harsh reality of the underlying structure, which is often imperfect, because of uncontrollable factors such as skill division, construction economy, or the availability of materials. Beginning in the Renaissance and largely until Modernism, maintaining an appearance of beauty, understood as a Classical attribute, rather than exposing the imperfections of the structure, has thus been the preferred visual expression for a façade.

The Column as Ornament

In *De Re Aedificatoria,* Leon Battista Alberti expresses his appreciation for the column, describing it as "the main ornament" in the art of building: "[The

17 Beltramini, "What was history for patrons and architects?". This text is adapted from a lecture given by Guido Beltramini at the CCA in 2017, in the context of the exhibition "Besides, History." Curator: Giovanna Borasi, CCA, 10 May to 15 October, 2017, https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/events/49014/besides-history-go-hasegawa-kersten-geers-david-van-severen.

18 Beltramini, "What was history for patrons and architects?".



Figure 3. The façade of San Petronio, Bologna, present state of the façade.

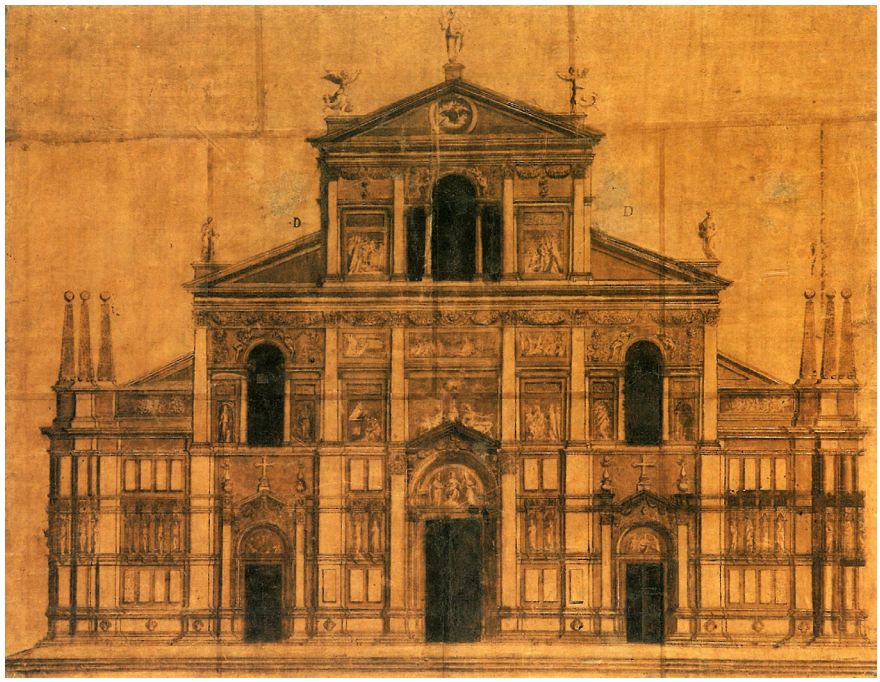


Figure 4. Andrea Palladio's proposal for the façade of San Petronio, Bologna.

column] can be part of a composition, to adorn a portico, wall or other form of opening." In the case of a façade extended along the vertical plane of the wall, the column defines the bays and forms a continuous body with the façade. In the case of a façade-portico, the column is the primary structural element. Alberti clearly distinguishes between pillars and columns and the connection of the former with the arch, which is an element carved from the flat wall. Logically, by doing this subtraction from the flat wall, the result would be an arch supported by pillars (rectangular in shape). Alberti avoided the arch - column system, as it clearly is a contradiction of the above statement. He thoughtfully places an entablature above the column, even though it is a decoration to embellish the wall. In Alberti's works on the façade, the arch is supported by pillars "with or without half-columns set against them as decoration."[19] As a structural component, its load-bearing capacity is achieved either through the stacking of processed stone blocks, treated with various surface finishes, or through a masonry mass formed by the radial, interwoven arrangement of bricks. Brick columns could also be coated with plaster and, depending on the texture of the plaster, they could retain the appearance of a stone column.

Does contemporary architecture still address the need to preserve the appearance of order and to convey tectonics and structure? Do architects rely on ornament and artifice to fabricate a desired appearance of beauty, or, on the contrary, do we see beauty in the sheer truth of the exposed structure? How does contemporary architecture reveal to the eye as true? Undoubtedly, modern architecture's beauty ideals shaped our understanding of appearance and façade, when the very idea of a façade was stripped away in order to expose "the skull."[20]

The truth of architecture lies not in its skeleton, but in its represented image, its appearance. In order to thoroughly question the complexity attributed to the theme of the truth of appearance, expansive lens are required to address the theme in the vast context of façade models, apart from the Renaissance model of facadism. The following chapter intents to question the truth of appearance by tackling the theme of the poetics of structure. The addition of the following case studies is relevant for the research, as they embody paradigmatic treatments for the appearance of the column, which sharpen the necessary conceptual distinctions. Their evoked presence is justified by their quality as heuristic anchor-points. In addition, both of the announced themes converge in the following projects, where structural necessity is transformed into expressive form and also, where ornament serves to represent the skeleton as appearance. In both cases, the visible structure becomes the bearer of truth, the architectural meaning projected through appearance, while the column fulfils its role as an ornament in the represented architectural composition.

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19 Wittkower, *Alberti's Approach*, 3.

20 L. Thomas Schumacher, "The skull and the mask: the modern movement and the dilemma of the façade," *Cornell Journal of Architecture*, No. 3 *The Vertical Surface* (1988), https://cornelljournalofarchitecture.cornell.edu/issue/issue-3/.

A relevant example is Fayland House, designed by David Chipperfield in Chilterns, Buckinghamshire, UK, from 2009 to 2013,[21] where the main façade is dominated by a portico structured with massive, imposing columns that evoke a classical colonnade, facing a vast landscape, as a classical Greek antiquity temple would. Highlighting this example, the study aims to reveal the presence of the motif of the column and its valence of ornament being in co-existence with the structural elements. However, upon examining the plan and the cross-section provided by the architecture office, we discovered that the actual load-bearing structure is hidden within the core of the columns, consisting of a type I steel profile. This structural solution is the result of both static load calculations and financial considerations that exceed architectural principles of composition. The steel profile is encased in brick masonry, arranged radially, with a layer of air between them. The brick layer acts as a shell, with its diameter determined by classical considerations, possibly following traditional orders, to preserve the appearance. The question of what constitutes the true column emerges, being either the steel core or the visible brick shell, its appearance. Is this a contemporary tool employed by the architect to maintain appearances, offering an idealised form, similar to how classical façades were dressed in various ways? One could observe when looking at Chipperfield's works, a relation to beauty in a classical manner, as a stated preference for its architectural expression, rather than expressing the structural elements.

Remaining within a contemporary understanding of ornament, we will discuss the expression of the concrete columns that define the continuous "façade" of the four-sided office tower of Baloise Insurance Company, designed by Valerio Olgiati. The office tower is located in Basel, Switzerland and was completed in 2021. The façade is defined by a series of house-shaped[22] columns of exposed concrete and by the horizontal lines of the slabs that extend beyond the columns, rendering the curtain wall in the shadowy background. As opposed to the "hollow" column of Chipperfield, these pilasters are filled with concrete and, at first glance, evoke a tectonic approach of the façade, by showcasing a naked structure. However, the resulting expression could not be further from the visual attributes of the load-bearing structure, such as conveying tectonics, pragmatism and necessity. Olgiati's architecture could be interpreted through the lens of the poetics of structure as a visual statement, dismissing the basic necessity of the structure, and turning it into an aesthetic object. The triangular termination of the column points towards the slab, creating a void at the very point of maximum tension. Instead of conveying the structural weight, the pilaster appears to not even be in contact with the concrete slab, and thus the slabs seem to float. The artifice that fulfils this purpose is a steel flat bar that sticks out of the pinnacle and takes over the task of connecting the vertical and horizontal elements. The colonnade situated on the ground floor creates an

21 David Chipperfield Architects, accessed July 25th, 2025, https://davidchipperfield.com/projects/private-house-chilterns.

22 Valerio Olgiati, *Built* (Park Books, 2023), 26.

urban room, a portico, referencing classical public architecture and mediating the building's relationship with the city.

This particular example portrays the idea of the column as a contemporary ornament on the façade, but its chosen expression strips away the load-bearing identity of the column. The result is an embellished façade with a non-load-bearing column ornament cast in a load-bearing material (concrete). Although it may seem as an irrevocable contradiction between material and appearance, it ensures continuity in architectural interest in visual expression, ornamentation and appearance. In the visual pursuit of the expression of the façade, the meaning of ornaments shifts towards what society values as beautiful and what architects are willing to achieve with the technological means available at the present time. The façade of Baloise's office tower thus becomes an exhibit in demonstrating that roles and meanings traditionally embedded in our architectural culture could be reversed to achieve a different expression of the ornament.

This examination reveals that both examples of contemporary architecture are addressing the theme of the column as the main ornament, as a design method in order to achieve a visual expression. In particular, David Chipperfield's proposed column preserves the appearance in the classical way (where structure and ornament were once inseparable and interdependent, as shown) over the naked structure, *the skull*. It is also a result of modern architectural practice, where collaboration with structural engineers often starts from different theoretical and critical foundations. On the other hand, Valerio Olgiati's column addresses its ornamental attributes by rendering it as a concrete element emptied of its load-bearing properties. These differences lead to diverse ways of understanding and practising the art of building. However, presenting an appearance (a façade, a shell) to the public eye is, in both cases, seen as more valuable than exposing the structural elements without ornament. This preference for appearance is as fragile and changeable as the notion of beauty and the meanings we assign to it. As history has taught us, fashion reveals all these representations of beauty and truth in architecture, cyclically, meaning that the idea of the façade as an autonomous visual expression would still hold its place in contemporary architectural practice.

Cladding as the Truth of Appearance

A. C. Quatremere de Quincy considers the ornament to be seen from "its intimate relationship with the execution of architecture,"[23] because architecture heavily relies on the arts (especially sculpture and secondly painting) but also on craftsmanship (*techné*) to achieve its expression, the desired appearance. The link between the structure and ornament is inseparable, firstly because the structure *wears* the ornament and secondly because the ornament is placed at the junction of at least two structural elements. If one looks at ornaments

23 Quatremère de Quincy and Samir Younés, *The True, the Fictive, and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremere de Quincy* (London, 1999), 199.

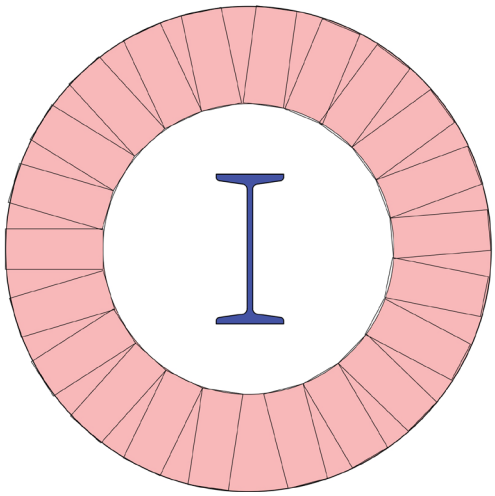


Figure 5. Plan of the column drawn by the author, column detail from Fayland House, architect David Chipperfield, Chilterns, Buckinghamshire, UK, during 2009-2013.

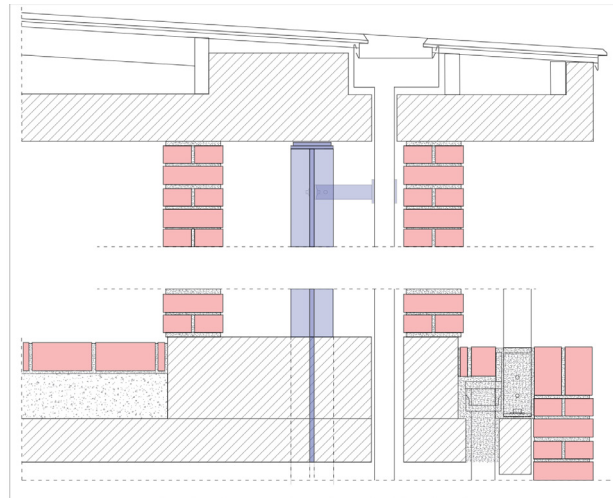


Figure 6. Section of the column redrawn by the author, column detail from Fayland House, architect David Chipperfield, Chilterns, Buckinghamshire, UK, during 2009-2013.

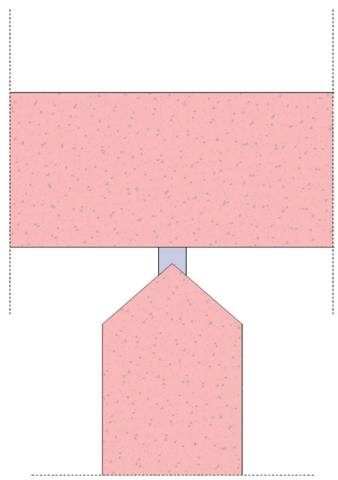


Figure 7. Façade detail drawn by the author, column detail column detail from Office Tower of Baloise Insurance Company, architect Valerio Olgiati, Basel, Switzerland, completed in 2021.

from a typological point of view, one finds five types of ornaments described in Quatremere de Quincy's dictionary. The typologies of ornaments are based either on their use, or their execution method, such as: running ornaments, meaning ornaments sculpted on friezes, stringcourses, plinths or any linear element; corner ornaments; ornaments in relief; sunken ornaments, and nautical ornaments. The image projected by the ornaments is always one of perfection, regardless of their authenticity, in terms of materials. The ornaments cast in mouldings try to emulate the heavy image of a stone-sculpted piece to convey the structural efforts in a tectonic system.

We could say that Chipperfield's column falls into the category of an ornament in relief, a shell that embellishes the structural element (the steel column), very similar to terra cotta ornaments or plaster, worked in such a manner to achieve the appearance of a stone element. Chipperfield provided a built skin, a shell-type ornament for his structural element. It is the same intention seen in the brick façades cladded with colourful marble stone by the medieval Italian architects, the same as Alberti's Renaissance shell, supported by the structural brick wall and the same as during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when architects embellished the façades with catalogue shell-like ordered ornaments, in terracotta or plaster. This proves an architect's preference for embellishment, the beauty of the shell that embraces the structure, at an intimate contact with the structure. The ornament is supported by the structure, and this creates an intimate closeness between structure and ornament, which passes on a feeling of authenticity. By contrast, Olgiati's column is a different type of ornament, because it is pursuing the attributes and expressiveness of load-bearing structure, an illusion sustained also by the choice of materials. This is very similar to the cladding principle introduced by Gottfried Semper,[24] asserting that ornament arises from textile traditions, particularly weaving, and thus linking it to structure. The concept of "Bekleidung" ("clothing") is fundamental for the theme of the façade, developed by Semper in his cited work. The distinction between the load-bearing structure and the visual structure has its foundation in the classical tradition laid down by Alberti. The primary wall ("true wall") would be the visual representation of the wall (in Semper's case, the cladding), asserting that it is the core of architectural expression. In addition, Mallgrave discusses Carl Botticher's theory and his distinction between "Kernform" (core form) and *"Kunstform"* (symbolic art form), highlighting the difference between the underlying load-bearing structure and representational façade.

Semper categorises architecture into four fundamental elements - hearth, roof, enclosure, and mound - and emphasises that the enclosure (the wall or façade) historically derived from woven fabrics, which were later translated into solid materials like wood, clay, and stone. He emphasises the etymology of the word "wall," in German "Wand," which shares the same root with the

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24 Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 103.

word "*Gewand*" ("garment") in explaining the origin of the spatial enclosure.[25] Semper traces the origins of the façade to ancient weaving techniques, where woven mats and textiles were used to enclose spaces, before the occurrence of voluminous walls. The symbolic and decorative patterns of these textiles persisted even when they decorated a solid wall. Patterns and motifs used on the fabric also had a functional role, by reinforcing the structure of the material, so there appears to be a relationship of interdependence between the structure and the ornament.

Returning to the open question of unravelling the meaning of truth in architecture, the above discussion suggests that the truth lies in its appearance ("truth of representation"),[26] rather than in its internal structure. Vesely discusses the nature of architectural representation, arguing that architecture is not merely about functional or material truth, but also about meaning and representation. He suggests that a certain "violation of truth" - meaning a departure from pure functionalism or material honesty - is necessary for architecture to convey meaning and engage with broader cultural, historical, and symbolic dimensions. This perspective challenges the modernist emphasis on transparency and correspondence between certain material properties and visual appearance, suggesting instead that architecture's representational role often requires a deliberate departure from strict functionalism. The plaster or terracotta classical ornaments are not a "quotation" of the original classical element overexposed on the brick wall, but rather a shell-like appearance that, in a very truthful way, conveys a structural suborder and crafts a façade. Giving thought to this meaning, the façade (be it a shell) is not "the Carnavale mask held on a stick,"[27] because that would be deceitful to the public eye and would not stand criticism. The truth of representation holds its ground because the shell and the structure cannot be told apart by the untrained public eye. Only a critical and technically trained eye could see beyond the appearance. It is the same for Chipperfield's column, where the true architecture is the one that appears visible to the naked eye. The drawings (plans and sections) only reveal the interdependent link between structure and ornament.

Conclusions

The historic reading on the topic of the façade has highlighted a connection between the public urban space and the façade as a representative image of political or religious authority manifested towards its urban citizens, in the contextual frame of the public space, enclosing the urban space in the form of the urban room or corridor and also imbedding it with meaning. The theme of the façade regains its place in the form of architectural expression in the postmodern and contemporary era, but it is conditioned by the existence of

25 Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or Practical Aesthetics* (Getty Research, 2004), 248.

26 Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The question of creativity in the shadow of production* (MIT Press, 2004), 45.

27 Schumacher, *The skull and the mask*, 3.

the public space of the city in terms of traditional urban fabric, meaning it requires its urban rooms and corridors to belong to the pedestrians to meet the requirements for visual perception. The façade, in order to be visually perceived, also requires the human walking pace, which allows the eye to pan around its surface and notice the intricate details and ornamentation. By contrast, in the modern city, which is designed in order to prioritise car speed, the eye can catch only a handful of blurry details of a streamlined enclosing of an edifice.

The architectural interest in the theme of the façade has its roots in the ancient origins of the wall as a spatial separation element, as seen in Semper's critical analysis, first as a textile element and later as a material that embodies the structural framework of the woven textiles. This line of thought exposes the ancient concern for decorum, translated into painted (dematerialised) façades, in stone-clad façades or plaster, brick or even concrete-clad façades. The separation between the load-bearing structure and the visual structure of the edifice gave the ornament its deserved dignity, being tasked with achieving the architectural, visual expression of the edifice as envisioned by the architect. The notable works of Alberti that marked the Renaissance period have outlined the theme of the façade and later had a strong influence on Palladio's interpretation of classical antiquity, as seen in the latter's proposal for San Petronio's façade. The development of the façade theme took off from the apprehension of the classical ornament and compositional principles, while maintaining the distinction between appearance and the load-bearing structure.

On the other hand, Kenneth Frampton argues over the importance of the tectonic at the expense of the "scenographic,"[28] claiming that architectural autonomy resides in the tectonic. In this view, the appearance is the expression of the load-bearing structure, "the presentation of a structural poetic, rather than the re-presentation of a façade."[29] Structural poetry could be achieved by mastering the execution of the given skeleton, rendering the details of the joint in an aesthetic and skilled manner, while balancing the internal configuration of the edifice. Although this is a rational argument, it would be reductive for the theme of the façade to limit the visual expression of the façade at simply conveying the tectonic principles of the building. The appearance, the mask, could compensate for an imperfect structural system, or could be a pretext to achieve a certain, desired expression.

The distinction between architectural "clothing" and load-bearing structure gives limitless possibilities for the architectural expression to develop, in order to achieve a visually expressive façade on a given urban, cultural, and social context or aesthetic experiments. Exploring the possibilities of anti-tectonic

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28 Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic – Essays on Postmodern Culture,* ed. Hal Foster (Bay Press, 1983), 27.

29 Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism," 28.

expressions, such as Olgiati's column on the Baloise façade, could not be achieved without the assessment of ornament as an element on its own.

From Alberti's Renaissance façadism to the contemporary use of the column as an ornament, the façade persists as a cultural mediator: a shell that embodies both tectonics and appearance. Far from obsolete, the façade demonstrates the cyclicality of architectural values, where representation and beauty continually reassert themselves against the modernist ideal of exposing the structural skull.

In today's perspective, there is a growing tension between the representational attribute of the façade, as seen in the Renaissance, and the contemporary use of façades as performative, technical envelopes, such as climate skins and media screens that function as machines for energy, light, and media communication. The historic reading on the Renaissance reclaims Alberti's theoretical view on the façade as a civic mediator, a surface where proportion, ornament, and urban decorum converged to articulate the public face of architecture. Today, however, the façade is increasingly redefined as a technological skin, thus displacing its symbolic and civic role. The problem is whether the façade is preserved as a continuation of the Renaissance ideal of civic representation or is "dissolved" into the abstract surface as a consequence of contemporary culture. In this context, the research advocates for a critical continuity with the ornament and façade design principles from Renaissance to present time. The contemporary examples reveal eloquent approaches to the theme of the column as ornament, as architects such as David Chipperfield and Valerio Olgiati have sought to recover the dignity of order, rhythm, and tectonic expressiveness of the façade.

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Fig. 1: (re)drawing of the author over the following sources: "Tempio Malatestiano (San Francesco), Rimini: main facade." In the digital collection Art Images for College Teaching. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/aict/x-

ira121/ira121. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed 20th of August, 2025.
March L. Proportional design in L. B. Alberti's Tempio Malatestiano, Rimini. Architectural Research Quarterly. 1999; 3(3):259-70. doi:10.1017/S1359135500002086.

Fig. 2: Photo from Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Matteo_de%27_pasti,_medaglia_di_sigismondo_pandolfo_malatesta_col_tempio_malatestiano,_verso_1450.JPG.

Fig. 3: Photo from Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Basilica_San_Petronio_facciata.jpg.

Fig. 4: Archive drawing, Andrea Palladio's proposal for the façade of San Petronio, Bologna: https://www.foliamagazine.it/bologna-san-petronio/.

Fig. 5: Drawing by the author based on the provided cross-section detail of David Chipperfield Architects.

Fig. 6: Section of the column redrawn by the author, from Fayland House, architect David Chipperfield, Chilterns, Buckinghamshire, UK, during 2009-2013;. The redrawing is based on the technical drawings provided by David Chipperfield Architects and published online in HIC Architectura, 15th of November 2015. https://hicarquitectura.com/2015/11/david-chipperfield-architects-fayland-house/.

Fig.7: Façade column detail drawn by the author, from the Office Tower of Baloise Insurance Company, architect Valerio Olgiati, Basel, Switzerland, completed in 2021.

SFA - (ALTER native) Context for Creative Growth and Critical Thinking

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Keywords
alternative posters; fiction film; dystopia; educational workshop in architecture

Abstract
This article discusses and analyses the yearly SFA (society, film, architecture) event designed and organized by ALT+A. The primary goal of the event is to support students in creating alternative posters for established dystopian universes. In the span of this work, we will be focusing on the conceptual frameworks and practical modalities that establish SFA as a favourable context for exploring alternatives. First, we will delve into alternatives as a conceptual endeavour of seeking out the other. Alternative posters, like alternative fashion, question styles, depictions, and interpretations of specific concepts. Designing an alternative poster involves a critical engagement with the process and object of design. The creative process encompasses much more than the consideration and creation of aesthetics. It encourages designers to reflect on the ethics, storytelling, and meaning of the dystopian universe it represents. Designers engaging in the process of creating alternative posters need to continuously rebel, adapt and reinvent themselves. Posters become veritable tools for questioning norms and become the manifestation of dissent and rebellion against social expectations. Then, we will talk about alternatives in a more practical sense, as mechanisms that play a part in the process of design: alternatives as creative choices and "alters" as self-standing creative instantiations that expand, contrast, or enter a dialogue with the original or "native." In an alternative educational context like SFA, mentoring the participants to work with these alternatives can cultivate and enhance the development of creativity, critical thinking, synthesis skills, teamwork abilities, and a sense of community. It can offer students the support needed to critically evaluate, represent, and decode visual content in their quest to make authentic conceptual and graphical representations for existing movies. To realise this quest, we offered participants the guidance of hand-picked mentors who work in various domains relevant to fields like architecture, design or philosophy.

Introduction

Art, Design, Architecture, and other creative fields often struggle with the act of creating *the new* while accounting for creative constraints and opportunities. The difficulty emerges from a series of aspects that can broadly be split into internal factors, related to the capacities of the author, and external factors, related to the context in which the creative work is being performed. These two are interdependent and constantly in play. Internal factors correlate with designer-related skills, abilities, mental processes, critical thinking, experience in design, art, or secondary domain, practical skills, creative choices, etc. External factors refer to the influence of tools, materials, media of choice, rigours of the domain, design principles, content, etc. on the design process.

When making creative choices, we must be aware of the potential decisions that exist, be able to select among these alternatives, and have the ability to evaluate them and their impact on the crafted product. At the start of the creative process, we seem to face an infinite pool of alternatives and choices. As the object of our imagination gets progressively refined through these choices, we also narrow the pool of alternatives. Although we can methodically make these choices, we often select alternatives based on how well they fit in the current creative context. In the final stages, alternatives and choices become scarce and significant.

For emerging creators, like those still in training for a creative degree, the process can easily become overwhelming. "Establishing new ideas in any field takes perseverance and patience."[1] Tackling the new involves breaking up with the conventional. Confidence is required in order to express a unique perspective and to entertain a bold creative approach. This confidence to thread uncharted waters and push the boundaries of the known world requires, perhaps, an equal amount of thirst for exploration and the passed-on experience from the professionals.

About SFA

SFA (society, film, architecture) is a yearly event created by ALT+A that aims to provide a fertile context for exploring alternative ways of thinking about and representing existing films. It features a series of talks and workshops centred around a specific creative artifact. One of the challenges in this event consists creating an alternative poster for a sci-fi dystopian movie. Alongside the workshop, a series of daily conferences bring together students and specialists from the fields of architecture, history, literature, design, and art.

Interdisciplinary dialogues aim to broaden the understanding of the sometimes subtle relations between society, film, and architecture. The week-long endeavour culminates with a public exhibition, transforming the workshop space into an open gallery that showcases the fresh perspectives and innovative

1 Eduard Helmann and Brian Switzer, *Rhetoric of Logos - A Primer for Visual Language* (Niggli Verlag, 2016), 6.

solutions expressed through alternative posters produced by the students. SFA aims to equip participants with the instruments and tools necessary to navigate uncharted territory in the realms of visual storytelling; the port is always a dystopian film and the ocean is endless. In other words, participants learn how to address challenges through critical thinking and collaboration. Over the course of a week, SFA explores how architecture and film can serve as powerful lenses for understanding, shaping, and changing society. SFA is not only about education, but rather about paving the way for a new generation of thinkers and creators who are ready to challenge dogma and reimagine the world through their own alternative.

Posters

Posters are graphical representations, usually melding images and text to convey messages, concepts, or ideas. Posters may be used for many purposes. They are a frequent tool for advertisers (particularly for events, musicians, and films), propagandists, protestors, and other groups trying to communicate a message. Unlike other creative artifacts that exist independently, posters remain linked to the event, product, artifact, etc. They are designed to serve or enhance an occasion and, as such, act like a wrapper or packaging for it. Much like a book cover design, they cannot fully express every aspect of the event they stand for. Seen this way, posters serve as "time stamps that mark our memories, conversations, experiences, and encounters associated with the event."[2]

A movie poster is used to promote and advertise the content of a film. Its primary purpose is to inform and appeal to the aesthetic sensibilities of potential customers, persuading them to pay in order to enjoy the content of the movie.

Through a poster, the designer aims to elicit emotion and establish a connection between the audience and the film. As such, explaining the movie or offering clues through visuals might rob the audience of their discovery or even form prejudices. A movie poster is not a manual or a plot summary, but rather an object that serves as an ambassador, drawing audiences in with creativity. As film plots thrive on mysteries and their uncovering, so should the poster offer only glimpses of what lies ahead, while allowing the viewer to embark on a journey of discovery. In a sense, the poster is part of the storytelling process just like the opening and closing credits and its role lies in raising questions and anticipation. "The poster requires a certain concentration. It permits no wavering… The designer has to successfully hit the given mark within the scope and possibilities open to them."[3] Limited by format and means of expression,

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2 Jason Aljandro, "Viewer Participation," in *I got something to say – poster inventory 2013-2021* (Draw Down Books, 2022), 35.

3 John Foster, *New Masters of Poster Design: Poster Design for the New Century* (Rockport Publishers, 2008), 84.

the poster is the medium that truly highlights the mastery of a designer, as one has to reach the very core of the intended concept.

Besides their aesthetic and informative roles, posters represent a visual identity of the movie, becoming a wrapper for the essence and content of the film. In this sense, they are similar to other wrappers like clothes, packaging, or houses that fulfil the purpose of signifying a specific identity or individual perspective. "Design has always involved shaping or embellishing everyday things, to provide us with a reminder of the world beyond utility."[4]

It is common for studios to design and print alternative posters that vary in size and content depending on the context they are intended for. As contextual artworks, posters often manifest differently in graphical form depending on the time, space, and distribution platforms they are intended for, or depending on the way their creators (author/designer) interpret the essence of the content they represent in a visual form. Many films boast a plethora of posters and a multitude of interpretations that reflect a specific context. These contextual aspects are varied and plentiful. Some are influenced by factors relating to the intended viewer or target audience, and others relate to the poster's historical context and the fashionable practices specific to it. Since the poster is a creative element, the mindset and craft of the creator also influence how it will manifest. Under the interference of these factors, the poster adapts. It is framed, and composed anew, undergoes chromatic changes, alters the information deemed essential to convey and illustrate the adapted narrative.

What is being shown and said through a poster becomes as important as what is being omitted. This positions posters as context-specific artifacts that occupy "a liminal space between the transient and enduring."[5] It is transient as it is made for a specific time-bound context. At the same time, the poster transcends its temporal connection to the context and evolves beyond printed ephemera, becoming a self-standing and long-lasting cultural symbol. They continue to exist as commemorative objects or historical records evoking a shared memory of their origin, illustrating a snapshot of minds, passions, and communities.

Alternatives

Dystopias as Alternatives

"The dominance of and demand for dystopian scenarios in popular culture in the last two decades has led to people considering catastrophic scenarios as inevitable, moving away from imagining different futures, and becoming passive instead of proactive."[6]

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4 Deyan Sudjic, *The Language of Things* (Penguin Books, 2009), 169.

5 Vaishnavi Mahendran, "Dialectical Harmony," in *I got something to say – poster inventory 2013-2021* (Draw Down Books, 2022), 33.

6 Ivica Mitrović, Mia Roth, and Čerina Tonči, *Designing in Coexistence, Reflections on Systematic Change* (Croatian Architects' Association, 2023), 34.

Stemming from shared anxieties, fears, dilemmas, and the struggle in the quest for identity and truth in an increasingly complex world, the dystopian narratives possess an enduring appeal. Dystopian cinematography in particular looks back and forward at the same time. On the one hand, it mirrors contemporary social issues and the darker sides of human existence while on the other, it projects a fictional universe, filled with room for wonder and possibilities.

Dystopias are thought-provoking and inherently fashionable as they capture the *Zeitgeist* of different generations. In dystopian narratives, there is invariably a hero and a journey leading on a path of relentless rebellion. This archetype of resilience and individuality resonates deeply with the design process of an alternative poster where the designer adapts, rebels, and reinvents himself. In many dystopian universes, uniforms are a means of oppression, a way to suppress individuality, and as such heros assume some liberties in the way they fashion themselves. Not following the crowd, and embracing one's uniqueness, in the pursuit of truth is key to understanding the dystopian model. Just like in fashion, poster design is more than just aesthetics, it is about the ethics of the process, storytelling, and meaning. Just like clothes, posters can become a tool for questioning norms and a manifestation of dissent, a rebellion against social expectations.

Alternative Posters

Like alternative fashion, alternative posters are questioning styles, depictions, and interpretations of specific concepts. This represents a critical engagement with the process and object of design. In clothing design, an alternative approach might reconsider what is feminine, what are the appropriate colors for a wedding dress, or what represents a casual outfit. Seen this way, alternatives free the designer, their process, and the designed objects from mainstream conventions, making way for new expressions of forms unencumbered by the requirement of being commercially viable.

Alternative posters allow self-expression, for those that make and those that interact with them, allowing individuals to communicate their personalities, tastes, and individuality to others. Just like people use clothing to construct a particular image, signaling their uniqueness, values, and interests to the world, posters can present a personal and authentic perspective to an event, movie, or commercial product it might portray. This authenticity is the "engine of its value, based on the concreteness of a non-reproducible presence."[7]

The original poster for a movie is inextricably linked to the film's existence and lore. It becomes canon material that plays a pivotal role, not only in advertising the movie but in creating a cultural touchstone. The original evokes and transcends the spirit of the movie and establishes a visual identity that fosters

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7 Giovanni Corbellini, *Sayable Space - Narrative Practices in Architecture* (Lettera Ventidue, 2021) 7.

a sense of belonging with audiences. The visual form created around a film's poster is like a *spider's web* that entrances, attracts, and makes minds and ideas stick close to the original interpretation of forms. Significantly different visual and conceptual alternatives often strain to escape the sticky threads of the established. It is challenging for poster designers to dodge the traps and spin new threads while tackling an entrenched visual identity that has become an icon and an intrinsic part of pop culture. Even though the official artwork becomes in most instances synonymous with the movie itself, it also serves as a rallying point for designers to reimagine, rework, and reinterpret. Few are the approaches that don't end up in the *spider's web* of iconic imagery and sneak through its threads to advance a new narrative.

Designing an alternative poster is a process that transcends its source material as it sustains and evolves the movie's legacy and influence in art, design, architecture, and clothing fashion by reimagining its iconic imagery. As long as alternative posters are still being designed, the visual language of certain movies, not only is still alive, but it grows and develops organically, always adapted to the latest fashion. Vibrant and enduring, the process of designing an alternative poster is a testament to the power of reconsidering trends, remixing data, and artistic reinterpretation in shaping cultural paradigms.

Alternative posters can be considered "after the fact" posters, designed in response to the event and shared with those who already experienced the original event or the poster referenced. This mode of making alternative posters allows for more creative freedom as one does not have to commercially appeal to an audience.[8]

From a graphic design point of view, alternative posters parallel the journey of logos and branding, serving as timeless yet adaptable markers of identity. If logos adapt to trends and attempt to keep up with the latest *Zeitgeist* in order to appeal to their targeted public, alternative posters are more radical in approach, following only generic themes. By doing so, posters have more freedom than logos, as they are able to change their content entirely from the initial reference and not only shapeshift like a brand does. Both posters and logos foster a sense of identity that evolves in tune with their audience's sensibilities in order to remain evocative and relevant. What to preserve, what to remove, and what to adapt? are tricky questions that are being tackled by all the speakers from a unique perspective. Understanding what makes an idea relevant and how you can change it to appeal to a present context without losing its initial scope and purpose is key to creating an alternative poster.

SFA (Society, Film, Architecture)

SFA offers a large array of experiences and if it were to classify it from a creative point of view, it is somewhere between a book club and a fashion

8 Mary Yang, "Embodying the Residue," in *I got something to say – poster inventory 2013-2021* (Draw Down Books, 2022), 39.

show; a shared intellectual journey through visual storytelling and immersive fun. We can look at SFA as a fashion show where the dress code is the poster. The poster becomes a compulsory but personalized attire that represents our interpretation of the content, serving as a commentary on the movie's theme and integrating original ideas and personal craftiness to weave a complex story. As a book club, with posters instead of books, SFA creates a safe space for creative exploration, self-expression, and engagement in the community. Just like in a book club, participants gather to discuss themes, characters, and narrative arcs in the pursuit of a better understanding of the lore and its relevance in today's world. Unpacking layers of meaning by sharing diverse opinions and perspectives is crucial in channelling the essence of the movie in an authentic visual representation. Reflecting on subtleties, distilling the themes and emotions, and critical thinking are other characteristics of the SFA project that emphasize the similarities with a book club. Whether it is a theme party, a book club, or an alternative poster workshop, the heart lies in the gathering to share ideas, engage in activities, and explore new personal limits together.

SFA aims to provide a ripe alternative context for education in creative domains. The event focuses on supporting the creation of alternative movie posters, using them as an opportunity to enhance growth and critical thinking. Making something authentic and new involves a complex process of exploration, filtering, and comprehension. Sensemaking is primarily the concrete appearance of sensory knowledge rather than the result of a fixed theory or ideology that only affords ideologically fixed semantic images and symbols.[9] Creating alternatives is, therefore, much more a representation of personal perspectives and ideas rather than an established recipe. SFA also assists participants in their creative endeavours by lessening the strain on young artists when creating something new. Like this, SFA minimises the difficulty of making choices when creating something new.

To assist the students in generating personal creative representations through graphical forms, SFA provides both theoretical and practical assistance. This reveals to students an expansive horizon of nodes or possibilities that they can coalesce into meaningful constellations, both conceptually and graphically. It is not uncommon for them to imagine or materialize the existence of brand-new nodes. Ian Lynam, the author of "Press Darlings," describes the relevance of a poster as a roadside marker that tells: "We were here, you were here. We were here together."[10] The alternative posters realized during the SFA workshop can be perceived as testimony of the agency power of the group.

The SFA series of conferences and workshops supports students in this complex process in a multitude of ways. Through a series of guest conferences, we

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9 Markus Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture, Ideated by Valerio Olgiati* (Park Books, 2019), 127.

10 Ian Lynam, "Press Darlings," in *I got something to say – poster inventory 2013-2021* (Draw Down Books, 2022), 12.

introduce students to a plethora of reference frames through which they can analyse the theme of the movie and the complexity of concepts at play. This is meant to encourage diversity in thinking and perspectives. Participants are also exposed to existing graphical representations and supported in their analysis of the plurality of final forms in which a creative object can manifest itself starting from a predefined concept. Mentorship sessions and skill workshops highlight choices and reveal alternatives for students engaged in the creative process of constructing their alternative poster. These practice-oriented methods challenge their constellations, both conceptually and graphically, to trigger reflection and consolidate a deep understanding of the choices being made. Students are encouraged to weave their unique selves and context into the creative object, therefore engaging in the *poieses of truth*, a transformative process that alters the subject investigated, the investigator, and the world as a whole as described by Armen Avanessian.[11]

SFA offers modalities for inquiry and reflection, allowing students to look back on inspirational material and examples from the past in order to look forward and imagine new possibilities, as well as generate new ideas. The creative process involves synchronized efforts of prospecting and speculating. It relies on learning through a type of playful research, as described by Scarfe, where playful combinatory or associative operations and ideas become essential to productive thought.[12] Their final creative object becomes akin to a manifesto, as coined by Cruz Garcia and Nathalie Frankowski, a love letter to something that does not yet exist.[13] Analysing the resulting posters, it is visually clear that they do not suffer from sameness. An amalgam of styles, colours, techniques, ideas, messages, and concepts weave together in unique representations, that serve as foundations for future alternative thinkers.

Current SFA Editions

Currently, SFA boasts three instalments of the event, each focusing on a different dystopian universe and its aesthetics. While dystopian universes might share similar premises, their aesthetic presentation in clothing fashion, architecture, or even product design often varies significantly. These ideas manifested in visual form often serve as the starting point for the exploration of alternative forms. For participants, ensuring that the universes are represented in a way that they are recognizable but, at the same time, innovative and personal, is one of the main challenges of the SFA events. Observing how the functional and aesthetic manifest themselves as posters is fascinating for participants, mentors, and the general audience at large. This section offers an account of some of the specificities of each universe as manifested in clothing

11 Armen Avanessian, *Speculative Poetics and the Poeticization of Philosophy. Contemporary Forms of Temporality – OVERWRITE ethics of Knowledge – Poetics of Existence* (Sternberg Press, 2017).

12 Neville Vincent Scarfe, "Play is Education," *Childhood Education* 39 (1962), 117-21.

13 Cruz Garcia and Nathalie Frankowski, *Narrative Architecture* (nai010 publishers, 2019).

design, architecture, and product design, understood as manifestations of fashion.

The first edition of SFA focused on Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, the audience could immerse themselves in the neo-noir, retro-futuristic, and weathered cyberpunk aesthetic inspired by Charles Knode and Michael Kaplan, the Bafta-winning costume designers. The film's outfit design was a mix of gritty urban decay and futuristic elegance featuring shoulder-padded trench coats, synthetic materials, and leather ensembles. These iconic looks were influenced by both high fashion and streetwear; an aesthetic imbued in the alternative posters created during the SFA workshop. Neon hues, vibrant designs, and dramatic settings with muted tones are also present in the alternative poster proposals that tackle existentialist themes. Fashion trends are on a time budget, but clothes and styles coexist even if some fall out of interest for a while. They become a subculture, or if they are fortunate, they become vintage or get to be revived. This blending of styles and fashions is a time-blurring experience where vintage influences meet the minimalistic future. The result is a retro-futuristic appeal, a revival of 1980s trends that can be easily distinguished in the alternative posters as well. Urban dystopia, existential duality, and technological innovation are incorporated not only graphically but also conceptually, in a more abstract fashion.

Architecturally, Bladerunner features Art Deco influences. The movie makes use of revival-style buildings in the sets, like The Bradbury Building, in the Romanesque Revival style, or the Ennis House, in the Mayan Revival style. Using older buildings allows the viewer to understand how the futuristic city was built on the relics of the past. It allows the viewer to connect to the distant future and highlights how the aesthetical value of certain buildings makes them so valuable that they are still preserved in a context completely detached from their origin. This type of visual anchor to familiar aesthetics also applies to the objects or props present in the movie. The focus is on making the future feel believable.

The second instalment of the SFA workshop and exhibition centered around Fritz Lang's Metropolis, a dystopian world expressed throughout the movie by the employment of contrast in architecture, arts, science, philosophy, and clothing fashion. Aenne Willkomm's costume designs pour life into the characters by giving them the ability to speak to the audience in a silent film. This sense of transcending the medium and the technical possibilities is key in approaching the construction of a poster design paradigm. Breaking the bidimensional limits of a poster is an endeavour that is best seen in the works of the students, as they filter the movie's themes through their own social, cultural, and emotional context. By using the contrast between the density, colour, and a certain heaviness or lightness of the clothes, Aenne Willkomm sets the tone for all the major scenes. All that attention paid to the background grants freedom of expression in the foreground, allowing for spontaneity and experimentation without altering the set or the atmosphere. The same applies to the treacherous realms of finding the best expression for a poster. Getting the tone right allows

for more creative license and can even make room, to a certain degree, for some departures.

The intimidating architecture melds Art Deco, Bauhaus Modern, Expressionism, and Gothic influences. The steep verticality of the structures exacerbates the feeling of social stratification. The high contrast of the light urban elements with the dark sky gives the impression of a chiaroscuro painting. The interiors are modernist with Art Deco elements. Props and sets are based on the technical and scientific peak of the 1920s. We again witness a representation of the future that is tied to the past to make it believable. We observe machines featuring massive mechanical elements, like clock arms and gears, with wide use of brass and copper, and steam-powered technology.

Lastly, the provocative and visually iconic dystopian aesthetic of Stanley Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange was the centrepiece of the third SFA workshop. The movie explores subversive themes that encourage unconventional approaches in poster design. Kubrick's adaptation of Anthony Burgess's novel is a hyper-stylised social critique featuring avant-garde fashion, geometric patterns, strong contrast, and unconventional colour palettes. From Korova Milk Bar's surrealist interior design to the layout of Alex's room and the brutalist scenery of Southmere Estate, every detail stands as testimony to a multi-layered aesthetic that continuously inspired pop culture. The third SFA workshop highlights the themes of identity, rebellion, and counterculture and their role in defining contemporary design trends. The SFA workshop is not just about designing posters with striking visuals and strong messages; they are about pushing through the confines of what's fashionable and exploring new ways of thinking. Looking at A Clockwork Orange through the lens of costume design, we can identify an entire collection of iconic pieces that tell a story of their own, from Alex's bowler hat or the droogs' attire to the crane, the mask, bracers, or cricket codpiece. Complementing the outfit fashion and architectural aesthetics, the movie features a multitude of designed objects that fit right within the narrative of the movie. Maximalist interiors and explicit erotic objects, like Herman Makkink's phallic sculpture or the Allan Clark-influenced erotic furniture, often contrast the rather sterile elements composed of white moulded plastic, brushed aluminium and chrome, and thick glass panes. The studied and intentional choices of iconic objects, like the British-made Probe 16 car, confer the movie an unmistakable visual identity.

All of these elements infuse the students' creative consciousness and seep into their creations, as they attempt to balance nostalgia with modernity by delving into the film's stark brutality and intricate fabrics of the visual narrative.

Structure of a SFA Event

An instalment of a SFA event features four distinct phases, each with a well-established role in supporting the creation of alternative movie posters. While they are functionally delimited, they are not necessarily temporarily delimited. Rather, they are interlaced, supporting and completing one another. The

following section accounts for the inner workings of these phases in greater detail, viewed through the lens of the third instalment of the event that took place in 2024.

SFA - Introduction

The first of these is the "Introduction". It generally announces the theme for the current event, talks about how societies can be understood through architecture and film, projects the movie to participants, encourages them to engage critically with the movie and the concept of dystopia, and assists them in both deconstructing the original poster and in analysing existing alternative posters and how they might remix or reinterpret the ideas and aesthetics of the movie. This phase is not self-standing but rather prepares the terrain for the other three phases to unfold. Handled by the event organizers, Nely-Andreea Vînău, Tiberiu Teodor-Stanciu, and Răzvan-Mircea Nica, the "Introduction" phase exposes students to the consecrated ideas and aesthetics of the original artifacts. This process involves looking back on existing work, and content in order to look forward and create something new.

SFA - Conferences

Interdisciplinary conferences, discussions, and talks enrich the alternative poster-making workshop by shaping a sense of community, fostering a sense of curiosity, and serving as a prompt to explore uncharted territories. This open invitation to the unknown depths of dystopia resembles the edges of old maps, adorned with fantastical creatures and menacing monsters. Cartographers filled unexplored spaces with products of their fears and anxieties about the unknown. These chimeras lay just beyond the known world hinting at the dangers that may lay ahead. In many ways, dystopian worlds follow a similar logic in the sense of imagining frontiers in scenarios that exaggerate social fears, political doctrines, environmental catastrophes, or unchecked technological advancements. These exaggerations, both in cartography and dystopias, warn humanity to proceed with caution. Yet, while the maps of old confined the dangers to the margins of the known world, dystopian worlds invite a head-on approach.

Speakers from varied fields like art, design, architecture, philosophy, and literature encourage students to question the status quo in their endeavour to define the alternative poster. The role of these mentor figures is not necessarily to guide the participants on an established path, but rather to reveal more alternatives to them. The conferences are defined by a dynamic space where ideas and concepts converge, covering a large array of perspectives on the dystopian movie that is being subjected to. Creativity thrives at the intersection of disciplines; while an architect will discuss the poetics of space that define the movie, a philosopher explores semiotics in the search for meaning, a designer will search for composition patterns, and a linguist will translate the nuances in the dialog and underline the subtext. Throughout the three editions of SFA since 2022, crafting visual narratives was aided by professionals from the

fields of art, photography, and graphics like Matei Bejenaru, Dan Perjovschi, or Federico Babina discussing their craft and the role of composition, typography, and aesthetics in the journey towards compelling alternative posters. Together with the students, SFA guests discussed how contemporary design trends intersect with the established paradigms and how to approach an alternative poster from early sketches to abstract and complex visuals.

Literature and philosophy add layers of intellectual depth to the poster design process. Emanuela Ilie and Radu Cucuteanu explored the means through which symbolism, narrative structures, and literature can inform the alternative posters by fuelling imagination, evoking moods, or conveying themes. The poster is viewed as a medium of thought, challenging perceptions of concepts like existentialism, ethics, semiotics, or aesthetics. Vlad Enculescu and Silviu Teodor-Stanciu ensured an industrial designer point of view on the dystopian movies analysing and debating set designs, furniture choices, and the importance of using certain objects in key scenes that are able to carry the plot further or to provide depth in deciphering the characters.

Balancing space, form, and structure through the lens of architecture as a means of discovery and understanding, Anca Horvath, Viola Rühse, and Dana Vais explored how geometry, proportion, and hierarchy can lead to harmonious compositions. Using AI and traditional means of representation was also a focus point in the endeavour to bring thoughts into being through alternative posters. By integrating architecture, literature, philosophy, art, history and design the SFA workshop makes a point of the importance of a holistic approach in designing alternative posters. The work of the students and teachers alike is not isolated from the larger world, but rather they enter a feedback loop that reflects and prompts a rich cultural landscape.

SFA - Workshop

The primary goal of the "Workshop" phase is to aid students image, manage and represent alternatives throughout the creative process. The workshop offers practical assistance, developing the skills needed to create an alternative representation of the concepts in the movie. It also provides participants with the opportunity to receive individual mentorship, which involves receiving feedback on their creative work, assisting them in being bold and expressive in realising their alternative posters by challenging their ideas or forming and aiding them in managing choices throughout the creative process. This workflow calls upon a varied pool of knowledge and skills to reinterpret the ideas and aesthetics of the movie through a personal authentic filter.

Throughout this article, we have frequently used the word alternative to refer to a varied array of concepts and things. As the title might clarify, this section focuses on the process of designing an alternative poster. By breaking down the word *alternative* into *alter* and *native*, we contrast a distinctly crafted instantiation, the alter, to the original one, the native. Although we use it differently, we were inspired by Martín Ávila's hyphenation of the word, alter-



Figure 1. SFA - (ALTER native) context for creative growth and critical thinking.

native, describing "artifacts' relations to environments and beings", indicating the "alterity of a thing, its own foreignness (...)"[14] The native is therefore represented by the established form of the official movie poster while the alters represent the multitude of alternative posters that derive from the origin point. Therefore, the concept of an *alter* represents an instantiated alternative or a snapshot of a creative artifact at a specific point in time. Alters only appear in creative contexts that are constrained. This means that for an alter or something different to appear, some aspects need to remain constant. This constant essence that links these artifacts together could be related to content, theme, concepts, goals, etc.

The *alter*, as well as the *native*, are driven by the same creative force that channels emotions, passion, ardour, fieriness, strategy, or instinct. Exploring and exploiting one's unique perspective to portray the native story is most revealing for the other, adding new layers of complexity to their understanding. Similar to Heidegger's circle of understanding, the alternative of one informs another.[15] Fragments of perception will weave together into a great tapestry. This abstract construct of the story weaved through the perspective of the many, provides new alternative realities that fuel the continuous process of meaning-making. Every distinct creative choice we make creates an alter. Every day, we are faced with contexts that require us to make choices. These choices end up defining us and the world around us. We choose ourselves from an endless pool of selves. We choose to write this article from an endless pool of articles. We choose to manifest a poster in a specific form from an infinite pool of potential poster forms. Every choice implies a decision between two or more alternatives. This means that, in a creative process, alternatives can be understood as an expression of options from which we can select.

Our main interest lies with the alternatives and *alters* involved in the process of creating the new, in contrast to the old or established. We will be looking at how we organized SFA as a context for exploring alternatives and alters, focusing on alters as finished artifacts or final instantiations.

The common understanding of the notion of something that already exists, like an original or native, is that they are static or unchanging. This simply doesn't align with the complexities of our contemporary perception and understanding of the world. The existing is, therefore, better conceptualized as a living organism that goes through the continuous transformative process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of meaning. The alternatives and alters are, therefore, part of the existing, and acknowledging this helps us understand the adaptability of function and the fluid nature of identity. Posters can be seen as morphologies in transformation; the content of the movie they represent becomes a fluid that can fill different kinds of shapes and

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14 Martín Ávila, "(De)signs as response," in *Designing in coexistence: Reflections on Systemic Change* (Croatian Architect's Association, 2023), 148.

15 Martin Heidegger, *Originea operei de artă* (Editura Humanitas, 1995).

contours using synthesis, framing, selection, evocation, manifestation, and (re) interpretation. Existing art and design objects, such as posters, can serve as teaching tools for emerging artists and designers. By studying them, students decode and derive meaning, uncover hidden complexities like technique and composition, and build "cultural capital." This can assist them in remaking the object, not by copying but by interpreting, allowing students to find their voice.[16]

In the SFA workshop, organizers and mentors support the participants in their design endeavours, using alternatives and alters as an opportunity for learning and growth by critically engaging with the native. Content is analysed and selected. Concepts are exposed or hidden so that they fit the context for which the poster is intended and to communicate values and attitudes representative of said context. The graphical wrapper becomes a representation of an individualized perspective/perception of the content. "In understanding the language of design, expressed by the shape, colour, texture, and imagery of an object, there are constant paradoxes between function and symbolism to be addressed."[17] Tackling the expressions of ideas into visual forms becomes significantly easier in a context where individuals are in permanent flux with their mentors and peers.

Dystopian movie posters become the perfect incentive for pushing the boundaries of visual language by diving deep into the main themes and narratives of the story and lore for an unconventional aesthetic to emerge. In a sense, the creative process is not about construction but rather about dismantling and searching for meaning in between the pieces of the puzzle. The poster also becomes the vessel through which the emotional vulnerability of the designer is channelled. Emotional and rational decisions transform the act of designing a dystopian movie poster into an act of rebellion, a refusal to adhere to the status quo. Seen this way, SFA posters become akin to visual essays, personal declarations, and artistic acts of defiance. Dystopian themes emerge through the minds and hands of young designers as something tangible, not just as a throwback to the universe depicted in movies but as a challenge to reconsider our own realities. As such, it becomes a sort of manifesto - it represents and argues for our unique perspective and understanding of a movie - in addition to being a means of communication with others.

SFA - Exhibition

Lastly, the SFA "Exhibition" allows participants to reflect on the unique representations, by themselves or others, and on creative practice as a whole. Participants are encouraged to critically engage with the various perspectives and frames of reference that drove the creation process of the posters in the exhibition. This analysis of the final forms deepens their understanding of the movie, the dystopian context, and the final visual forms. The exhibition is a safe

16 Ganz Blythe, *Object Lessons*, 116.

17 Sudjic, *The Language of Things*, 34.

space, where participants can engage with mentors, peers, and the general public in an analysis and appreciation of the generated artifacts.

SFA posters are thought-provoking, they are evocative, create intrigue, and elicit emotions by translating into visual storytelling the lore of the movie as well as the creative imagery of the designers. They represent new interpretations of the aesthetics that might serve as foundations for future alternative thinkers.

The SFA exhibition is also a gateway for new audiences to discover dystopian cult classics by providing a visual allure that prompts curiosity and reaches new audiences. Whether it is the use of colours, shapes, layouts, textures, or the delivery of the message, these exhibitions bring cinematic and visual arts into a direct dialogue with the fashion world. The SFA experience provides a place where art, storytelling, and design intersect and merge into alternative perspectives and cultural narratives that fuel fashion in a broader sense. The poster's imagery can reinforce archetypes, or promote subcultures ensuring that certain styles, be it noir, cyberpunk, retro-future, hippie, or neokitsch remain part of the fashion discourse. Cinema and clothing fashion are intrinsically connected through iconic costumes, character styling, and concept art that transcend the screen to incite fashion trends. The focus on reinterpretation encourages cross-pollination between arts and visual mediums, enabling the appearance of hybrid trends that blend the past and present.

The exhibition is the final act of the entire workshop, and not just a celebration, but the catalyst for visual storytelling that echoes into many other disciplines, including fashion. These exhibitions and their alternative posters can influence aesthetics, revive nostalgia, and amplify subcultures, in other words, they set up a visual lexicon that can be used by designers and fashion enthusiasts to draw upon and foster new and new alternatives.

SFA also hosts itinerant exhibitions of its alternative posters. These serve as vehicles for cultural exchange and accessibility. In Iaşi, the exhibitions travelled between Fablab, The Palace of Culture, The Turkish baths, and The „G.M. Cantacuzino" Faculty of Architecture and were part of Romanian Creative Week, Architecture Must, RAM, and many other festivals, conferences or programs. The itinerant nature of the exhibition and the diverse settings and happenings bring the paradigm of the alternative to diverse communities. This inclusivity is key to SFA workshops and exhibitions, as it not only broadens participation, but also serves as an incentive for a more equitable cultural landscape. As they travel, the exhibitions carry narratives, imagery, thoughts, and ideas that create dialogue opportunities between students and the host community. Setting up the exhibition in a different setting is a whole new challenge for students, as they have to adapt and find solutions for displaying the posters in context. Feedback and engagement with the public are key for a better measure of one's efforts and also pave the road towards future reinterpretations, keeping the exhibition dynamic, pertinent, and relevant.

Event Reception

While feedback was not methodically gathered throughout the event, the organizers received and asked for feedback from participants throughout all the involved phases. In future editions, it might be interesting to collect this feedback more methodically. Regardless, the event offered a few takeaways. Students participating in the event felt that SFA enhanced their ability to think critically and that it encouraged boldness in their creative approach. This imbues the event we created with a certain degree of success that, we hope, will prove useful to others wanting to use alternatives as a way to enhance growth and critical thinking.

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Fashioning Housing

Fabric of a City
Modernities of Modernist Social Housing in Athens 1930-1940 & 1950-1970

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Keywords
social housing in Athens; modernist architecture; heritage

Abstract
This paper explores the influence of modernist social housing on the formation of Athens' urban fabric, aiming to highlight its valuable contribution not only to the city's historical evolution but also to its present-day form. Contemporary Athens stretches across a vast, chaotically structured, and rather impersonal expanse. Seen from above, it resembles a sea of concrete blocks. Yet within this overwhelming density, a closer examination reveals the presence of social housing complexes constructed throughout the Attica region between the 1930s and the 1970s, that stand out for their considered layouts and generous open-air spaces that distinguish them from the surrounding urban sprawl. The Social Housing Estate, inaugurated in Athens and Piraeus at the beginning of the twentieth century, represents a fascinating and perhaps unique example of collective housing in the country. It served as an opportunity for the principles of the modernist architecture - then emerging as a significant trend across Europe - to be embraced and implemented. The stripped-down façades and the rational layouts of these buildings find a parallel in the influence of modernism on clothing fashion that favored simplicity, geometry, and the rejection of ornament. Their austere elegance, functional clarity, and emphasis on light, proportion, and rhythm resonate with the visual codes of modernist style. The paper argues that these social housing complexes constitute a significant heritage. They serve as a testament to the modern movement, a valuable chapter in the evolution of the city of Athens, and an essential building stock amid the current housing shortage. As such, we believe they merit recognition, appropriate protection, and preservation.

Introduction

Athens, the capital and the largest city of Greece, boasts a history spanning over 3,400 years. Its urban landscape has been shaped by a succession of historical events, socio-political transformations, and waves of migration. The role of fashion in influencing the city's built fabric can be traced through various historical periods, each reflecting shifting ideals of beauty, modernity, nationalism, and identity.

The architecture of the Classical era, for instance, embodies the power, wealth, and cultural dominance of a city-state that reached the height of its glory during the Golden Age of the 5th century BCE. In the centuries that followed, however, Athens gradually drifted away from this era of prosperity, evolving into a quiet and provincial small town. During the period of Ottoman occupation (1458–1833) in particular, the city's architectural profile came to reflect traditional and vernacular influences, prioritizing function and religious modesty over aesthetic display.

A critical turning point came in 1834, when Athens, then a settlement of roughly 10,000 inhabitants resembling a large village, was chosen as the capital of the newly established Greek state following independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1830. The architectural style of Neoclassicism emerges as a prominent movement, reflecting the aspiration of the newly formed state to align itself with its ancient past. The urban design of the city emphasised open spaces and boulevards that would provide views to the Acropolis and public squares became central to social and civic life. Other than the notable neoclassical civic buildings designed mainly by German and Austrian architects, private neoclassical villas and mansions became common among the Athenian elite, blending classical elements with modern comforts. Even smaller-scale houses were built or reshaped in accordance with the official style, resulting in cohesive and continuous neoclassical façades along the city's streets.

Yet, the persistence of neoclassical aesthetics gradually gave way to new architectural ideologies as the pressures of modernisation and urban growth intensified. The emergence of modernist architecture marked a decisive break from the classical tradition. This transformation unfolded rapidly during the early 20th century, driven by a combination of social factors, such as mass migration; economic mechanisms, most notably the *antiparochi*[1] system; and administrative frameworks, including urban planning reforms and new building regulations. Guided by the principles of functionalism and minimalism, the modernist architecture of the time responded to the demands of industrialization, urban expansion, and evolving societal needs.

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1 The *antiparochi* system entailed landowners ceding their plots to developers, who then constructed apartments; in return, landowners received ownership of some apartment units. This became the dominant financing -housing construction model in Athens from the 1950s onward. In her book *"Builders, Housewives and the Construction of Modern Athens"* (2017), 175-81, Theocharopoulou provides a detailed explanation of *antiparochi*.

Social Housing in Athens. The Context

The construction of public housing in Greece starts right after the end of World War I. A series of large scale emergencies throughout the 1920-1960 period forced the state to intervene forcefully and to develop large scale ambitious and original - by the standards of the time - housing programs. Firstly, an overwhelming large influx of refugees, secondly a series of large scale earthquakes, then the extensive destruction of houses and settlements during World War II and the civil war that followed, ultimately followed by, a series of large-scale earthquakes. As a result the Government developed a policy that saw housing as an *ad hoc* responsibility of the state related to emergencies only.[2]

The arrival of Greek refugees from various areas at the end and after World War I, and above all, the enormous influx of more than 1.200.000 refugees that arrived in Greece after the Asia Minor Catastrophe in 1922[3] had a profound impact on Greek society. Approximately half of the incoming populations were placed in rural areas and the other half in urban centres, over half a million were settled in Athens and Piraeus, thus doubling their population.[4] This sudden population increase triggered a severe housing crisis, accelerating urban densification and reshaping the city's architectural and demographic profile. Shacks made out of mud bricks, wood or any other available building material were built wherever there was open air free space, in the city and its periphery. So that soon, huge areas of slums with extremely poor living conditions were created, many of which remained in use until the late 70s. To cope with this situation, the state, often with the support from international organisations, developed some of the earliest social housing estates.

These estates were to be built at a certain distance out of the fringe of existing cities to avoid interference with "normal" life but also to ensure a more homogeneous social environment within the urban refugee settlements. In the case of Athens and Piraeus there were created 12 major and 34 smaller refugee settlements located at a distance between 1km and 4km from the boundary of

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2 J. Papaioannou, *Housing in Greece - Government Activity* (The Technical Chamber of Greece, 1975), 150. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MYdEo6usuxqpUqfgZYoj9R4pFTVjjATf/view.

3 The Asia Minor Catastrophe refers to the Greek defeat in the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922); the burning of Smyrna and the atrocities committed against the non-Muslim population of the city in September 1922; and the subsequent uprooting from the Turkish coastline and inner Asia Minor of approximately 1,200,000 Orthodox Greeks who ultimately settled in Greece. For an indication of the exchange of populations, see: Stephen P. Ladas, *The Exchange of Minorities: Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey* (The MacMillan Company, 1932); Dimitri Pentzopoulos, *The Balkan Exchange of Minorities and Its Impact upon Greece* (Mouton & Co, 1962); Renée Hirschon (ed.), *Crossing the Aegean: An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange between Greece and Turkey* (Berghahn Books, 2003), https://journals.openedition.org/diasporas/10419#ftn1.

4 Papaioannou, *Housing in Greece,* 152.

the existing built up are (Fig. 1).[5] The Refugee Care Fund (established by the Greek government) and the Refugee Settlement Commission (autonomous from the state and supervised by the League of Nations) were the two institutions that acted in the field of the refugee housing during the first period 1930-1940.

The public housing complexes that were constructed between 1930 and up to 2004 by various entities as well as by the central government (Ministry of Welfare), for the housing of refugees, internal migrants, workers and employees, were granted directly for owner-occupation. The choice of owner-occupation over social renting resulted in the shift of responsibility for the management of these complexes from the constructing entity to the individual apartment owner. Thus, a significant opportunity was lost for these complexes to form part of a general housing stock that could have been used in the future as social housing, to accommodate those unable to acquire housing on their own.[6]

The Influence of Modernism

While Neoclassicism symbolised Greece's connection to its glorious past, acting as an ideal vehicle for the formation of a national identity, Modernism reflected the country's attempt for integration into the global architectural trends and the practical needs of a modernising society.

When the 4th CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) was held in Athens during the summer of 1933, focusing on the theme of the functional city, prominent foreign architects had the opportunity to admire several notable Greek architectural examples. Among these, the most representative was the ambitious and highly successful nationwide program for constructing new school buildings. A program that stood out for its scale, vision, and execution, showcasing modernist principles adapted to local needs. The leading architects behind this initiative included Nikos Mitsakis, Emmanuel Siagas, and Patroklos Karantinos, who played pivotal roles in its development and realisation.[7]

1920s–1940s: Refugee Crisis and Early Social Housing

In the case of social housing settlements constructed during the interwar period - each differing in scale, architectural style, and urban layout - the influence of Modernism is evident in their structural systems, design principles, and architectural language. While one might argue that features such as minimalism, the restrained use of materials, the absence of decorative features and ornamentation, and the emphasis on communal spaces were driven more from necessity and limited resources rather than by a conscious modernist vision,

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5 Papaioannou, *Housing in Greece,* 152.

6 Nikolia-Spyridoula Myofa, "Social housing in Athens: study of the refugee settlements Dourgouti and Tavros from 1922 until today" (PhD Diss., Athens, 2019), x. https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/45949.

7 Fotini Georgakopoulou, "Refugee settlements in Athens and Piraeus (1930–1940)," Encyclopaedia of the Hellenic World, Asia Minor, http://www.ehw.gr/l.aspx?id=5944>.

the resulting built environment suggests otherwise. These refugee housing complexes, beyond their historical role as places of memory, form aesthetically coherent urban ensembles that justifiably stand as a representative expression of the interwar modernist movement in Greece.

Defined by their simple, functional, and minimalist style, these buildings showcase an interesting and often innovative architectural approach, inspired by the (then) contemporary German housing standards and based on the concept of providing the "minimum surface for decent living," internationally recognised as *Existenzminimum*.[8]

Among the architects involved in social housing projects in Athens during the interwar period, Patroklos Karantinos, Kimon Laskaris, and Dimitris Kyriakou played key roles in adapting the international Modernist movement to the local context, blending global principles with Greek architectural traditions. They were all familiar with the works of Bauhaus and Le Corbusier, the principles of the garden city and modern architecture that emphasised clean lines, new materials (e.g. concrete), and a rejection of ornamentation. They viewed high-rise buildings favorably, arguing that high-rise construction in central areas would serve as a powerful antidote to the uncontrolled sprawl of the capital.[9]

Working with limited resources, these architects strived to provide the best possible living conditions for the refugees. The buildings were typically three-story high, each comprising minimum-dimension one or two apartments. Vertical circulation was facilitated by a single staircase serving six apartments, with no corridors or elevators in order to optimise space and reduce costs.

Construction relied on inexpensive local materials, reflecting the economic constraints of the time. The structural system consists of reinforced concrete slabs and stone load bearing walls. The simple, plain volumes, where the only spatial events are the repeated small balconies, combined with the total lack of decorative elements, give the buildings an austerity reminiscent of German functionalism.[10]

The buildings of this period 1930-1936 present common characteristics: They are mainly three-storey, consist of one and two-room dwellings with an average floor area of 30-40 m² and usually hosted more than one family. Communal spaces included laundries on the terraces or semi-basements which were often converted into residences as the apartments were never enough. Most of them were double fronted, therefore bright enough, allowing plenty of sunlight. They have no elevators, only staircases that serve 2 to 12 apartments on each floor.

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8 Ioanna Theocharopolou, *Builders, Housewives and the Construction of Modern Athens* (Onassis Foundation, 2022), 89.

9 Georgakopoulou, "Refugee settlements in Athens and Piraeus (1930–1940)."

10 Georgakopoulou, "Refugee settlements."

The buildings are usually arranged in simple rectangular blocks, aligned in parallel rows, and occasionally forming L- shaped or U-shaped configurations. The open spaces between these blocks, although thoughtfully provided, were typically left undefined, with no dedicated green areas, communal gathering spots, or recreational facilities. This absence of structured outdoor amenities was likely the result of an economy of means. It may also reflect a broader modernist approach to open space in minimal collective housing developments built elsewhere in Europe during the same period.

For the refugees, life in these houses required significant adjustments to a lifestyle that differed from what they were accustomed to. This shift led to numerous challenges, including cramped indoor spaces, the absence of thoughtfully designed communal areas, and a lack of dedicated spaces for children's play. Consequently, one of the key social and architectural phenomena in early social housing in Athens was the appropriation of common spaces for private use, particularly by the inhabitants of ground-floor apartments.

Residents in crowded neighbourhoods often converted the open areas in the front or in the back of their apartment into small personal gardens. Flowerpots, small vegetable plots, and greenery became a form of self-expression, offering a resemblance of comfort and aesthetic value in otherwise utilitarian environments. These gardens also served practical purposes, as they allowed families to grow food, especially in areas where food insecurity was a concern due to economic hardship. This practice reflected the adaptive nature of residents in response to the available housing conditions and the limited provisions. Over time, these transformed spaces contributed to the sense of belonging and community within neighbourhoods.[11]

The appropriation of common spaces in early Athens' social housing serves as a fascinating example of how individuals and communities adapted their built environment, both practically and socially, to make their lives more manageable and comfortable. Thus, these interventions can be seen as a form of modernisation within the original modernist ensembles and illustrate how residents actively adapted and redefined the built environment, aligning the functional and social logic of modernist design with the lived realities of everyday life.

The "Prosfygika" Apartments on Alexandras Avenu (Fig. 2), in the centre of Athens, constructed in 1933–1935, constitute a typical such example: A complex of eight parallel, Bauhaus-inspired flat-roofed, three story apartment blocks with a total surface area of 11,000 square meters, containing 228 apartments in total. Each unit measured approximately 40 m² and was designed for a four-person family. Key elements included stone-walled construction, thoughtfully

11 G. Vlachos, G. Giannitsaris., and E. Hatjicostas., "Housing the Asia Minor Refugees in Athens and Piraeus between 1920 and 1940," *Arxitektonika Themata* (1978): 119-20.

oriented internal courtyards for sunlight, shared laundry facilities, efficient layouts, and independent entrances per dwelling. Influenced by modernist and rationalist housing ideals - emphasising minimal ornamentation, social functionality, and cost-efficiency - the complex is viewed as one of Greece's earliest examples of social housing in the Modern Movement and in 2008 was declared a listed monument by the Central Council of Modern Monuments of the Ministry of Culture.[12]

Other complexes from this period, called "prosfygika" (refugee housing) are the ones of Stegi Patridos (1933-1936), in the centre of Athens, on the foot of hill Lycabettus, Kaisariani (1934-1935), Nea Smyrni (1926–1930), Dourgouti (1922-1930), Kolonos (Late 1920s–1930s), Prosfygika of Vyronas (1930s). Due to the urgent need for housing and limited financial resources, these estates were constructed quickly and economically, often prioritizing basic shelter over long-term urban planning or infrastructure integration. Throughout the years, as Athens expanded these once-peripheral estates became embedded within the urban fabric.[13]

Despite their modest construction, these housing ensembles hold significant heritage value due to their distinct urban morphologies. Organised around shared courtyards, pedestrian pathways, and human-scaled public spaces, they introduced a cohesive spatial structure that contrasts with the fragmented, profit-driven pattern of *polykatoikia* development, dominating much of Athens. Their low-rise typologies, rhythmic façades, and integration of communal areas have encouraged strong neighbourhood identities and social interaction. Today, as the surrounding city has densified, they serve as rare examples of planned, collective urban living, offering valuable insights into alternative models of housing and urban organisation.

1940s–1950s: War and Reconstruction

The Axis Occupation (1941–1944) and subsequent Greek Civil War (1946–1949) left much of the urban infrastructure in ruins. Moreover, Athens experienced a dramatic population increase during the 1950s. This was driven by internal migration, especially from the countryside, where economic opportunities were limited, and agricultural decline pushed people towards urban centres. Additional housing pressures were created.

This was a period characterised by a rapid urbanisation that led to the mass construction of apartment buildings (*polykatoikies*). Much of Athens' housing stock during this era got shaped by the system known as "antiparochi," where property owners allowed developers to construct on their land in exchange for receiving a share of the apartments. A large number of neoclassical structures was demolished or abandoned, especially in the historical center as the

12 Research by O. Simaioforidou, *Sadas-pea / social housing in Attica region*, 2013, https://www.sadas-pea.gr/kinonikes-katikies-stin-attiki/.

13 Georgakopoulou, "Refugee settlements".

new trend was modernization that prioritised functionality and density over preservation of the existing neoclassical fabric.

In this framework, reconstruction projects have been initiated by the state. In 1954 the Organisation of Workers' Housing (OEK 1954-2012)[14] was established by the Greek Ministry of Employment and Social Security aiming to provide affordable housing for working-class families, particularly those migrating from rural areas to urban centres like Athens in search of jobs in factories, construction and small businesses.

The architecture of the Social Housing Estate of this period (1955-1970), is relatively uniform and based on a general typology of houses adapted to the characteristics of each area. The focus is on efficient use of space, with small apartments designed to house families within a limited urban footprint. Practicality was prioritised to accommodate the needs of lower-income families and apartments often included compact kitchens and bathrooms, reflecting changing domestic roles and modern living standards.

The transition from rural villages to urban social housing estates marked a shift in the lives of many migrants during this period. Relocating to compact apartment units introduced residents to amenities such as electricity, running water, and improved sanitation, offering a standard of living that often exceeded that of their previous rural homes or informal urban settlements. Yet these improved material conditions came with significant social implications. The limited spatial capacity of the new apartments discouraged traditional multigenerational living arrangements and accelerated the move towards smaller, nuclear family structures.

The Key Role of Architect Aris Konstantinidis[15]

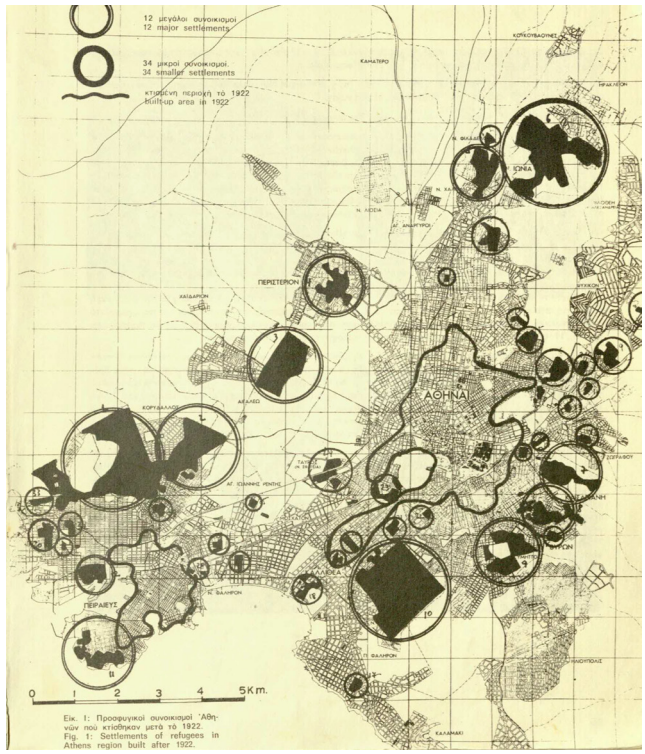
Aris Konstantinidis, as head of the Design Department of the OEK from 1955 to 1957 set the ground of the aesthetics of the new settlements with the use of exposed, reinforced concrete as the skeleton and the exterior plastered brick walls in recess. The layout was simple and functional with every couple of units sharing a common stairwell.

Konstantinidis (1913-1993) holds a special place among the Greek architects and his works[16] are considered emblematic masterpieces of modern architecture. He

14 Elli Vasilikioti, *Housing in Greece - Government Activity* (The Technical Chamber of Greece, 1975), 162-63, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MYdEo6usuxqpUqfgZYoj9R4pFTVjjATf/view.

15 Aris Konstnantindis is widely regarded as a foundational figure of Greek architecture, well known for both his architectural practice and theoretical writing. The monograph *Aris Konstantinidis (1913–1993),* authored by Paola Cofano and published by Electa in 2010, provides a comprehensive documentation of his life, architectural practice, and theoretical contributions.

16 Weekend House in Anavyssos (1962), Xenia Hotels (1957–1967), Ioannina and Komotini Archaeological Museums, Public and Workers' Housing Projects, Several Private Residences are among his emblematic works.



Εικ. 1: Προσφυγικοί συνοικισμοί Αθηνών που κτίσθηκαν μετά το 1922.
Fig. 1: Settlements of refugees in Athens region built after 1922.

Figure 1. Settlements of refugees in Athens region built after 1922.

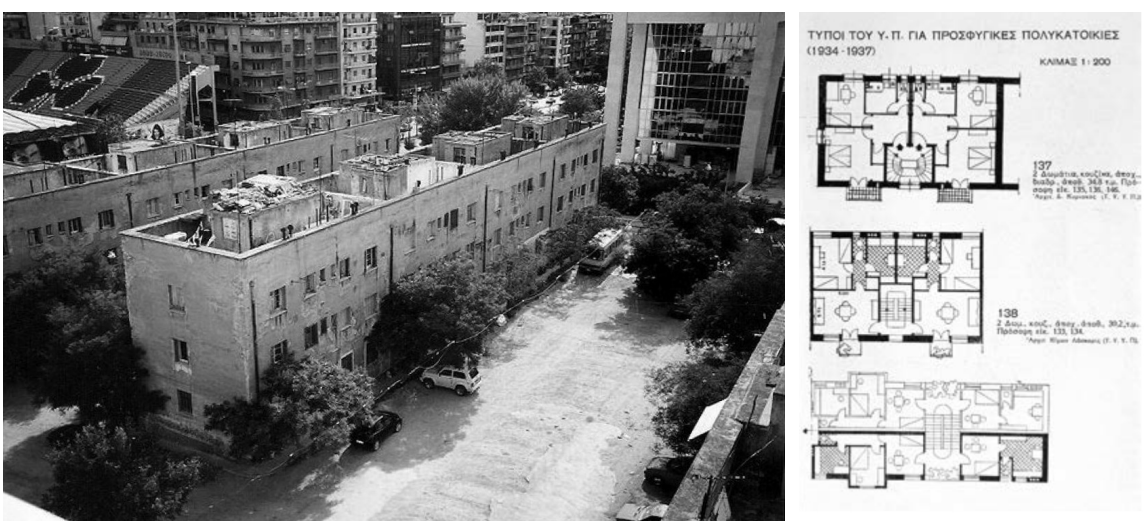


Figure 2. The complex of eight refugee apartment buildings on Alexandras Avenue considered to be a prominent example of the Bauhaus movement.

has been particularly criticising the adoption of Neoclassicism as it manifested in Athens during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, considering it to have been introduced by the Bavarian architects and intellectuals idealising, imitating, and appropriating aspects of Greek culture in order to serve Europeans in their search for their own ancestry. Therefore, he viewed Neoclassicism as an imposed aesthetic that failed to reflect the lived reality and traditions of modern Greece. He admired the simplicity and functionality of vernacular structures, the harmony with their environment and he argued that architecture should grow organically from its local context, much like traditional Aegean or rural Greek architecture. He advocated for a modern architecture grounded in local traditions and the Greek landscape.

Furthermore, the architect compared the "unpretentious" folk houses to the elaborate neoclassical edifices built after 1834, insisting that true Greek architecture had nothing to do with this type of public buildings and residences. He considered, moreover, that the zeal shown by the Philhellenes and other Europeans, but also by the Greeks with a Western mentality, for the creation of a "national" architectural idiom in the nineteenth century, ultimately led to the misguided promotion of a Neoclassicism that remained intrusive in the Greek space.[17]

Drawing inspiration from his studies in Munich and his research on traditional Old Athenian Houses in 1950 (Fig. 3),[18] he sought to propose a new way of living that blended Bauhaus inspired functionalism with a relationship between interior and exterior space influenced by the Mediterranean lifestyle. Therefore, he gave importance to the exterior balcony with its recessed space as a counterspace to the monolithic volume of the buildings. He also articulated the complexes in such a way to form inner courtyards in between the individual buildings, creating a reference to the traditional way of living. His influence remained strong many years after his departure from OEK. There is a considerable advance in the way the open space is treated in the 1950s social housing if compared to the 1930s one.

As already mentioned, open spaces in the 1930s were generally not designed for active social interaction, they did not encourage community engagement and were focused on providing basic living conditions rather than focusing on aesthetics or social cohesion. A minimum attention was paid on outdoor spaces which were often left undefined, were small and functional, serving more utilitarian roles, such as areas for drying laundry or small gardens.

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17 Theocharopolou, *Builders, Housewives,* 51-65.

18 Konstantinidis authored numerous influential books and essays. His key theoretical works include: *Two "Villages" from Mykonos* (1947), *Old Athenian Houses* (1950), *Country Churches of Mykonos* (1953),"Vessels for Life or The Problem of a Genuine Architecture" (1972), *Projects and Buildings* (1981), *On Architecture* (1984), *God-Built (Theochtista)* (1992).

In the 1950s, there was a noticeable shift towards prioritising community and social interaction. Open spaces became more thoughtfully planned and generous in layout, addressing the needs of diverse residents, including children, elderly individuals, and families. This era saw an increased focus on improved quality of life, with public spaces within housing blocks becoming larger, better organised, and more multifunctional. Features such as playgrounds, parks, and spacious communal courtyards were integrated to encourage socialising, relaxation, and outdoor activities. This shift demonstrated a growing awareness of the role community life plays in urban settings and how well-designed open spaces can strengthen social cohesion and enhance overall living standards.

The workers' housing complex of Nea Philadelphia (Fig. 4) is the first large-scale such project, a work of architect Aris Konstantinidis, as head of the Design Department of the OEK from 1955 to 1957. Other estates from this period include the ones in Rentis, Agios Sostis (1962-64), Nea Smirni, Elliniko and Imittos. These are all defined as "garden cities" and follow the basic principles of garden-city design, with central and secondary larger-scale space, where the centre of the settlement is distinguished.[19]

After the 1960s the increase in the need for accommodation led to the demand for taller buildings. The Drapetsona complex, one of the denser projects, in the context of the rehabilitation of the area from the shacks,[20] provided 1,859 dwellings in total. Next to the initial two-storey detached houses with a small garden and the four-storey blocks of flats, followed seven-storey, eight-storey and ten-storey buildings.

From the photographs of the period showing the complexes immediately after their completion, one could imagine the impression - that these would have made on the refugee population, even though they were certainly a vast improvement if compared to the slums they have replaced. The 'avant-garde boldness' of the larger ones in particular (Drapetsona, Dourgoutiou), as well as the a-commonality of the spaces between them would have probably been accepted with a sense of sadness if not disappointment. Soon however, the initial impression changed and the complexes were animated by the users' interventions. The urgent need for more space brought about significant changes to the façades and terraces of the buildings (openings were added, new structures were built on the terraces etc.). The internal common open spaces as well, especially in the smaller complexes (Agioi Anargyroi Piraeus, Kaisariani , Agios Ioannis Rentis) were occupied by the tenants and converted into gardens and courtyards that functioned as extensions of their tiny residences.[21]

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19 Toussi Evgenia, https://www.athenssocialatlas.gr/en/article/the-refugee-settlements-of-athens/.

20 Papaioannou, *Housing in Greece,* 153.

21 Georgakopoulou, "Refugee settlements."

These appropriated open spaces played a significant role in the everyday life of the communities and in the broader urban landscape. By transforming the undefined common areas into gardens, courtyards, and semi-private extensions of their homes, residents not only enhanced their living conditions but also fostered stronger social interactions and a sense of belonging. Over time, these contributed to the creation of a distinct micro-scale urban fabric, blurring the boundaries between public and private.

In the years that followed, the fact that the first prototype apartment buildings were built to house the poor and desperate refugees, and thereafter the lower income workers, made middle-class Athenians generally suspicious of inhabiting apartment buildings in general. [22]

Social Housing in Athens: Current State of Conservation and Use. Heritage Value

The state of conservation and utilisation of the social housing stock in Athens varies significantly across different areas, reflecting their unique urban contexts, levels of maintenance, and land values.

The quality of the housing stock is influenced by several factors, including structural degradation, illegal alterations, and unauthorised additions. Furthermore, the condition and perception of these refugee housing areas are strongly affected by the quality of their surrounding public spaces as well-maintained and inviting public areas often enhance the value and public appeal of the adjacent housing stock.

The "Bauhaus" style apartment blocks of Alexandras street, also known as "Prosfygika of Alexandras avenue," a vibrant working-class district for refugees and their descendants, with local shops, cultural events, and strong community life, started to decline by the late 1990s and early 2000s. That was the time when many of the original residents moved away, and most of the apartments fell into disrepair and abandonment (Fig. 5).[23]

Most of the apartment blocks built in the 1930s-1940s are in rather bad shape, poorly maintained and either abandoned or inhabited by really low income residents who could not afford any better. An explanation for that is that the quality of the construction and the materials used were rather poor in the first place. Another aspect is that the small apartments of approximately 35-40 m², organised in large-scale residential complexes, failed to meet the contemporary housing needs and are now, for the most part, abandoned. In contrast, smaller-

22 Theocharopolou, *Builders, Housewives,* 100.

23 Dimitris Filippidis, *New Greek Architecture* (Melissa 1984), 203, 225.

scale complexes with larger housing units are in noticeably better condition in terms of maintenance.[24]

The complexes of the period 1950-1970 are in a better state, well preserved and inhabited with their generally larger public open spaces and more generous plan layout making them more attractive.

In districts such as Philadelfeia, Kaisariani, Stegi Patridos, Alexandras, and Tavros, the original boundaries of the public housing settlements remain distinctly recognisable. In contrast, areas like Vyronas and Hymettus exhibit a more dispersed integration of public housing within the modern urban fabric. Variations in land and property values are notable, with higher values often associated with better-maintained housing or more advantageous locations.[25]

Maintenance and restoration efforts, however, face numerous challenges. One common issue arises from ownership complications, as refugee apartments are frequently inherited by multiple heirs, complicating decision-making and leading to neglect. This, coupled with other logistical and financial constraints, often results in delayed or insufficient conservation measures.

In any case, within the overwhelming density of their adjacent cityscape, the social housing complexes constructed throughout the Attica region between the 1930s and the 1970s, still stand out today for their generous open-air and green spaces that distinguish them from the surrounding urban sprawl (Fig. 6).

Two Social Housing Case Studies

In our view, Athens' modernist social housing represents a remarkable architectural heritage, embodying a period of social ambition and architectural innovation, while contributing to the city's distinctive urban narrative. Preserving these structures creates a link between the aspirations of the past and a contemporary appreciation for historical and cultural diversity.

These housing estates are deeply embedded in the collective memory of their residents and surrounding communities. They capture stories of migration, resilience, and adaptation, serving as vivid reflections of the lives of working-class families and refugees. As tangible reminders of the social and economic challenges Athens faced during periods of significant transformation, they hold a unique and enduring value. These estates are integral to the urban, architectural and cultural identity of the city, highlighting the interplay between its history and its people.

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24 *Evgenia* Toussi, *Current state of building stock in the refugee settlements of the Central and Southern Sector of Athens*, 2024, https://www.athenssocialatlas.gr/en/article/the-refugee-settlements-of-athens/.

25 *Toussi, Current state of building stock in the refugee settlements.*



Figure 3. Photographs illustrating the interior façades surrounding the courtyards of traditional Athenian houses, as documented by Aris Konstantinidis in his book *Old Athenian Houses* (Politipo, 1983).



Figure 4. The workers' housing complex of Nea Philadelphia is the first large-scale project of architect Aris Konstantinidis, as head of the Design Department of the Organisation of Workers' Housing (OEK 1954-2012) from 1955 to 1957.



Figure 5. The complex of the apartment buildings on Alexandras Avenue in its actual state of abandonment (as of 23.09.2025) presents a neglected appearence. Nevertheless, its open spaces - though poorly maintained - still offer a pleasant green area within the densely built urban surroundings.

From this perspective we present two case studies that aim highlight the qualities and the potential of such housing complexes:

The first is the Rentis housing complex that has been studied by the 6th semester students of the School of Architecture, National Technical University of Athens, between the years 2022-2024, in the framework of the elective, undergraduate course, "Special topics of Architectural restoration," under the title "Modern Archaeologies: Sustainable strategies for Social Housing Building in Athens, 1950-1970."

The second case study focuses on the Dourgouti neighbourhood, which includes social housing developments from various historical periods representing a most interesting ensemble. Currently undergoing a process of gentrification, Dourgouti has recently drawn renewed attention, featuring prominently in both a 2024 documentary film[26] and two recently published books.[27]

The Rentis Housing Complex

The housing complex is located near the centre of Athens, inside the broader district of Rentis, a heavy industrial area with sporadic housing blocks. Prior to its industrialisation, the area was fertile farmland, next to Kifissos river with small private farms that provided the city markets with fresh products. Post-war development of the city altered the area and industrial units along the new Petrou Ralli avenue were built. OEK developed three social housing projects here. The case study complex is the biggest of all covering a plot area of 36,000m^2 surrounded by the Petrou Ralli avenue on the north and Agias Annis street on the east.

The complex is arranged according to the modern, free-standing building system in plots with regular or irregular shape, in a way that internal courtyards are created. It comprises 29 4-story buildings, totaling 378 apartments. The design was executed by a team of architects, supervised by George Skiadaresis and the construction was completed in 1959.

The Unit Layout

The original floor plan (Fig. 7) reflects a functional design approach that prioritizes the requirements of standard living of its residents. The carefully considered spatial organization aimed to provide comfortable and efficient living spaces. Upon entering a unit, there is a hallway that is open to the living area and is separated from the kitchen by a wall. There is also a small passageway along with two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom.

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26 Documentary film directed by Dimitris Bavellas, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt33176213/.

27 Meletis Zacharakis, *The Shack Generation – From Dourgouti to Neos Kosmos* (Zacharakis M. K., 2019).
Pantelis Arapinis, *The Dourgouti of the Refugees: "The City of the Partisans"* (Ellinike Ekdoseis, 2023).

Two balconies, one connected to the living room, and the other to the kitchen, enhance the resident experience providing an extension of the living areas and a connection between the indoor and outdoor space, nature and the surrounding urban fabric.

The Public Space

A great feature of the social housing projects of this period is the free space between them. The actual public space in most Athenian neighbourhoods consists of streets and occupies between 15-25% of the territory. The public space of the Rentis housing complex reaches 80% percent and consists of green spaces, streets, sidewalks and small squares.[28] Additionally, several communal spaces and shops are placed on the ground floor providing further opportunities for social interaction. The complex offers a blend of modernity and contextual relevance, contributing to the visual appeal and livability of the urban environment.

Current Situation of the Complex

Despite the tenants' continuous use, which has helped preserve most of the buildings' core infrastructure, significant issues have emerged in the complex: The abandonment of open public spaces which are often used as parking spaces; The concrete structures that present severe decay and can no longer comply with the current safety requirements and regulations; The buildings' poor to non-existent energy efficiency; The deterioration of the façade elements; Various interventions by tenants, such as the alteration of exterior porches and balconies into interior rooms to maximise space. If these are the main problems identified both by the students and the interviewed tenants - some of whom are long-time residents and others, newly established ones - all of them agree on a very special advantage that this complex offers: The green areas among the buildings that provide a sense of intimacy, something like a small village and create a special microclimate in a heavily industrialized area.

The Methodology of the Interpretation

The original blueprints were studied by the students and the analysis was complemented by surveys made on the site, as well as by archival research, bibliography and interviews with residents. Then three main areas of interest were identified:

The first focused on the public space either between the buildings (inner courtyards and access streets) or the shared common public space within the units (stairwells and rooftops). Special attention was drawn to the deterioration and neglect of these spaces, as well as their abandonment by the residents of the complex.

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28 Vaso Trova, "Workers' housing, the other side of modernism" in *The Modern notebooks*, ed. Panayiotis Tournikiotis (Futura, 2006), 69-78.



Rentis housing Complex



Tavros Housing Complex



Agios Sostis Housing Complex



Kaisariani Housing Complex

Figure 6. Aerial photographs of the social housing complexes of Rentis', and Tavros', Agios Sostis and Kaisariani, in their actual urban context, showing their generous open spaces and green areas in comparison with their surrounding buildings.

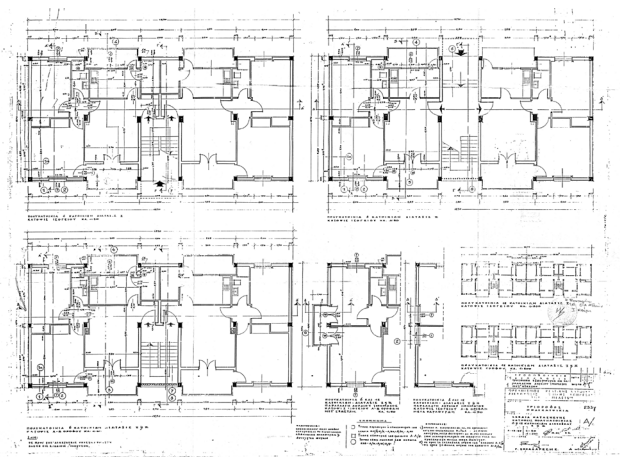


Figure 7. Original blueprints of a typical floor plan of the Rentis social housing complex.

The second delved into the structural integrity and deterioration of architectural elements, energy inefficiency, and alterations on the building envelope implemented by residents over time. Accessibility issues due to the lack of elevators were also raised.

Special attention was paid to the social transformations in terms of living patterns, demographic structure and number of occupants per unit. Therefore, the third area focused on the housing program, examining the problems regarding the outdated layouts of the units.

Proposed Strategies and Interventions
The second phase of the projects explored strategic interventions aimed at addressing the issues that were identified in the earlier stage.

Several projects tackled the theme of public open space and proposed interventions that aim to revalorise it, make it accessible and available for the inhabitants to use it for all kinds of activities. In these projects, the streets between the apartment buildings are converted into pedestrian ones to be used also by cyclists. A typology of four squares, which will display four different characters: the assembly square, the cultivation square, the playground and an amphitheater.

A significant number of projects addressed issues related to circulation and accessibility, proposing and designing new staircases or introducing elevators, and ramps for disabled and vulnerable tenants of the complex.

Others focused on the design of new, passive bioclimatic systems, including the redesign of common rooftops or the integration of bioclimatic façade elements. Numerous students also proposed expanding the outdoor space of each apartment, introducing new programs to increase square footage and enhance quality features.

In other cases, the extended balconies were connected to allow interaction and common usage by groups of tenants. Certain groups of students addressed adaptive layouts to accommodate the needs of emerging residents (war refugees and new types of families) as well as responding to changing patterns of occupancy (co-housing, ephemeral occupancy). In some cases, this resulted in unifying apartments, creating communal kitchens for each building unit and thus allowing ground floor apartments to become communal hubs for work or study.

Although employing different approaches, the proposed interventions shared a common strategy: exploiting the flexibility of the buildings' structural grid to accommodate diverse programs. This approach enabled the development of new, imaginative housing narratives that addressed solutions for an evolving socio-economic landscape. At the same time, the interventions incorporated restoration strategies that involved spatial modifications, updates to façade elements, and the integration of both new and repurposed components.

Additionally, sustainability concerns were effectively addressed, demonstrating the feasibility of energy-efficient adjustments (Fig. 8).

The Case Study of Dourgouti

The area of Dourgouti in Neos Kosmos, a neighbourhood located just 2.5 kilometers from Syntagma (Constitution) Square and adjacent to Syngrou Avenue, holds a rich and multifaceted history. Spanning approximately 63,000 m², it features a remarkable collection of social housing complexes constructed across different historical periods, reflecting both architectural evolution and shifting social needs (Fig. 9).

The first apartments built in the "Bauhaus" style between 1935-1938, were the first ever constructed in the neighbourhood in an attempt to clear the shacks and accommodate the refugees that had arrived there in 1910 and 1922. These form a group of eight apartment blocks, the so-called "old blocks."[29]

The later phases of development include a mix of 4-storey, 6-storey, and 12-storey buildings that were built between 1967 and 1971. These are complemented by a diverse range of public amenities: a commercial zone, an elementary and high school, a childcare centre, an elderly' home, and generously planted green spaces.[30]

While the architectural landscape is diverse, the neighbourhood preserves today a sense of a charming and pleasant way to live in the neighbourhood. Its public spaces, including a central square and several smaller parks and open areas, are abundant and currently well-maintained. The same applies for facilities such as shops, schools, and a local medical centre. The buildings from the 1930s are in a state of disrepair, often housing contemporary immigrant populations, while the ones from the 1960s-1970s are well-preserved and home to a mix of residents. Together, these elements create a vibrant and dynamic character that defines the neighbourhood (Fig. 10).

Dourgouti is presently undergoing significant regeneration and is gaining popularity due to its proximity to the city centre, an efficient public transport network, and its closeness to "Stegi" - a landmark and major cultural hub constructed in the neighborhood a decade ago - and several other nearby theatre and restaurants.

In *"Echoes of Change,"*[31] a documentary film released in 2024, Dourgouti is portrayed as a microcosm of Athens which struggles with the challenges of modernisation, memory, and the costs of progress. Through personal

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29 Myofa Nikolina,and Papadias Evaggelos, "The development in the neighborhood of Dourgouti since 1922" (2016), https://www.athenssocialatlas.gr/en/article/dourgouti/.

30 Papaioannou, *Housing in Greece*, 83.

31 Documentary film directed by Dimitris Bavellas, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt33176213/.

narratives, archival footage, and modern-day perspectives, the film traces the neighbourhood's evolution - from its origins as a refugee settlement in the early 20th century to its present-day identity as a vibrant, multicultural community. It celebrates the resilience, struggles, and cultural contributions of its residents, offering a heartfelt exploration of urban transformation. At the same time the film presents the skepticism of long-time residents, many of whom express concern that the neighbourhood's original character is increasingly threatened by the rise of the Airbnb industry, tourism, and the influx of digital nomads. Their voices underscore a growing tension between development and the preservation of local identity.

In our view, despite these pressures, social housing complexes possess significant potential to be preserved and thoughtfully repurposed. Such preservation efforts can protect not only the physical structures but also the rich layers of history and identity they embody. As the film suggests, achieving this balance demands a conscious effort to avoid disruptive interventions, along with a commitment to inclusive urban policies that prioritise both heritage conservation and social equity.

Conclusions: Past and Potential Modernities of Athens' Social Housing Estates

The concept of modernity, as reflected in Athens' social housing estates, has undergone significant transformations, particularly in its implications for comfort, suitability, housing opportunities, and shortcomings. In the early and mid-20th century, modernist housing represented a decisive break from traditional vernacular styles, embodying ideals of progress, efficiency, and comfort. These values were expressed through standardised amenities, abundant natural light and ventilation, and functional layouts designed primarily for nuclear families. Social housing estates were conceived to address urgent post-war housing shortages, initially providing affordable homes for refugees and, later, for working-class families. However, their rigid standardisation and limited adaptability often compromised their long-term relevance as demographic patterns and household structures evolved.

The social housing estates constructed in Athens during the 1930s and 1940s are now often in poor condition. These early projects were largely experimental, constrained by scarce resources, modest planning standards, and the use of inexpensive, lower-quality materials. Their significance lies less in their intrinsic architectural qualities and more in their historical value. Closely linked to pivotal historical events, they represent Athens' first attempt to introduce a collective urban living model - one that would later be refined and developed more successfully.

Post-1950 developments benefited from improved planning principles, evolving architectural know-how, and stronger institutional frameworks and produced more sophisticated and durable housing solutions. The larger, functional layout



Figure 8. Student proposals exploring strategic interventions on the buildings and the open space such as a. revalorisation of the public square (Natalia Koronaiou, Marios Fotopoulos, b. reuse of rooftops. Christina Karatziou, Iliana Papadaki, Yannis Stefanis, Paraskevi Tsamadou, c. adaptive layouts (Guro Laa, Mathilde Voisin-Grall, Gloria Etienne) 2024.

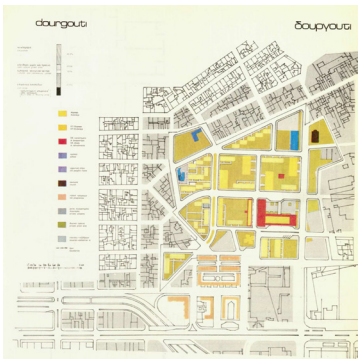


Figure 9. Map of the Housing Project of Dourgouti, showing the complexes constructed in different periods.



Figure 10. The public open space between the apartment blocks of Dourgouti is shaped by simple squares and lean green areas offering a sense of breath and quality rarely found in Athens' dense neighborhoods.

and the carefully considered spatial organisation of these estates, allows for adaptation to contemporary living standards. Moreover, the larger public open spaces stand out even more today, offering a striking counterpoint to the higher-density urban environments that have since developed around them.

Modernity today emphasises personalisation, sustainability, and technological integration. Current expectations include energy efficiency, smart home features, and designs that accommodate diverse household structures. While some social housing units appear outdated and poorly suited to today's living standards, the research on the Rentis complex demonstrates the potential for their redevelopment. Through adaptive reuse, sensitive restoration, and community-oriented policies, these estates can be reimagined to meet current needs. Given the rising pressures of urbanisation, economic inequality, and hyper-tourism, these complexes could provide affordable and inclusive housing for a diverse range of residents, including immigrants, lower-income groups, students, and digital nomads.

Beyond their historical role as sites of memory, the Social Housing Buildings in Athens stand as remarkable urban ensembles that embody the ideals of the Modern Movement forming one of the three principal expressions of Greek modernist architecture, alongside interwar educational buildings and selected private residential projects.

Distinguished not only by their technological and typological innovations, these buildings offered new domestic standards and spatial experiences to their inhabitants. Nowadays, they encapsulate historical, urban, architectural, and aesthetic values while representing a vital segment of the city's built heritage - one that deserves to be reinterpreted and revalorised in the contemporary discourse. Their potential lies not only in material preservation but in their symbolic and cultural capacity to address present-day challenges of housing, community, and identity.

These complexes' modest scale, standardised units, and carefully articulated public spaces continue to offer an alternative model of urban living - one rooted in collective identity rather than spectacle. Their quiet, enduring presence in Athens's urban fabric evokes a form of stylistic resistance to the fast-changing and often superficial trends of contemporary development. In this way, they remind us that architecture - like fashion - can both reflect and shape social aspirations, and that style, when grounded in purpose, becomes a lasting form of cultural expression.

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Illustration Credits

Fig. 1: "Housing in Greece - Government Activity," Technical Chamber of Greece, 1975. p.15 .

Fig. 2: https://www.sadas-pea.gr/kinonikes-katikies-stin-attiki/.

Fig. 3: Aris Konstantinidis in his book: *Τα παλιά αθηναϊκά σπίτια* (*Old Athenian Houses*), published by Πολύτυπο (Politipo, 1983).

Fig. 4: https://www.sadas-pea.gr/kinonikes-katikies-stin-attiki/.

Fig. 5: Tina's Mikrou archive.

Fig. 6: Ethniko Ktimatologio (National Cadastre, 2025).

Fig. 7: G.Skiadaresis, 1958.

Fig. 8: Natalia Koronaiou, Marios Fotopoulos, b. reuse of rooftops. Christina Karatziou, Iliana Papadaki, Yannis Stefanis, Paraskevi Tsamadou, c. adaptive layouts (Guro Laa, Mathilde Voisin-Grall, Gloria Etienne), 2024.

Fig. 9: "Housing in Greece - Government Activity," Technical Chamber of Greece, 1975, p.85.

Fig. 10: Tina's Mikrou archive.

Architectural Hybridisation and Housing Trends in Cluj's Periurban Area

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Keywords
peri-urbanisation; urban-rural interference; housing

Abstract
In Romania, the process of peri-urbanization experienced significant acceleration during the post-socialist period due to the withdrawal of the state from urban development, the implementation of a market economy, and the rise of the middle class. Urban expansion in the area surrounding Cluj-Napoca is the result of insufficiently regulated urban planning, and the housing produced here reflects diverse and specific lifestyles and consumption patterns.

Through this article, we aim to explore what type of architecture is being produced and what architectural trends are shaping housing in peri-urban areas. We start with the hypothesis that there is a hybridisation in architecture between urban and rural elements, influenced by the migration of other cultural codes, which manifests in the types of materials and construction techniques used, as well as in the shapes of the houses in peri-urban villages and communes.

Introduction

In Romania, the peri-urbanisation process has accelerated significantly in the post-socialist period due to the state's retreat from urban development, the transition to a market economy,[1] the consolidation of the middle class and the spread of car ownership among the population.[2] Particularly in Cluj county, this trend is evident among the middle class residents who relocate to peri-urban areas, seeking to escape the urban lifestyle dominated by socialist apartment blocks.[3]

A distinctive feature of the city is that it is the second largest university center in Romania, which ensures a constant influx of new residents who often settle here after completing their studies and, implicitly, bring an imbalance to the city's demographic structure.[4] Cluj-Napoca has a high percentage of educated workers and a level of wages in certain fields that exceeds the average wage economy. Consequently, Cluj-Napoca currently has the highest housing prices in the country, in terms of both rents and home sales.

Therefore, the migration towards rural areas has been driven by the real estate market pressure and the need for new living configuration. Urban extension surrounding the city of Cluj-Napoca results from insufficiently controlled urban planning, with housing reflecting diverse lifestyles and consumption patterns.

Issue and Methodology

The research aims to identify housing types in Cluj-Napoca's peri-urban area and to understand how they reflect processes of hybridisation between urban and rural architectural elements. The working hypothesis is that this hybridisation is expressed through architectural form, construction materials, and building techniques, shaped both by the migration of cultural codes from diverse contexts and by people's tastes, preferences, and expectations.

Methods

The study employs a four-stage methodology: theoretical review and definition of analysis criteria, field research, classification of housing types, and analysis of hybridisation mechanisms.

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1 Ludek Sýkora and Kiril Stanilov, "The Challenge of Postsocialist Suburbanization," in *Confronting Suburbanization: Urban Decentralization in Postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

2 József Benedek, *Studiu de Fundamentare Privind Definirea Zonelor Periurbane Din Județul Cluj În Scopul Realizării Planului de Amenajare a Acestora* (Facultatea de Geografie, Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai, 2019).

3 Iris Ganea-Christu, „The Phenomenon of Internal Migration and the Prospects of a New Type of Rural-Urban Housing," *Argument*, no. 11 (2019).

4 Dana Vais, "On the Margins of Urban Europe: Housing Policies in a Secondary City (Cluj, Romania)", *Urban Research & Practice* 2, no. 1 (n.d.): 91–102, https://doi.org/10.1080/1753506090272708.

In the first stage, the specialised literature on architectural trends was reviewed, and key criteria for housing analysis were defined, focusing on: Architectural form (volumetry, distinctive elements, solid-void ratio, roof type, etc.); Construction materials and techniques (natural vs. industrial, traditional vs. modern).

Field research involved the selection of 31 case studies from peri-urban communes around Cluj-Napoca, chosen to capture a diversity of contexts. Localities were selected based on building activity (number of permits), media visibility, cartographic analysis, and finally on-site visits, considering only villages with a rural community, agricultural activity, remarkable natural setting, and vernacular households. Selection criteria for the analysed case studies covered location, infrastructure, integration, community influence, family profile, housing type, materials, and the degree of dependence on the city.

Interviewees were found through targeted searches and trusted networks to ensure diversity and reliability. After compiling a shortlist of representative communes and criteria to ensure diverse case studies, we began identifying potential participants. We first focused on two communities highlighted in the media: Colina Nouă in Băbuțiu (Vultureni commune) and Aiton, developed by the Reformed Church. Initial contact with project initiators helped understand investment motivations, followed by attempts to reach residents. A direct approach, such as leaving letters in the mailboxes, proved ineffective, showing that intermediaries are needed to establish trust and legitimacy. We then activated personal and professional networks to identify suitable families or obtain referrals. This allowed a preliminary selection based on commune, location, and integration type. Final verification of other criteria occurred during on-site visits, where additional contacts within the community were also sought, when relevant.

Each case was documented through field sheets including photographs, plans, observations, and excerpts from interviews with residents, while also considering the social context and the relationship of the dwelling with its surroundings.

Field observations enabled the classification of housing into three major types, based on production mode, social integration, and spatial relation: new houses in residential developments; new individual houses in the village core; transformed old houses (minimal or extensive interventions). In the absence of specialised literature on this topic in the study area, these types were defined solely based on empirical experience, during the process of identifying architectural and construction trends in the studied area. Each type was analysed and described based on the documented field evidence.

Finally, hybridisation mechanisms were examined by applying the initial criteria to identify urban and rural elements within each type, correlating findings with theoretical mechanisms (assimilation, imitation, interpretation, pastiche) to

elucidate how hybridisation occurs in practice, and comparing theory with field examples to highlight dominant trends. This approach provides insights into architectural trends in the peri-urban area of Cluj-Napoca and the underlying factors driving their emergence.

Theoretical Framework

Before identifying (correctly) trends in architecture, we must first clarify what we mean by the term: a flexible approach to reinterpreting an established style. Trends depend on several factors, and in this article, we will focus on the elements that define a home's exterior and reflect users' aesthetic, technical and functional preferences.

The main focus will be on describing the criteria related to the Materials and Construction Techniques and the Form of Architectural Elements. The goal is to identify the rural and urban elements that characterise them and further apply them in our case studies. Based on the constructed worksheets, using photographs and interview excerpts, we will analyse the connections between the two criteria, in order to define the type of architecture found in the periurban territory of Cluj-Napoca.

Building Materials and Techniques

Materials have always defined the level of development of civilisations, and today we have entered the era of advanced materials. Beyond their technological and aesthetic significance, it is essential to also consider the sociological dimension of materials and the techniques used to implement them.

It is important to analyse materials and construction techniques together to better understand the urbanity gradients in peri-urban and rural housing. Until the nineteenth century, housing was inherently ecological, especially in the countryside. In the past, building methods involved a sensitivity to the site, climate, prevailing winds, and the locally available materials, leveraging their specific advantages. Supported by centuries of experience, these homes maintained their vernacular homogeneity for a long time.[5] However, this geographical determinism, specific to rural societies, began to vanish with the development of transportation and communication systems, which facilitated access to all types of materials at any construction site. The use of local materials became optional, when more economical or efficient alternatives were available.[6]

Building traditions were disrupted by the industrial revolution, and the economic paradigm shift in the twentieth century further accelerated this process of economic deterritorialisation through the radical evolution of

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5 Jacques Brun, Jean-Claude Driant and Marion Segaud, "Habitat et ecologie," in *Dictionnaire de l'habitat et du logement* (Armand Colin, 2002).

6 Lucan, *Habiter ville et architecture*, 26.

production systems[7]. Today, in the twenty-first century, most constructions rely on prefabrication systems, a hallmark of contemporary industrialisation and a central theme of the Modernist Movement.[8] This industrialisation of housing gave rise to several theories that led to the creation of various attempts to optimise housing from multiple perspectives and explored the relationship between architecture and industry.

The emergence of new materials produced on an industrial scale has been accompanied by the introduction of regulations governing their use and application. This process of standardisation and industrial production imparts an inherently urban character to these materials.

On the one hand, the norms influence construction practices, but on the other hand, they hinder innovation and the use of local materials. Certifications often favor industrial materials over those produced by artisans and small-scale manufacturers, who lack the resources to compete.[9] Thus, locally produced materials, made in small quantities, struggle to reach the market, are less likely to be certified, and come with higher production costs.

The production method, whether artisanal, mechanised, or industrial, creates significant differentiation between the types of materials available in the market. The choice of materials subsequently dictates the construction techniques, and the entire construction system directly impacts the economic viability of the project.

Natural materials implemented using traditional techniques are now predominantly found in village museums. This idealised representation of rural residential houses is far from the reality of modern construction. While there are still cases where homeowners intend to build sustainably, respecting both people and nature, such initiatives are rare and are only partially achieved using traditional techniques. Financial accessibility often becomes the primary factor in selecting construction methods, favoring industrial materials. Nevertheless, a contemporary manifestation of vernacular practices can be observed in the DIY approach, which addresses the evolving needs of homeowners. Unlike traditional home-building processes, which involve transporting raw materials to construction sites, prefabrication entails the off-site production of construction elements which are then transported and assembled on-site.[10]

Prefabrication systems include the prefabrication of small elements (building kits), two-dimensional panels or three-dimensional elements, complete

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7 Basile Cloquet, "Vers un habitat écoresponsable en Saône-et-Loire, qui privilégie les ressources locales. Architectures Matérielles" (Université de Grenoble, 2013).

8 Geraldine Bouchet-Blancou, *Préfabrication de l'habitat – Une histoire technique et culturelle* (L'Harmattan, 2020), 9.

9 Cloquet, "Vers un habitat écoresponsable."

10 Bouchet-Blancou, *Préfabrication de l'habitat*, 21.

prefabrication and factory assembly of buildings, modular construction and more recently 3D printing.[11]

A material's position on an urbanity gradient scale depends on its level of processing and the method of implementation. For example, wood can be classified as a rural material if its processing is minimal before becoming a construction element. However, it transitions into an urban material when its form is designed and produced in a prefabricated manner. Natural materials are those derived directly from the natural environment, without undergoing structural transformations, although they may be dimensionally calibrated before use in construction.[12]

In this research, the concept of an urbanity gradient and its related assessment criteria were introduced- drawing inspiration from and initially developed within the framework of my doctoral thesis. They represent part of my own working method, applied here to evaluate the degree of urbanity in each case study. While not a scientific quantification technique in the strict sense, this approach offers a more in-depth analytical tool for understanding the urban-rural interplay in materials and construction techniques. Within this method, the degree of urbanity is assessed based on:

- the type of material,
- its method of production, and
- the technique by which it is put into operation.

Within this framework, a material is classified along the urbanity gradient according to its intrinsic characteristics and the way it is produced and applied. A material is considered rural if it is natural (e.g., earth, stone, straw, reed, wood), produced manually with minimal processing before becoming a construction element, and implemented using traditional joints. Conversely, a material is considered urban if it is composite or artificial, produced through mechanised, industrial, or prefabricated processes using advanced technology.

By observing the vernacular dwellings in the studied territory, we identified the local materials specific to the area: *stone (*used for foundations, the masonry of houses and barns in enclosures); *wood (*used in roof trusses, coverings, fences, agricultural annexes); *straw/reed* (coverings); *earth* (walls). Their rural character lies in the minimal transformations performed between the extraction of the raw material and the completion of the construction element (e.g., wall, roof).

The chronological placement of the old buildings in the studied villages highlights the evolution of materials used in housing production: stone or earth masonry has been largely replaced by brick and, more recently, masonry blocks,

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11 Bouchet-Blancou, *Préfabrication de l'habitat*, 41.

12 Cloquet, "Vers un habitat écoresponsable"- interview with the architect Gilles Perraudin.

while wooden coverings (shingles) or straw/reed have given way to ceramic tiles, metal sheets, and other industrial roofing materials, among others. While these newer materials are easier to obtain and more economically viable, they are produced industrially and mechanically, with limited manual labor. As a result, they have lost the vernacular character of materials sourced from nature and hand-transformed for construction purposes.

SUBCRITERION	RURAL	PERIURBAN	URBAN
4.1. TYPE OF MATERIAL	natural material (earth, stone, straw, reed, wood)	combination of natural materials and composite/ artificial materials	processed, composite and artificial materials (reinforced concrete, metal, etc.)
4.2. METHOD OF PRODUCING MATERIAL	carried out through manual work of a limited number of operations on raw material to shape a construction element	combination of manually/ artisan produced materials and industrially produced materials	mechanised production / assembly of prefabricated modules
4.3. TECHNIQUE OF IMPLEMENTATION	traditional joints	combination of construction elements obtained through traditional techniques and construction elements obtained through advanced technological processes	advanced technological processes (mechanised assembly of prefabricated elements, 3D printing)

The Form of Architectural Elements

About the Form

Alongside materials and construction techniques, form completes the defining characteristics of architecture. As Tapie notes in his work, residents are invested in the shape of their home because it connects it to their personal history, turning it into a meaningful part of their life story.[13] This perspective can be contextualized through Raymond's assertion that the external form, materialised by facades, represents an aesthetic - moral marker of the inhabitant.[14] The form a home takes reflects the inhabitants' vision of what a home should be: an

13 Tapie, *La sociologie de l'habitat*, 155.

14 Henri Raymond, *L'architecture, les aventures spatiales de la raison* (Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984), 184–96.

individual house with a sloping roof and small windows evokes a picturesque image of rural and vernacular housing. In contrast, contemporary houses inspired by modern aesthetics are characterised by volumes with terraced roofs and large openings.

Compared to the exterior, the interior of a home, represented by its domestic decor, is the place for expression of individual and collective identities. Through furnishings, decorative elements, and even plants, ways of life are articulated. These elements define the functions of spaces, reflect social status, cultural origins, and stages of the life cycle, as well as reveal family dynamics and gender roles.[15]

Physical Representations of the Form
It is important to go beyond interpreting form as a projection of social relationships and ways of life and to take into account its own life and logic, related to the work of those who conceived and produced it.[16] From this perspective, form relates to the overall volume of the building, architectural elements (walls, gaps, roof, balconies, fireplaces), materials and colors used in their construction, as well as to certain distinctive elements (lintels, cornices, dormers, fireplaces, etc.).

The overall volumetry provides insights into the number building volumes, about its plan shape, the principles of plot placement (linear, offset, orthogonal, radial, angular) and any organizational axes (symmetry).[17] This framework allows us to define rural and urban forms and explore whether hybridity exists in this context, how it is expressed, and whether it can be measured using urbanity gradients.

Rural Form
The rural form specific to traditional Romanian housing is characterised by a simple volume, small openings and a traditional hipped-roof, steep slopes and natural coverings such as straw or reeds. Over time, the roof shape evolved as ceramic tiles replaced straw. This led to reduced slopes and the transformation of four gables into two, with triangular or beveled gables (beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century).

Today, recommendations for new constructions or interventions in rural areas emphasise preserving the traditional volume and shape. This includes simple roofs (2-4 slopes) with medium pitches (45-50 degrees), ceramic tile coverings, eaves, and horizontal ridges.[18] Architectural guidelines for fitting into local

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15 Jacques Brun, Jean-Claude Driant, and Marion Segaud, "Le décor domestique, une mise en scène de soi," in *Dictionnaire de l'habitat et du logement* (Armand Colin, 2002).

16 Tapie, *La sociologie de l'habitat*, 149.

17 S. Ostrowetsky and J. S. Bordreuil, *Le Néo-Style régional* (Bordas, 1980).

18 Răcășan et al., "Ghid de Arhitectură Pentru Încadrarea În Specificul Local Din Mediul Rural. Zona Dealurile Clujului."

rural contexts suggest alternatives such as low slopes (minimum 2%) if a green terrace with vegetation is incorporated, often for semi-buried volumes.

The use of balconies is allowed if they are not visible from the street, and decorations are encouraged to remain unaltered, with simplified shapes that do not borrow from other ethnographic regions. However, introducing conditional alternatives, such as green roofs or hidden balconies, signals a form of hybridisation. By minimising or masking such interventions, the rural aesthetic is preserved while incorporating elements of urbanity.

Urban Form
The urban form of housing is characterised by larger volumes, often composed of multiple parts, with expansive openings and organized on one or more levels. This form may also include terraces and/or balconies. The terrace roof, popularised by the Modernist Movement, is a hallmark of urban housing.

In newly built homes or those transformed in the peri-urban and rural environment by relocated city dwellers, a hybridisation of form emerges. This hybridisation reflects on the one hand their imagination, and on the other hand their differing needs compared to those of traditional rural residents.

The Imaginary – the Rural Idyll – the Countryside Encoded by Architectural Culture
The idealisation of country life, often referred to the *rural idyll* is a concept rooted in the cultural representation of rurality.[19] Existing primarily in the collective imagination, it has been shaped and sustained over time by the works of writers, artists, and, more recently, by media and internet imagery. Today's rural landscape is no longer shaped solely by agricultural production but has become a space of consumption for a growing middle class. Consequently, the concept of the rural idyll has often worked against farming communities.[20] This idealised image of the countryside is also perpetuated by real estate developers, who use it as a marketing strategy. Together with architects and builders, they participate in shaping the housing form in peri-urban and rural territories.

As a symptom of urbanisation[21] and a product of a bourgeois imagination, the *rural idyll* emerged alongside modern urban-industrial culture, which created an ordered spatial distinction between the periphery and the center.[22] Spatial representations of this ideal include weekend homes, cottages, commuter

19 Brian Short, "Idyllic ruralities," in *The Handbook of Rural Studies*, 1 ed (SAGE Publications Ltd, fa), 133–48.

20 Short, "Idyllic Ruralities," 143.

21 Williams Raymond, *The Country and the City* (Chatto & Windus, 1973).

22 Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

villages, commercial parks, and suburban communities.[23] The idealised vision of rural living is also reflected in the form of the houses, which often incorporate seemingly rustic elements. These elements contribute to a new (neo?) style that merges rural and urban forms with elements from the resident's imagined preferences. This style satisfies both their romanticised vision of rurality and their urban-specific needs.

Rustic and Neo-Rural Style Encoded by Architectural Culture

Throughout history, several styles have emerged that can be classified as hybrids. For this reason, this article will discuss two such styles: the rustic style and the neo-rural or neo-regional styles.

The rustic style has a long-standing history in Europe and Romania, closely associated with nature, the natural world, and rural life, its inhabitants and the ways in which they "rusticised" their houses. At certain moments in recent history, some European states have promoted their rural architecture as an identity marker. Thus, national architectural trends emerged such as: English national romanticism, German historicism or French regionalism.[24] The *Neo-Romanian* style, inspired by the French model, embraced a specific modernity anchored in selective vernacular traditions.[25] Under communism, rustic elements became an identity symbol, showcased in restaurants for foreign visitors and through miniaturised wooden crafts that replicated peasant artifacts (e.g., houses, wells, plows). These crafts were displayed in homes as souvenirs or ornaments. In house construction, has become emblematic of the rustic universe, symbolising a return to rural and local traditions.[26] Adam Drazin argues that wood is at the heart of a domesticated Romanian identity and materialises emotional connection to tradition.[27]

Viewed from the perspective of Baudrillard's postmodernity, rustic houses and rusticity represent a *simulacrum* [28] of rurality, therefore a paradoxical simulation of itself.[29] This idea, applied to rural housing, suggests that many of the "rustic houses" in the peri-urban areas are not a natural continuation of tradition, but rather a simulation of it. In the context of peri-urban Cluj-Napoca, we encountered numerous examples that confirm this perspective - houses that adopt "rustic" elements purely as decoration, with no connection to the original structural logic.

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23 David Bell, "Variations on the rural idyll," in *The Handbook of Rural Studies*, 1 ed (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2006), 149–60.

24 Mihăilescu, "Comment le rustic vint au village."

25 Carmen Popescu, *Le Style national roumain. Building a nation through architecture, 1881-1945* (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2004).

26 Mihăilescu, "Comment le rustic vint au village."

27 Adam Drazin, "A Man will get Furnished: Wood and Domesticity in Urban Romania," in *Home Possessions. Material Culture Behind Closed Doors* , 1 ed (Routledge, 2001), 173–200.

28 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation* (Éditions Galilée, coll. «Débats», 1981).

29 Mihăilescu, "Comment le rustic vint au village."

The French regional style served as a reference in the production of a neo-regional style in the 1960s. Bordreuil and Ostrowetsky[30] analysed and theorised this style, which was inspired by rural architecture but evolved into an autonomous aesthetic.

The regional style, deeply rooted in specific territories through the use of local materials, holds undeniable aesthetic value. By contrast, the neo-regional style imitates traditional architecture but distorts the original through the use of non-local, universal materials and by catering to contemporary comfort demands. The neo style simplifies traditional models, interpreting them through the lens of imagination, and applies them to entirely different contexts of production and reception.[31] The contemporary architectural techniques allow the reproduction of a perfect simulacrum, and the rural inspiration validates the imagination of the inhabitant, not the local, geographical affiliation.

Neo-regional styles are characterised by the presence of rustic features that distinguish them from individual suburban houses, built in a more urban style, unmarked by regionalism.[32] The clientele for neo-regional styles often develops their aesthetic preferences through personal experiences, such as travel and cultural exposure.[33]

This theoretical framework complements Raymond's idea of the house's form as a moral and social marker: in Cluj-Napoca's peri-urban areas, the "neo-rural" is not merely an expression of individual taste, but also a choice that signals belonging to a social category.

Drawing a parallel with the neo-regional styles of 1980s France, we will explore the extent to which individual housing forms in the studied area align with this aesthetic. Rustic features, which are absent in urban styles, are defining characteristic of the neo style. Some of the studied buildings incorporate neo elements, while others are more clearly defined by contemporary forms. However, the majority of the houses analysed illustrate a transition: they carry a "local" aesthetic layer but being built with industrial materials, in a process that reflects globalisation rather than local specificity.

In our analysis, the criteria specific to the shape of the architectural elements will be: type of volume, specific architectural elements (voids, roof type, exterior elements or spaces), materials and colors (of the walls and covering) and distinctive elements specific to each case.

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30 Ostrowetsky and Bordreuil, *Le Neo-Style regional*.

31 Fonticelli, "Construire des immeubles."

32 Ostrowetsky and Bordreuil, *Le Néo-Style régional*, 80.

33 Ostrowetsky and Bordreuil, 89.

A simple volume, with spaces arranged on a single level and linearly positioned on the plot, is specifically rural; in contrast, an approach with multiple volumes and/or multiple levels is more closely associated with urban settings. Regarding openings, small, rectangular windows are typical of rural constructions, while large openings are indicative of urban buildings. Intermediate forms combine various types of openings, differing in size, appearance, or unique outlines, such as apparent lintels. Simplified shapes and reduced roof slopes are features that increasingly reflect an urban character.

The type and shape of exterior spaces also vary by context. The traditional rural *târnaț* (porch) appears in various forms and sizes in some of the studied constructions, often resized or reinterpreted. In contrast, terraces and balconies are distinctly urban features.

In analysing materials and colors, the dominant characteristics will be observed. Rural constructions often feature nature-inspired colors, with structural elements camouflaged through plastering, while annexes may leave materials exposed. Hybrid urban-rural designs often incorporate rustic elements or external cladding of walls with natural materials over thermal insulation. Fully urban designs display a diversity of colors and materials applied to exterior plaster and other structural elements.

Finally, we will identify the distinctive elements of each analysed construction: chimneys, small roof vents, traditional carved elements (rural), dormers, terraces cut into the sloping roof, various rustic elements (hybrid elements), walkways, cut-out volumes, gutters and hidden downspouts (urban).

	RURAL	PERIURBAN	URBAN
5.1. TYPE OF VOLUMETRY	- a simple volume - a single residential volume - linear implantation on the plot	- apparent bay window	- multiple volumes - multiple residential volumes - diversified implantation at the plot level (linear, staggered, corner, L-shaped, U-shaped, etc.)
5.2. OPENINGS (TYPE, SHAPE, FINISH)	- small windows - rectangular shape - recessed position (closed windows with carpentry)	- combination of small and large windows	- large, rectangular windows
5.3. TYPE OF ROOF	- steep roofs (>40 degrees) - 2-4 slopes	- roofs with medium/ low slopes (15-40 degrees), multiple slopes	- flat roofs, terraces
5.4. EXTERIOR SPACES/ ELEMENTS	- traditional porch	- redesigned porch	- terraces, balconies
5.5. WALLS	- vertical walls - colors inspired by nature - camouflaged - plaster finish (lime) - rustic finishes	- rustic-inspired finishes (gestures, motifs) - apparent bay window, imitation half-timbered structure	- exterior finishes - plastering with natural materials (lime, clay, stone) - thermal insulation finishes
5.6. ROOF COVERING	- natural materials (straw, reed, wood)	- ceramic tile covering	- sheet metal roofing, sandwich panels, membranes
5.7. DISTINCTIVE ELEMENTS	- small dormer windows for ventilation - wooden elements (carved) - porch (if it exists)	- dormers, rustic details, roof elements	- terraces, pergolas, external stairs, solar panels, decorative elements

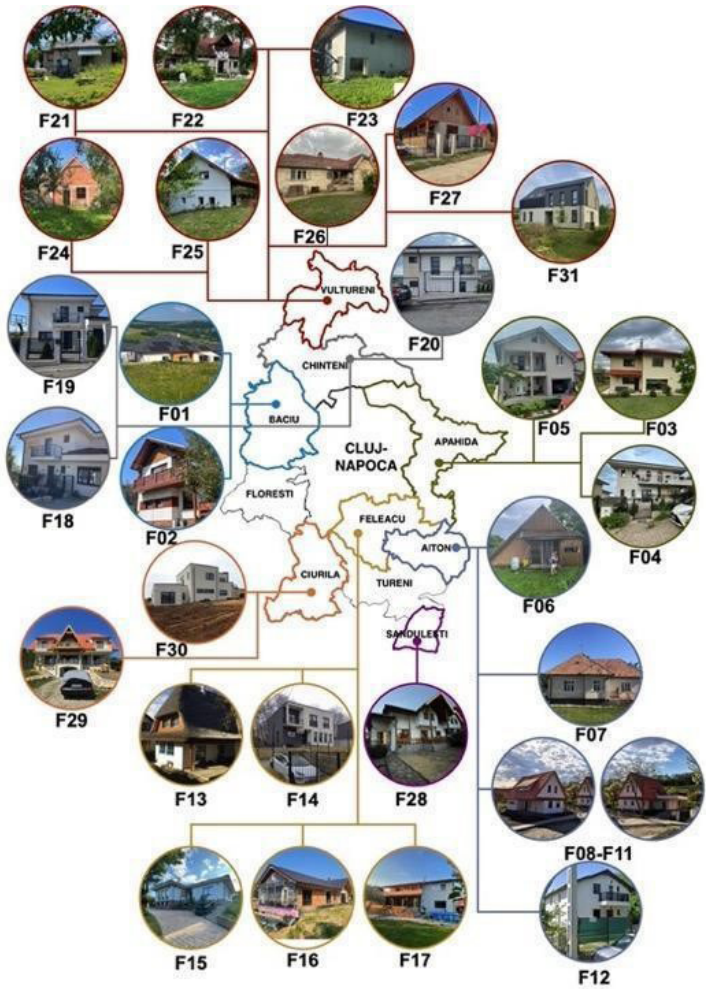
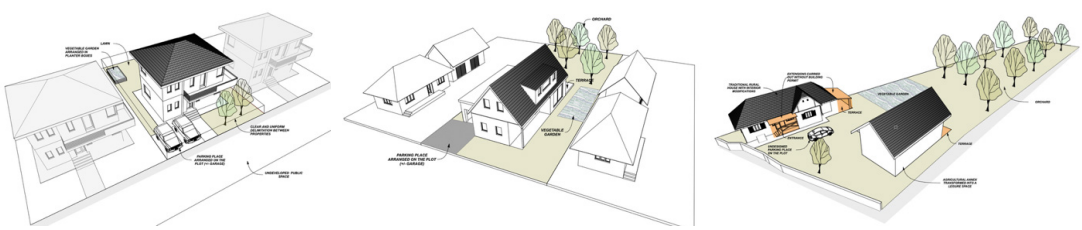


Figure 1. The location of the 31 case studies on the map.



Type 1 Type 2 Type 3

Figure 2. Housing types identified in the field study (peri-urban Cluj).

Field Research

Field research involved the selection of 31 case studies from peri-urban communes around Cluj-Napoca, chosen to capture a diversity of contexts.

Selection criteria of the case studies included location, level of infrastructure development, integration into the existing built fabric, community influence on residential choice, family profile, housing type, construction materials, and relationship with the urban center. Potential interviewees were identified through targeted searches in representative communes, leveraging personal and professional networks, with a preference for introductions via trusted intermediaries to ensure both diversity and reliability of the sample. Each case was documented through field sheets including photographs, plans, observations, and excerpts from interviews with residents, while also considering the social context and the relationship of the dwelling with its surroundings.

Classification of Housing Types

We observed a variety of housing types emerging in the peri-urban and rural areas around Cluj-Napoca, shaped by the way localities have evolved. In order to understand these types, we started from defining the type of housing. A type is a structure understood from a technical, constructive and anthropological perspective, defined by the essential characteristics of the relationships between its constituent elements. This structure is connected to lifestyles and adapts to evolving expectations and needs.[34]

The housing type comprises three main components: 1) production-related, referring to the materials and methods used in construction; 2) social context-related, reflecting the dwelling's role in the family structure and societal framework; and 3) spatial.[35] While a type is specific and can be unique, the typology of housing involves generalising types and organising them into categories.

In defining the three housing types specific to the studied territory, we categorised residential buildings based on their characteristics, spatial form, and functionality. We considered their physical structure, spatial configuration, and their interaction with the surrounding context. The description of these types is part of a more extensive study conducted as part of my doctoral thesis.

Type 1. New houses in residential complexes/neighborhoods built on the outskirts of the city or rural localities

Production: A common feature of this type is the transformation of agricultural land into buildable land through urbanisation. The complexes are built by private investors, and their appearance reflects the vision of the developers,

34 Jacques Lucan, *Habiter Ville et Architecture* (EPFL, 2021), 34.

35 Lucan, *Habiter Ville et Architecture*, 51–52.

that of the architects and urban regulations. The projects are designed on an urban scale, with a formal approach in all stages: urban planning, architecture and, sometimes, landscaping. Speculations related to the buyers' preferences have led to uniformity in the spatial configuration and external appearance of the neighborhoods. The main buyers are middle-class families with children, which influences the organisation of the housing.

Social integration: Usually, most families who move here typically replace collective housing with individual housing and public spaces with private ones, but they maintain their previous urban lifestyle, especially through daily commutes. The social uniformity results from both the way these houses are inhabited and the lifestyles of their residents.

Relationship with space: This type is found in various forms: individual, coupled or row houses, characterised by larger spaces compared to urban apartments, private gardens and an external uniformity.

Type 2. New individually built houses on available plots in the built core of villages

The second type includes individual houses built inside the villages, among traditional or new houses. While the interior spaces are generally similar to the first type, their realisation and appearance differ due to the affective involvement of the inhabitants. The two subtypes depend on the mode of acquisition: built individually on plots or as a second home on extended lands, for a new generation of the family.

Production: All houses in this category have a building permit, but the formal or informal approach to the project differs. Their appearance reflects both the residents' direct involvement in construction and the architects' design decisions.

Insertion into the social context: The use of these house plots reflects rural practices, such as gardening and various forms of consumption. The location, the appearance of the house, the use of the plot and the lifestyle of the inhabitants are interconnected, the choice to build in an existing context having a direct impact on the life and aesthetics of the house. Sociability involves close relationships between neighbors of the same social category, and the ties between locals and newcomers are usually cordial but superficial.

Relationship with space: While maintaining urban routines, residents moving to villages adopt a lifestyle closer to the rural one, valuing nature, community, and rural aesthetics. Some integrate contemporary living into rural-looking spaces, while others combine rural elements with other sources of inspiration in their home design.

Type 3. Transformed old houses (adaptation/extension/attic conversion)
Subtype 3.1. Old Houses with Minimal Interventions
This type includes traditional rural houses minimally modified to meet modern comfort standards, typically by adding an interior bathroom while largely preserving the original structure.

Production: These homes are typically upgraded without formal authorisation or specialist involvement. The residents themselves handle the discreet modifications, relying on DIY methods and prior research. Using local materials and traditional techniques, they preserve the rural character of the buildings. Some interventions, like removing plaster to expose stonework, highlight a rustic aesthetic, allowing residents to personalise homes with historical and emotional significance.

The insertion of housing in the social context: These houses are inhabited by atypical families: childless couples, single people or families that adopt an alternative lifestyle as a form of escape from conventional social norms. Moving to the countryside reflects personal aspirations and commitment of a rural living, including specific local practices and efforts to integrate into the village community.

Relationship with space: Moving to traditional houses and minimal modification reflects the residents' sensitivity to rural living. Coming from apartments, they adapt to smaller, multifunctional spaces, capitalising on indoor and outdoor activities that complement the daily routine.

Subtype 3.2. Large extensions/attic extensions/adaptations of traditional homes

Production: These projects involve transforming old traditional homes into contemporary ones, often through large extensions, attic conversions, or significant adaptations. They are built either with the assistance of architects or directly by the residents without professional involvement. The materials and construction techniques, whether traditional or modern, are adapted to fit the existing structure. As a result of these extensive modifications, the original form of the house often becomes unrecognisable.

The insertion of housing in the social context: Through their appearance, these modified houses signal a sign of distinction from the surrounding existing built context, which typically feature simplified spatial layout. This distinction underscores social differences between the new inhabitants and the native neighbors. In villages that are attractive for the relocation of urban dwellers, such examples become landmarks for the potential evolution of these villages.
Relationship with space: The transition from a traditional rural type to a contemporary one is evident through significant volumetric changes and the introduction of new functional spaces. These projects usually evolve from one or two multifunctional rooms, characteristic of rural living, into a layout tailored

to urban lifestyles: differentiated rooms for children and parents, shared spaces (living room, kitchen, terrace), as well as more bathrooms and storage spaces. By importing their urban habits, the new inhabitants redefine the spatial relationship, blending rural origins with contemporary living standards.

Hybridisation Mechanisms

In the types of housing identified, we observed that the architectural form is shaped both by the existing context (built and surrounding) and by the actors involved in its conception.

Any operation involving an existing built object (attic conversion, extension or rehabilitation) is constrained by the building's form, as well as by the materials and construction techniques originally employed.

Legislative limitations, often adhered to by those working with specialists, do not apply in cases where construction projects circumvent the authorisation process. In such instances, the form emerges from the inhabitants' wishes, choices and actions, shaped in turn by the skill and knowledge level of those executing the work.

For new constructions, the freedom to choose form, materials, and construction techniques is shaped not only by the inhabitants' imagination, but also by their tastes, preferences, and aspirations. Their life experiences provide diverse sources of inspiration: some draw from the rural environment or museified rural concepts, others from their travels, and many from online sources where they explore styles that resonate with them.

In the examples studied, we discovered a hybridisation that is evident at the architectural level, marked by the blending of urban and rural elements, as well as influences borrowed from other cultural contexts. This hybridisation arises from the combination of legislative regulations, the inhabitants' creative visions for their homes, and economic or construction constraints. It is particularly visible in the homes' forms, which are shaped by materiality and construction techniques.

To understand these mechanisms, we drew inspiration from the theory developed by Galina Ptichnikova, who approaches hybridisation in architecture from a different perspective than the one applied in the present study. According to her, the specific mechanisms are: assimilation, interpretation, imitation and syncretism. We partially adapted her conclusions to fit our context.

Identifying the source of inspiration is the starting point for discovering the specific hybridisation mechanism in each case. Sources of inspiration relate to urban or rural, modern or traditional, national or international architectural elements. Architecturally, these mechanisms are identifiable by analysing both the exterior and interior space.

The exterior, particularly the facade, often reveals the type of hybridisation mechanism employed. As a demonstrative part of the architectural object, the facade serves as an aesthetic and moral marker of the inhabitant and is inherently a Western product.[36] Identifying hybridisation at the level of individual dwellings requires a detailed analysis of architecture and lifestyles within a context of continuous transformation and adaptation.

> "There were also some choices that we made that were influenced by circumstances. For example, the style of the house, these people from Maramureș who worked on the roof, made the decorations on the pillars on the terrace for us. They did them with a chainsaw, and none of them look like the other. It turned out pretty well. Maybe the ideal would have been to study the architecture of the area, to do something specific to the area, but it wasn't within my reach and if they offered, I said let them do it."[37]

Imitation in architecture refers to the intentional act of reproducing an object or material that imitates the original.[38] The forms it can take are mimetism, disguise,[39] or pastiche.

> "I searched online because there were sections of the fence that needed rebuilding, as well as the door I mentioned that had to be constructed. An ordinary bricklayer wouldn't know how to do it. Additionally, the wall has a certain linearity, even though the stones are clearly of different sizes and shapes. These are carved using a bard, which is very interesting. The stones are laid in two rows with a filling of straw, dung, and soil, making the wall 50-60 cm thick. I was curious to see how it was made, and when I knocked down the walls, I observed how it had been designed."[40]

> "I bought stone in the same style as the one used in various houses or sheds from people in the village. The house was never plastered; it was always left with the exposed stone, as they all were. According to the family story, the stone was originally quarried by my grandfather from Baia, located somewhere between Deușu, Făureni, and Ghiula or Sărmătin. They would bring large pieces of stone and then cut them. The stone is relatively easy to work with, simple to cut and carve. I noticed that they even cut it with an axe, which seems straightforward compared to other types of stone."[41]

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36 Raymond, *L'architecture, Les Aventures Spatiales de La Raison*, 185–96.

37 T., interview.

38 *Le Petit Robert de la Langue Française 2022*, Le Robert, 2022.

39 Ptichnikova, "Hybridization in architecture," 256.

40 P., interview, July 25, 2023.

41 Lucia V., 16th August 2023.




Figure 3. The form and materiality specific to the area (stone houses) combined with fachwerk structural elements, specific to traditional constructions in Central and Northern Europe - Șoimeni, Vultureni commune.



Figure 4. Assimilation of elements specific to the Danube Delta area (Dobrogea): thatched roof, blue wooden joinery - house in Feleacu commune. In this case, there is a form of hybridisation in which a locally specific shape (the gabled roof) has been combined with reed and straw materials characteristic of historical models and of regions closer by, such as the Transylvanian Plain, although traditionally associated with other roof forms. However, the colour combination suggests an influence more reminiscent of the Danube Delta.




Figure 5. Households in Chidea - traditional household and a new household that imitates the local vernacular style (an example of mimicry).

Some of the representative examples of imitation were created using traditional construction techniques, ensuring that both the style and the construction method were faithfully reproduced. However, in other cases, the imitation was only superficial, limited to the external facade. For instance, in the commune of Vultureni, inspired by the unplastered stone houses typical of the area, some residents employed modern construction techniques (insulated masonry walls) and added external cladding to mimic the local style.

> "On the inside, the house is built of brick. We added polystyrene insulation and then applied stone masonry on the exterior."[42]

Several of the houses visited are pastiches, resulting from the intentional, more or less controlled reproduction of certain original styles.

> "I wanted it to be Mediterranean style, but it didn't come out Mediterranean style, like it should have had terraces and I didn't want terraces. It came out like a hybrid thing."[43]

Imitation of the Mediterranean style is particularly common among these houses, especially those built by private investors for sale in residential complexes. Typically, the only elements of this style that are retained are the roof (with its low slope), the light-colored plaster, and possibly the large openings. Investors assumed that this style would appeal to potential buyers, leading to the construction of entire neighborhoods of new houses in peri-urban areas. These homes were vertically designed apartments, superficially adorned on the exterior with Mediterranean-inspired elements.

Steil distinguishes imitation from copy, noting that imitation reconstructs the original through a creative process rooted in living tradition, addressing both essence and form, whereas a copy merely replicates appearance.[44] A pastiche, in turn, is an incomplete and simplified imitation of dominant stylistic elements, aiming more to evoke an impression than to reproduce accurately.[45] In architecture, pastiche often has a pejorative meaning, as decorative elements are borrowed from one context without understanding their original logic, leading to misfit or ineffective applications and the transformation of the borrowed forms.[46]

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42 R., interview, 2th August 2023.

43 Camelia R., 9th August 2023.

44 Steil Lucian F., "On imitation," fa, https://www.academia.edu/7322485/On_Imitation.

45 Lucian F., "On imitation."

46 Kim Anton, "Assimilation of traditional architecture influenced by the imported styles", *A|Z ITU Journal of Faculty of Architecture*, January 2018, https://doi.org/10.5505/itujfa.2018.32032.

Interpretation involves adapting the old model functionally or in form, resulting in the emergence of a new model from a typological perspective. Without altering its general shape, certain elements are modified to accommodate new functions or offer a fresh perspective on living. For example, the traditional roof shape can incorporate dormers, or the traditional *târnaț* (porch), the transitional space between the interior and exterior, which can be enclosed to make it usable in winter. Additionally, certain household annexes, originally designed for animal production, can be repurposed into spaces typical of a lifestyle no longer centered around raising animals.

A significant percentage of the houses studied and visited fall into the category of those that interpret rural-inspired elements and apply them to urban housing typologies, creating hybrid models. The house shapes are inspired by rural design, but the dimensions, types of spaces, materials, and construction techniques used are distinctly urban. Roof slopes are outfitted with dormers or terraces, and rooms under the slope are characteristic of these neighborhoods.

We also encountered the mechanism of interpretation in the sense of re-functionalising some former agricultural annexes. The variety of situations identified reflects the diversity of emerging styles and the absence of a clear development strategy.

Conclusions

As observed, housing types in the studied area are diverse both morphologically and aesthetically. The architecture specific to these types highlights the interplay between rural and urban elements. The gradient of urbanity for each example is more closely linked to fashion, mindset and the lifestyle of the family than to external factors. To a greater or lesser extent, architectural aesthetics emerge from a mental process influenced by certain hybridisation mechanisms through which they are produced.

We have not identified any distinctive local style, but rather certain trends that can be defined and whose inspiration stems from local, urban, and rural elements, as well as other cultural codes.

The novelty of this research goes beyond merely identifying housing types in the peri-urban area; it lies in overlaying them with hybridisation mechanisms, offering a clear picture of the relationship between how housing is produced and its appearance. This relationship is the result of the intersection between the market, the imaginary, technologies, and everyday practices. And this framework provides a useful tool for monitoring trends over time.

As we have seen, the mechanisms of architectural "fashion" manifest in the field as follows: imitation and pastiche frequently appear in speculative developments (for example: the simplified "Mediterranean" trend, low-pitched roof, light-colored plaster, large openings),an aesthetic that is easy to recognise and to sell. The rural idyll has become a driver of consumption, and the village



Figure 6. Mediterranean style pastiche house in Dezmir village, Apahida commune.



Figure 7. Examples of interpretation - rural forms within an urban typology and the repurposing of an agricultural annex: House in the Reformed Church residential development of Aiton commune, House in the Colina Nouă residential complex in the village of Băbuțiu, Vultureni commune, a former agricultural annex transformed into an art studio in Chidea village.

HOUSING TYPOLOGIES	HYBRIDIZATION MECHANISM			
	IMITATION		ASSIMILATION	INTERPRETATION
	PASTICHE	MIMETISM		
TYPOLOGY 1				
TYPOLOGY 2				
TYPOLOGY 3				

Figure 8. Classification of housing types according to the hybridisation mechanisms.

a cultural or real estate product. While residents negotiate between urban comfort and rural symbols, developers package this desire into standardised solutions.

Interpretation dominates in re-functionalisations and in new houses inserted among the old ones (enclosed porches, dormers, converted annexes), adapting rural symbols to urban needs. Assimilation appears when elements from other regions or cultures are absorbed as a distinctive sign (reed, colored joinery, artisanal motifs).

In addition, we have noticed that the two characteristics that define the types of housing described in this article are primarily related to their level of formality. The supply is structured into two registers: the formal and the informal. While new developments produce a standardised, market-ready aesthetic, the transformations of old houses fuel a DIY trend of bricolage. The first type is characterised by a higher degree of formality as a result of a design approach involving several stakeholders (investors and architects), while the type of converted houses is marked by greater informality and involves more vernacular approaches. The intermediate type combines formal and informal elements, representing a mixture of approaches to the project. These two main approaches (vernacular and scholarly/formal) dominate the peri-urban area studied, which is characterised by urban-rural hybridisation in terms of form and building materials. However, it is important to mention the stylistic heterogeneity of these models, which is influenced by the different hybridisation mechanisms that generate them. These mechanisms are only possible due to legislative permissiveness, or rather a vacuum.

Moreover, as observed in the analysed case studies, these trends often overlap within each project, but the extent of this overlap varies depending on the situation. Regardless of the project's level of formalisation or the number of actors involved, appropriation of living space can only be carried out by the inhabitant, with specific gestures relating to making smaller or larger changes to the interior space's configuration. This could be the focus of future research.

Analysing in detail the materials used in the case studies, we observed that sometimes they become an indicator of the trend: for example, "rusticising" claddings over thermal insulation become a quick fashion for signaling a rural appearance without traditional constructive logic, a "look" rather than a technique.

In most situations, dependence on the city remains high, even when the address becomes "rural." Many households maintain urban routines (commuting, services, networks), while private space (yard, garden, terrace) gains a major identity role. The "fashion" of peri-urban housing is thus one of *dispersed urbanity*, to which rural signs are applied.

The current permissiveness or regulatory framework favors the overlapping of hybridisation mechanisms within the same project and fuels both the variety and the inconsistency of the models produced. Real architectural models can only be achieved through legislative intervention following close collaboration between state institutions and professional organisations. Together, they could provide coherent and applicable guidelines while taking into account the potential informal dimension of any project.

In peri-urban architecture, fashion can act as a mechanism of social validation by creating local landmarks or models. These consist of shapes, materials and details that can become easily recognisable. When they become repetitive, they can turn into criteria that can be standardised over time, such as roofs of a certain shape, rustic cladding and reinterpretations of porches. If these fashions are codified as locally specific, they can indirectly influence urban or architectural regulations, turning a commercial trend into a formal criterion.

In the context of hybridissation, fashion can legitimise the rapid adoption of foreign elements and their combination with local ones. The result can be fluid architecture oscillating between pastiche and creative reinterpretation.

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Renovating Tradition
Rural Housing Trends in Cluj County

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Keywords
rural; renovation; bottom-up; Cluj County

Abstract
Lifestyles have undergone significant transformation over the past 35 years. Even in rural areas, people now spend more time indoors and seek the comforts associated with urban living, which has generated a demand for larger and better-insulated houses. This study focuses on villages in Cluj County, examining architectural fashions in household construction and renovation during this period. To contextualise the persistence of certain trends and historically rooted processes, references will also be made to the twentieth and even nineteenth centuries. The article is written from the perspective of the professional critically reflecting on personal biases in interpreting the countryside. The research engages with the issue of village idealisation and the efforts not only to preserve but often to reconstruct an image that has long since disappeared, if ever existed.

Argument

Fashion is a cultural, social, and economic phenomenon that reflects the tastes, values, and stylistic preferences of a community at a given moment. As an expression of both individual and collective identity, it is articulated through choices related to the aesthetics and functionality of homes, households, and even public spaces. In Transylvania, fashion has typically diffused from Western Europe toward the east, moving from major cities and intellectual centers to smaller towns, and eventually reaching villages. A distorted version of Loos's manifesto reached the Eastern European countryside nearly a century after its original publication, materialising in the form of stand-alone houses with modest architectural expression. At present, the local distinctions once shaped by environmental factors are increasingly dissolving into a more unified culture. Households are now adapted primarily to the needs of the residents and to the surrounding socio-economic context,[1] rather than to the climate or geography. Within this framework, the present study examines fashion in the rural built environment, with attention to aesthetic models and technical innovations drawn predominantly from urban contexts and, with growing frequency, from the media.

The methodology includes direct observation and inventory of the types of trends in terms of recently built or renovated buildings. The research is based on the field visits conducted in fifteen villages located in Cluj County: Aşchileu Mare (Aşchileu Commune), Boju (Cojocna Commune), Buza (Buza Commune), Călata (Călăţele Commune), Chiuieşti (Chiuieşti Commune), Cutca and Sânmărtin (Sânmărtin Commune), Dăbâca (Dăbâca Commune), Feleacu (Feleacu Commune), Hăşdate (Săvădisla Commune), Mărgău (Mărgău Commune), Mociu (Mociu Commune), Petreştii de Jos (Petreştii de Jos Commune), Someşu Rece (Gilău Commune) and Vad (Vad Commune). The investigation is completed by the available bibliography, especially the collection of data *Habitatul, Vol. III - Transilvania,* by Alina Ioana Ciobănel, Paul Drogeanu, Ion Ghinoiu,[2] which helps draw a parallel between the last century fashion and the contemporary trends.

Data from recent censuses[3] indicate the periods when the housing stock was built. Since the 1960s, there has been a steady trend of population decline in villages. This trend was briefly interrupted in the 1990s following the political regime change, which brought unemployment and uncertainty. During that

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1 Szabó Árpad Töhötöm, "Resources, Strategies, Necessities. Economic and Social Adaptation in the Use of Family Houses", in Imola Kirizsán, Bálint Szabó, Enikő Takács, Publicația postconferință TUSNAD 2009 - *Arhitectura vernaculară în regiuni multiculturale* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Utilitas, 2009), 31.

2 Alina Ioana Ciobănel, Paul Drogeanu, Ion Ghinoiu, *Habitatul, Vol. III - Transilvania* (București: Editura Etnologică, 2011).

3 "Conventional dwellings by period of construction of the building, Cluj county and areas of residence, la 1 decembrie 2021", Population and Housing Census 2021 (Recensământul Populației și Locuințelor 2021), https://cluj.insse.ro/rpl-2021/ accessed on 13th December 2024.

time, many people relied on traditional agricultural practices to provide for their families. Between 2000 and 2010, urban areas saw a significant increase in housing development. After 2010, there has been a modest reversal of this trend, with renewed interest in suburban and rural living - possibly accelerated by the pandemic (see Table 1).

This study focuses particularly on villages located farther from urban centers, where depopulation remains an ongoing issue. While there is good news in some of these villages there is still interest in building or renovating dwellings, oftentimes these constructions are frowned upon by specialists. Urban planning regulations are often loosely enforced in rural areas. Moreover, local administrations may even contribute to poor building practices by promoting inappropriate or low-quality design examples.

	TOTAL	before 1919	1919 - 1945	1946 - 1960	1961 - 1970	1971 - 1980	1981 - 1990	1991 - 2000	2001 - 2010	2011 - 2015	2016 - 2021	no data
IRBAN	217050	3108	7050	13447	49150	54400	34916	5822	23655	8041	16947	514
URAL	144850	1183	10601	21439	33335	17057	5986	6573	15504	8274	18449	6449

Table 1. Number of conventional dwellings, by period of construction and area of residence, Cluj County, on 1st dec. 2021. The red frames show when there were more dwellings built in rural environments.

Inspiration and Dissemination

Modernity tends to be framed within urban settings, whereas in rural areas its embracement may prove less straightforward. Perhaps there should not be such sharp differences between how we look at the rural and the urban. In the studied villages, urbanisation occurred primarily through infrastructural development and a moderate increase in built density. These trends could be channeled towards the creation of functional spaces and a pleasing overall image, with attention to maintaining a close connection with nature and creating community space.

Fashion tends to disseminate from dynamic urban centers toward more conservative peripheries. In the studied area, it spreads outward from the large city of Cluj to smaller towns and villages situated along the main road axes: Dej - Cluj - Turda and Huedin - Cluj - Târgu Mureș / Reghin, eventually reaching the most remote settlements at the ends of these routes.[4] Beyond regional dynamics, major European cities also act as important sources of influence. During the Austro-Hungarian period, fashion trends reached Transylvania primarily from Vienna; today, trends are often encountered in the various European regions where many residents of the studied area have migrated to.

4 Árpád Furu, „Arhitectură rurală în Transilvania. Influențe, evoluții, zonificare" in *Manual de specialitate pentru studenți și cursanți postuniversitari* (Cluj-Napoca: Idea, 2015), p.141-142, Accessed on 16th January 2022, https://www.academia.edu/31938851/Arhitectur%C4%83_rural%C4%83_%C3%AEn_Transilvania_Influen%C8%9Be_evolu%C8%9Bii_zonificare_2015.

The agents of transmission have also shifted over time. In the past, skilled workers arriving from the imperial center played a central role in introducing new norms. At present, young people who migrate for work, or who have simply had the opportunity to travel, are the primary conduits of fashion. On a more localised scale, imitation within the village itself contributes significantly: once certain styles are adopted by neighbors, they tend to be reproduced within a small radius, reducing the need for external exposure. Finally, contemporary media, especially the internet, acts as a major driver, enabling fashion and modernity to reach even the most remote communities.

One transformation in the spread of aesthetic patterns is access to mass culture and standardisation of construction techniques and materials. In the 1950s and 1970s, the technical possibilities, but also the aesthetic tastes of the villagers, began to change: traditional gates and decorations were gradually replaced by iron varieties, and handmade objects were replaced by more functional and affordable industrial products. This transition reflects an adaptation to new economic and social conditions, but also a change in aesthetic preferences.[5]

According to Árpád Furu, the development and character of rural architecture is mainly determined by the way of life, which in turn is dictated by the economic activity - predominantly agriculture -in the study area.[6] Over time the built environment has been organised according to the activities permitted by the natural and climatic conditions. Today, although the main economic activities are still linked to agriculture, the ways of life and rural living have changed considerably, taking over elements of urban living. The needs and productivity of households have changed,[7] the standard of living has increased and people spend more time indoors, so they need more living space.

Social status is a second important factor in determining the character of the built environment. Today the houses of the less wealthy are comparable in standard to those inhabited by the more affluent in previous generations,[8] as people tend to imitate what are considered successful models. In today's context, diverse individual choices generate clutter. The transformations are different, but they have in common the adaptation to a new situation, such as conforming to a new political system, changing agricultural activities or shifting towards other economic fields.

Brief History

The discussion begins with illustrative examples of the ways in which fashion and innovations have influenced villages in the study area over time. A

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5 Grigore Smeu, *Repere estetice în satul românesc* (București: Editura Albatros, 1973), 90.

6 Furu, „Arhitectură rurală în Transilvania," 141.

7 Szabó, "Resources, Strategies," in Kirizsán, et.al. , *Arhitectura vernaculară în regiuni multiculturale*, 31.

8 Furu, „Arhitectură rurală în Transilvania," 42.



Figure 1. New house in Sânmărtin.





Figure 2. Three stages in gate fashion: wood (Mărgău), metal (Cutca) and wrought iron (Feleacu).






Figure 3. Similar fretwork used at a wooden gate in Cluj and a porch railing in Sânmărtin (first two pictures from the left), as well as house pediments at urban house in Cluj and rural house în Mărgău (third and fourth pictures).

substantial part of the analysis draws on data collected between 1978-1983 in *Habitatul, vol. III – Transilvania* . This perspective is intended to highlight the extent and pace of transformation experienced by the studied villages during the last century.

Fashion carries a pronounced aesthetic dimension. By the late nineteenth century, as living conditions in rural communities improved, the demand for social representation increased. This was expressed in the ornamentation and organisation of facades of dwellings and outbuildings. Many of these designs were adapted from noble mansions, particularly their ancillary structures, or from urban houses on the periphery, whose more rural character made them easier to assimilate.[9]

During this period, distinct local specificities emerged, contributing to the formation of ethnographic regions. The studied area experienced later developments compared to other parts of Transylvania; however, in its western region of Țara Călatei (Hu. Kalotaszeg), a particularly distinctive and coherent style arose, consisting of wooden carved gates, fretwork pediments and other wood crafted elements. Some of its ornamental features spread to neighboring regions, including the Apuseni Mountains and the western Transylvanian Plain.[10] These motifs can ultimately be traced to the Viennese Secession style and were widely diffused across Central and Eastern Europe in areas where wood constituted a primary building material. In Transylvania they were widely employed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in resort towns, such as Sovata or Borsec, which inspired the wooden architecture throughout the region, before ultimately reaching the villages.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were marked by great Habsburg projects for the rational use of the landscape. Important technical and functional innovations were spread through the political - administrative agenda, but likewise through fashion and replicating designs in the area,a pattern which continued throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. One example is the organisation of the household with a double courtyard separating the domestic and the economic sectors by fence and gate or even by the bard.[11] Along with this type of household organisation there has been spreading a house type as well: the long house with a porch, with two windows facing the street. Variations of this house model are widespread in Central and Eastern Europe, even much earlier than the nineteenth century. This form of dwelling holds significant cultural value and will be referred to in this paper as the old type of house. Afterwards, another example of popular design was the urban dwelling type spread during the socialist times. Rural societies of the past were mobile and they communicated. Consequently technologies and innovations were at hand to be adopted, just like today. Communities and

9 Furu, „Arhitectură rurală în Transilvania," 142.

10 Furu, „Arhitectură rurală în Transilvania," 163.

11 *Șură.*

individuals would observe innovation and decide whether it was suiting them or not, and how it would differentiate them from their neighbors.[12] Communities define themselves as much by what they decline as by what they accept, therefore some cultural traits were not spread[13] and a certain local specificity has been continuously shaped by copying some patterns, while refusing others.

Vernacular architecture in the studied area was often built with organic, ephemeral materials, so the buildings had to be constantly rebuilt and therefore there is rarely anything older than 200 years.[14] An important technical improvement was the transition from organic materials (wood, earth) to inorganic materials (stone, brick).[15] This happened in the studied area later than in other areas of Transylvania. Stone was sporadically used throughout the last century and it is mentioned in five of the fifteen studied villages: Așchileu Mare, Boju, Călata, Dăbâca and Petrești de Jos. Brick was used from around 1900 in five of the fifteen studied villages: Așchileu Mare, Boju (even earlier), Buza, Cutca, Mociu, from 1930 in Vad and later in the 1950-1960s in half of the villages, namely Călata, Chiuiești, Dăbâca, Feleacu, Hășdate, Mărgău and Someșu Rece. Cement was used earlier than concrete by about 10-15 years. Both were used in the studied area after 1944, and in six of the villages even after 1960-1970 (Boju, Călata, Chiuiești, Dăbâca, Hășdate, Mărgău). Lime and sand plasters had been used since the inter-war time, while cement-based plasters were still a novelty in the 1970-1980s.[16]

House roofs were having a smoother slope than in the past in all the studied villages, as ceramic tiles had replaced wood shingle or straw as the roofing material. In Boju and Someșu Rece the use of tiles is mentioned since 1920. Sheet metal was used in Boju, Buza, Chiuiești, Mărgău, Mociu and very rarely in Călata, as well as asbestos cement boards or Eternit in Chiuiești and Mărgău.[17]

The socialist thinking was oriented towards progress and the future. Many new houses were built with a complex square or "L" plan, rather than the simple rectangular plan typical of the traditional ones. In the last case they would frequently have a volume for the entrance with a smaller roof and windows on three sides (see Fig. 6). The conversions made in the older houses involved the construction of large windows, sometimes by joining the two small windows facing the street, enclosing the porch with a wall on the facade or closing it completely with glasing (see Fig. 6). The volumes of the houses built in the first two decades of the socialist times were similar or slightly taller than the previous

12 David Graeber, David Wengrow, *Zorii tuturor timpurilor. O nouă istorie a omenirii* (Iași: Polirom, 2022), 143.

13 Furu, „Arhitectură rurală în Transilvania," 143.

14 Grigore Ionescu, *Arhitectura populară românească* (București: Editura Tehnică, 1957), 7.

15 Árpád Furu, lecture on Vernacular Architecture 13th May 2022.

16 Ciobănel, *Habitatul, Vol. III - Transilvania,* 301.

17 Ciobănel, *Habitatul, Vol. III - Transilvania,* 252.

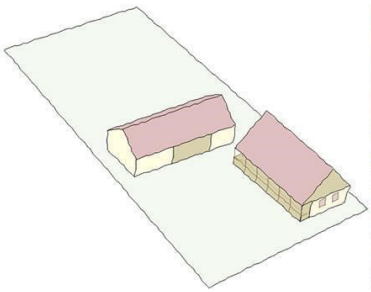




Figure 4. Household organisation: scheme and photography where the old house type is also visible (Sânmărtin).

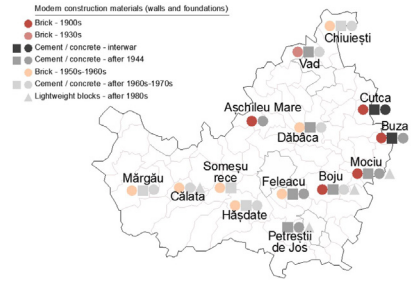


Figure 5. Adoption of industrial materials in the surveyed villages.



Figure 6. The upper pictures show houses built in socialist times in Dăbâca Village on rectangular plan and on "L" plan, both comprising an additional entrance volume. Both houses have typical facade decoration for the time, using Neo-classical (upper left) and Modernist (upper right) elements. The lower pictures depict renovated examples of older types of houses in Chiuieşti and Călata. The one on the left preserves the configuration of the windows and the porch, while adding Neo-classical inspired elements on the main facade. In the case of the one on the right, the two small windows facing the street are replaced with a single larger window, while another one is added in place of the former open porch. Simultaneously, the whole porch is replaced by a conventional enclosed area and a canopy is added across the whole entrance side.

ones. On the other hand, in the 1970s tall houses were a sign of progress, so it was enforced by law to build new two-story houses on the main roads. Often, people didn't need as much interior space, or didn't have the economic possibilities to build one, and so a fashion for a house with a small half-storey turret emerged.

The proportion of the facade changed from the low height stance of the previous house types to a more vertical one, in all the studied villages.[18]

Fences and courtyards are a determining element for the general appearance of the village. Around 1980, courtyard paving was not mentioned in the majority of the studied villages, yet it was rare in the villages of Călata and Mociu, more common in Chiuiești and in Hășdate, where rubble was partially used. Only in Someșu Rece it is mentioned the use of concrete for alleys. Before the 1980s, people remembered unfenced households were common in half of the villages, namely Boju, Buza, Chiuiești, Petreștii de Jos and Vad, while in Mărgău and Mociu some still existed. Wicker fences were also still in use, though rarely, in the 1980s. Regardless, wooden material in the form of planks or slats and posts were still popular in all the studied villages. The most recent trend at that time was the use of concrete and metal fences, observed in ten of the studied villages, with the exception of Buza, Dăbâca, Mărgău, and Petreștii de Jos. For Sânmărtin commune the situation remains uncertain, as the available data refer only to the village of Cutca. In some places stone[19] and brick[20] are mentioned for the construction of fences.[21]

In terms of facade decoration, in the 1980's various geometric, floral or sun motifs carved on pillars or gates were mentioned as artistic elements for the outbuildings in six of the studied villages, namely Așchileu Mare, Buza, Chiuiești, Dăbâca, Mociu and Petreștii de Jos.[22] However, after the 1950s a cubist-inspired fashion for the decoration of the houses became widespread, with a slight volume displacement in the overall composition, the division of the facade into three horizontal parts aligned with the windows and modernist window framing (see Fig. 6 and 7). At the same time, these trends were contemporaneous with the tendency to incorporate Neo-classical elements: pedimented entrances, pilasters on the facade or at the window casings (see Fig. 7), plaster brick like corner decorations (see Fig. 9), classical capital decoration or other elements of classical friezes, baroque curved and counter-curved patterns carved in wood, painted or modeled in plaster.[23]

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18 Ciobănel, *Habitatul, Vol. III - Transilvania,* 276-278.

19 Chiuiești, Cutca, Dăbâca, Mărgău, Mociu, Petreștii de Jos.

20 Așchileu Mare, Feleacu, Mociu, Someșu Rece.

21 Ciobănel, *Habitatul, Vol. III - Transilvania,*171-180.

22 Ciobănel, *Habitatul, Vol. III - Transilvania,* 336.

23 Virgil Pop, "Despre influența arhitecturii culte în arhitectura vernaculară," in Kirizsán et.al., *Arhitectura vernaculară în regiuni multiculturale,* 53.

Although recent, these transformations have almost completely changed the face of the studied villages, especially in the second half of the last century. This indicates on one hand an, initial weakly built environment, and on the other a generalised desire to replace it.

Contemporary Trends in Rural Households and Dwelling

Fashion transforms, and this process involves erasing parts of the previous condition. In rural areas, aesthetics often follow the practical requirements of the craftsman or builder, and today this means the use of industrial materials common on any building site in urban or rural areas. However, aesthetics is important for expressing social status and the need for representation, emotional well-being, cultural identity and local pride.

While in the 1950s-1970s the transformations were dramatic, in the 1980s there was a certain stagnation due to the depopulation of villages. In the 1990s a return to villages was recorded, as a result of the demise of the state economy, when a large number of industries came into serious decline. This affected mostly working class households, which formed the larger part of those who moved (back) to the countryside. Therefore the built environment changed again, and this reached a whole new scale after the economic growth of the 2000s, with the set off of suburbanisation.

In line with changing lifestyles in recent and contemporary times, the main requirement is more interior space and increased thermal comfort. In the studied area, there are generally few new interventions and there are more renovation works than new houses. They usually provide thermal insulation or replacement of windows with PVC double glazing windows. Another common transformation is the conversion of attics of houses built 50 - 70 years ago into livable spaces (Fig. 08). Usually these houses were already of a more urban fashion,and the transformation increases their height a little bit, and changes the roof shape from four or more slopes to just two, which brought them even closer to urban models. These changes aim for the comfort of the residents, but moreover for not lagging behind the neighbors in terms of home equipment.

There are few new dwellings in all the studied villages, most often with a square or L-shaped floor plan with two, three or four storeys, sometimes incorporating a basement and always a livable attic. Many of these houses have an architecture inspired by renovated old houses, a phenomenon observed in Mărgău and Someșu Rece. Besides there are some examples of new constructions with a collection of disparate elements unrelated to the local context, indicating a certain cultural confusion. These were noticed in the villages of Chiuiești, Dăbâca, Feleacu, Hășdate, Someșu Rece and Vad. The village of Feleacu is distinguished through the numerous new contemporary urban dwellings, due to its proximity to the city of Cluj-Napoca.

Regarding the facade, some of the renovated or newly built houses are garishly colored. The range of colors includes orange (the preferred color in



Figure 7. Window decoration inspired by Neo-classical(left) and Modernist (right) models or a blend between the two (center) in Vad, Someșu Rece and Mărgău.



Figure 8. Houses that went through renovation works in order to transform the attic into livable space, while simplifying the roof shape to accommodate more windows for the upper level. There are also examples of new fences, balconies or loggias, facade painting and new roof cover.

most villages), yellow, pink, blue, green, red or anthracite gray. These kinds of colors were observed in all the surveyed villages, with the exception of Mărgău. The strong colors are usually interpreted as a result of the desire to make the space more welcoming and cheerful by a simple method, but also from the difficulty to choose from a diverse palette. For economic and technical reasons, but also for embracing a modern, clean look, which puts aside old fashioned ornamentation, these houses have no decorations, the overall volume, geometry and the details are simple. Yearning to ennoble the house, the owners sometimes use combinations of two colors, often yellow and orange of different intensities. Patterns may include highlighting with a different color architectural elements such as the plinth or basement level (Mociu, Petreștii de Jos), some of the walls (Buza, Călata, Chiuiești, Hășdate and Vad), window reveals (Petreștii de Jos), window casings (Așchileu Mare, Călata, Cutca, Hășdate, Mociu and Someșu Rece), connecting the windows across the width and height with painted rectangles (Dabâca, Feleacu, Mărgău, Petreștii de Jos, Someșu Rece) or even cutting the facade by a diagonal (Boju, Buza, Dăbâca, Petreștii de Jos) (see Fig. 9).

On the other hand, a similar numeber of new facades in all fifteen villages include a more skilfully chosen palette of colors, including: a lot of beige, cream, white, ochre, pinkish to grey, pastel tones of scarlet, yellow, orange, grey, green or pink and so on. Furthermore, we noticed the choice of more expensive materials, whether they pertain to what is usually called "rustic" or not. Stone cladding, or tiles that imitate stone are favorites, but wood or brick finishes are also sometimes present. These solutions are found in all fifteen villages and are often used for plinths, for different facade designs, or even for the cladding of a single pillar. They are also used for window casings (Așchileu Mare, Boju, Călata, Cutca, Mărgău and Someșu Rece), or to dress the corners of houses (Așchileu Mare, Feleacu, Petreștii de Jos and Someșu Rece) (see Fig. 9). Wood is used for gables or for cladding walls entirely or partially.

Regarding the roofs of the houses, in all the studied villages there are new roofs made of ceramic tiles or metal sheets imitating tiles, in shades of scarlet, dark brown, anthracite gray, which blend into the overall picture, but also bright red in five of the villages, indicated in order of prevalence: Cutca, Mociu, Mărgău, Așchileu Mare, Buza and Boju. Other roof finishes are standing seam or corrugated metal sheet in shades of dark brown, red, gray or unpainted metal. Blue or green roofing were found in only isolated cases (one house each in Așchileu Mare, Călata, Hășdate and Someșu Rece). The same observation applies to bituminous shingle roofing.

Monica Iancău noted a change in taste by comparing two guest houses. The first was massive and brightly colored, while the second one was an extended old house designed by an architect, who reinterpreted local decor elements in a contemporary style. The owners of the second guest house were able to charge

double the price for accommodation,[24] so the incentive to change fashion may also be economic.

The latest fashion in the countryside is the renovation of old houses and their use for leisure or rental, especially after the Covid 19 pandemic. This fashion is taken on by the urban population. However, there are also such houses that are cared for by their owners that still inhabit them. There are such houses in half of the surveyed villages, namely Călata, Chiuiești, Cutca, Dăbâca, Feleacu, Mărgău and Petreștii de Jos.

An important element in the rural house is the space between the outside and the inside. This feature was the wooden porch in nineteenth century or inter-war houses. Over time this has been integrated into the street façade, which has become more classical in composition. The porch was often enclosed by glazing or even walls, in order to increase the interior space. This type of intervention has been practiced since the 1970s, but is still common today. We have observed it in ten of the studied villages: Călata (very common, since most of the houses are of an older type, and have subsequently been transformed), Așchileu Mare, Boju, Cutca, Sânmărtin, Feleacu, Hășdate, Mărgău, Mociu and Vad.

Houses influenced by recent urban trends typically lack a porch, but frequently feature balconies or loggias, a pattern observed in all studied villages except Călata. These balconies or loggias are usually positioned along the street-facing facade, particularly in houses with renovated attics (see Fig. 8). In new houses, balconies are frequent, they may have corner posts or are built as a terrace over the ground floor in a semicircular shape (Someșu Rece and Vad) (see Fig. 9). In Someșu Rece a stepped masonry parapet enclosed with metal bars is frequent. Other railing methods are classically inspired balusters or stainless steel bar closures. The lack of an intermediate space between inside and outside at ground level has led to the introduction of a wooden or metallic canopy covered in metal sheet, observed in nine of the fifteen villages surveyed, or metal structure and polycarbonate canopy in ten of the fifteen villages. This is a simple, low-cost method of fulfilling a need.

Even households that are mainly engaged in agricultural activities keep fewer animals today than 35 years ago,[25] so that the role of household outbuildings used for housing animals and storing fodder is being transformed into storage for agricultural machinery or other objects.

New outbuildings have also been built to meet new needs. The most common are the garages, observed in twelve of the fifteen surveyed villages, the

24 Cosmina Goagea, Constantin Goagea, Ștefan Ghenciulescu, Cosmin Caciuc, *Dincolo de oraș* (București: Editura Universitară „Ion Mincu," 2013), 78-80.

25 "Livestock (end of year)," Population and Housing Census 2021 (Recensământul Populației și Locuințelor 2021), https://cluj.insse.ro/rpl-2021/, accessed on 13th December 2024.

wooden pavilions for relaxing or dining, observed in eight of the villages, or the greenhouse made of plastic sheeting on a light wooden or metal structure, observed in two villages.

Outdoor space is important in the overall image of the village. Green space in all its extent, is gaining more of an aesthetic value, instead of the productive one. In the past there were often small flower gardens in front of the houses. What's new is the landscaping of the entire visible courtyard with decorative trees, mainly thuja, lawns and neatly paved paths. This image shows us trends of urbanisation of lifestyles and of the built environment and was sporadically observed in twelve of the studied villages, with the exception of Cătala and Cutca.

Fences and gates are decisive for the street image. In the 1950s-1970s a taste for metal fences developed, which had since increasingly been used along the wooden ones. Wrought iron fences with decorations (see Fig. 2 and 11) are the most popular choices in all the research villages, sometimes doubled by polycarbonate sheet (observed in nine of the fifteen villages: Aşchileu Mare, Boju, Călata, Cutca, Hăşdate, Mărgău, Mociu, Someşu Rece and Vad). Wood is still used for fencing, either in a traditional or in a contemporary, urban inspired manner, and more recently metal sheet panes on a simple bar frame are encountered, which can be bright red, unpainted or dark brown, in order to imitate wood (see Fig. 8). In all the villages there are urban-inspired fences with concrete plinths cladded with stone.

Fashion Micro-Regions: Cutca and Someşu Rece

As mentioned earlier, fashion develops locally like a microclimate in which certain ideas and trends are picked up by neighbors in the village. This probably happens for reasons of proximity and ease in choosing similar materials and builders. We will draw a parallel between two recurrent elements in the villages of Cutca and Someşu Rece. In Cutca, the prevalence of bright red painted metal sheeting is visible, used in a large number of households for fences or roof cladding. In Someşu Rece, on the other hand, a fashion has developed to build tall houses on the main street, where stone cladding is used for facade compositions and fencing. In both cases industrial materials that are not related to the local tradition are used. In the first case, the result is visible from great distances and considerably alters the general image of the village. In the second case, the trend is urban-inspired, but can be more easily integrated into the new image of the village.

Villagers' attitude: *if everyone else has renovated the house, we should renovate ours too*

Habitus is a concept by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and it refers to a set of acquired social dispositions that lead individuals to live their lives in a similar way to other members of their social group, or a class inclination towards certain desires, pleasures or tastes. Classes are not just distinguished economically, and choices depend on taste, not cost. Individuals have common

tastes and a sense of belonging to the same class. *Habitus* is not due to the individual or the environment, but it is created through the interaction of the subjective mind with surrounding structures and institutions, such as family and school. It is made up of different types of capital: economic, cultural and social, and together they form the "usable set of resources" that a person possesses. The forms of capital are interdependent and can be converted in order to acquire a living standard according to another habitus.[26] Fashion can be viewed through a multifaceted lens in which different actors view trends differently according to habitus.

In the village, imitation is more widespread than innovation. Designs are copied from the great architectural trends and arrive in the countryside after a series of re-edits, which might alter them significantly. This often leads to cultural confusion and inappropriate designs. Apparently the way of living in the village is not oblivious to fashion, but it is an important aspect of perception both within and outside the community. This creates a curiosity and eagerness towards creating a sense of belonging to modernity, even if only apparently. Despite common assumptions, Romanian society is probably not at all that conservative at its core. The resistance to novelty is rather weak, as most people and village inhabitants nonetheless have a great capacity to adapt to the times and quickly adopt foreign solutions. However, innovation is most often copied or imitated rather than created.

Generally, innovation is slow to penetrate the countryside. It starts with the cultural or, more commonly today, economic elites, and then spreads shortly throughout the whole community, as everyone tries to conform and feel a sense of belonging. The rural environment has mechanisms to equalize taste, fashion and innovation. Less affluent households are struggling to keep up, but it is common for the amenities of these households to be similar to those of the wealthy in previous generations. What is eventually widely adopted are certain building solutions, most of which sharing the common trait of being economically accessible, which in fact translates to lower grade materials, such as metal sheets for fencing and cladding, PVC joinery or decorative plaster insulation systems.

The role of the public authorities in adopting and spreading questionable building solutions is not negligible either, as it is not uncommon nowadays that the communal administrative building or the community hall, stand out through scale, bright colors and irrational design. Moreover the streets are usually just asphalted roads lacking sidewalks for pedestrians and public spaces are hardly ever used, due to poor design. In the future, some of the studied villages will probably have a higher degree of urbanization, meaning, among other things, higher building density, larger building volumes, larger paved spaces, garages and decorative landscaped gardens. Many village residents

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26 Dorling Kindersley Limited, company Penguin Random House, *Sociologie. Idei fundamentale* (București: Editura Litera, 2018), 76-77.

will probably implement these trends on their own plot, but in order to ensure a uniform image, pleasant rhythm of the buildings and better material choices, the administration might implement certain regulations. There is rather limited potential for these initiatives to be community-based, as the individualistic lifestyle has penetrated the countryside. In order for this to happen, more efficient, community-oriented and better informed administrations are needed, in order to set better examples either through public facilities and/or judicious organisation of the public space.

Professionals' Attitude: *the village is different from the city and the differences should be maintained by perpetuating a pattern that has been thoughtfully established*

This study is a way of deciphering elements and signs of lost motivations, in the interest of understanding the built environment and ultimately society. One of its aims, however, is to analyse the attitude of specialists, especially architects towards rural fashion. Architects and other specialists tend to see the village too differently from the city, to try to preserve a so-called "rural character." In the past, the distinction between village and town was pronounced. Perhaps the gradual reduction of differences, particularly regarding spatial needs and aspirations toward modernity, does not necessarily mean the disappearance of the village but rather its transformation. Furthermore, the classification of a house as rural or urban is historically contingent: a dwelling considered rural in 1930 may well have been regarded as urban a century earlier, in 1830.

The current trend among professionals is to focus on protecting the village. But this raises the question: what exactly are we protecting? Typically, it is the image of the village as it existed in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, a period when rural architecture fragmented into microzones, each with its own local specificity.[27] This era has been deemed to be the most culturally significant. We will simplify this image and refer to it as the *old type* (see Fig. 4), since the details that differentiate these microzones are not the subject of the present study, and most of the existing houses, built in the interwar period or in the 1940's and 1950's are of this same type. Most villages usually consisted of long houses set short-sided to the street. The house had two windows to the street and a porch on the long side, the end of which was later incorporated into the facade, which gained a third window. The streets were probably made of earth with ditches dug around the edges and greenery dominated where possible. We love and idealise this image, fragments of which still exist today in reality or in memories. The professional, or village lover, who goes out in the field tends to give disproportionate importance to this house type.

From the 2021st census we can conclude that out of the total number of dwellings built in rural areas in Cluj County, about 11,800 were built before

27 Furu, „Arhitectură rurală în Transilvania," 165.

1946, about 66,000 between 1946 and 1990, and 48,800 after 1990.[28] The spatial development plan of Cluj County data indicate a number of about 35,700 dwellings built in the period 1990-2018 in rural areas, of which about 30,000, or 84%, in the municipalities neighboring Cluj (Florești, Baciu, Gilău, Chinteni, Apahida, Jucu and Feleacu).[29] We can conclude that in the remaining communes the majority of the built stock was constructed between 1946 - 1990 (see Fig. 10). At the beginning of this time span, or in certain areas with a longer building tradition, such as Țara Călatei, or partially the Transylvanian Plain, the old house type was preserved, but it is a minority. Moreover, this type of house has undergone transformations over time, such as extensions, converting the attic in a livable space or alteration of the openings. Many such houses were abandoned and have been deteriorating towards collapse.

This old house type, chosen by professionals to be protected, is a minority within the study area and holds particular value when occurring in coherent ensembles. Such clusters may be protected as cultural heritage and possess economic potential in both cultural and tourism sectors.

The role of specialists should be to formulate regulations that are enforceable and attuned to contemporary conditions, without relying on nostalgia or fears of undermining the village. This nostalgic attitude is old and probably deeply human. In 1909, Tzigara-Samurcaș blamed the "urban barbarism" that had hardly existed in previous generations, and Burcuș blamed architect-designed houses with attics, iron balconies and unkempt style that deteriorated the rural landscape.[30]

Policies and regulations contribute to shaping the overall image of a settlement by influencing building proportions, material choices, fences, and the treatment of public and green spaces. Such an image is meaningful when it is grounded in reality and aligned with the lifestyle and aspirations of the community. Conversely, it becomes a simulacrum when it merely produces a façade designed to satisfy visitors, without reflecting the authentic life of residents. In the study area, landscape regulation was first introduced during the Habsburg period, leaving behind a highly valuable legacy. Today, specialists might consider engaging with current fashions in rural contexts to develop

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28 "Conventional dwellings by period of construction of the building, Cluj county and areas of residence, la 1 decembrie 2021," Population and Housing Census 2021 (Recensământul Populației și Locuințelor 2021), https://cluj.insse.ro/rpl-2021/, accessed on 13th December 2024.

29 Spatial development plan of Cluj County (Planul de Amenajare Teritoriala a Județului Cluj), Total dwellings built between 1990 and 2018, https://www.patjcluj.ro/, accessed on 13th December 2024.

30 Al. Tzigara-Samurcaș, *Arta în România. Studii critice*, (București, 1909) and Șt. Burcuș, "O vizită la un amator de artă și arhitectură românească," in *Arhitectura* 1-2, 1906, pp. 29-32. As cited in Emilia Țugui, "Urban Influences in the Architecture of rural Dwellings in the Southern Muntenia and Oltenia in the late 19th and Early 20th Centuries," in *Caiete ARA* vol. 14 (București: Editura "Arhitectură. Restaurare. Arheologie," 2023/4), 201-26.



Figure 9. Facade patterns made out of paint in Dăbâca, Sânmărtin, Hășdate, Petrești de Jos, Feleacu, Cutca and Buza and out of stone cladding in Boju, Someșu Rece, Mărgău and Feleacu.

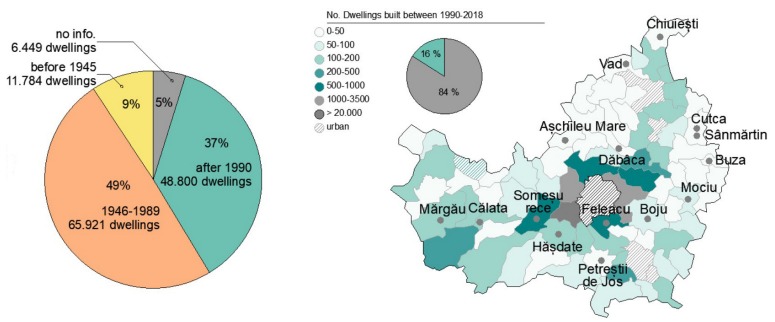


Figure 10. Left: Pie chart showing the distribution of dwellings by year of construction. Right: Map illustrating newly built dwellings after 1990. Both visualisations pertain to the rural area in Cluj County.

new, replicable patterns capable of generating valuable and coherent village environments.

The sociologist Vintilă Mihăilescu observes how *"show-off houses"* (ro. case făloase) are at best considered in poor taste, and at worst are criticised for spoiling our (i.e. the villagers') traditions. He also adds that urban observers struggle to accept that, for the first time in history, villagers, often seen as peasants, are transforming from an object class into a subject class, creating a bottom-up form of modernity.[31] The same author points out that our return to the village is both tragic and ridiculous, hindering our ability to recognize and embrace change.[32]

Architectural heritage holds significant value and can serve as a foundation for building community and fostering a sense of belonging. In the study area, however, such heritage is limited. Consequently, the approach of specialists may need to be adapted to contexts where it is absent, without resorting to replication of historical forms.

On the other hand, there are other valuable elements that can be encouraged. Perhaps the most important is landscape and the connection with nature. Potential policies to strengthen this connection within the study area include preserving the existing plot layout that links dwellings to the landscape and provides green space facing the street. Additional measures could involve recommending suitable color palettes for roofs, exterior walls, and fences; regulating the layout and appearance of spaces visible from the street; and promoting consistent street profiles, avoiding abrupt changes in elevation across their width, while incorporating aligned green areas and trees, even where traffic lanes function as shared spaces." Once the space of the street and visible private areas are properly managed, the large volumes of new constructions could become less obtrusive. As the existing building stock in most of the studied villages is relatively disorganised, a degree of standardisation, particularly in fencing, color schemes, and the maintenance of outdoor spaces, could provide a relatively straightforward path toward greater unity.

Conclusions

The village has been in flux for centuries. It has been changing to reflect shifts in lifestyle, the availability of new materials, and evolving building techniques. The influence of urban centers on rural architecture is not new. We could trace it back at least 200 years, but might as well see it as a rule throughout history. In the studied area villages were historically rather poor, and traditional building techniques relied on organic materials like earth and wood. These homes could not last; durable options only became widely accessible after the 1950s,

31 Vintilă Mihăilescu, *De ce este România astfel?* (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2017), 172.

32 Vintilă Mihăilescu, *Socio Hai Hui. O altă sociologie a tranziției* (București: Editura Paideia, 2000), 78.

with the rise of industrial materials. During the communist era, villagers were encouraged to build larger, taller homes inspired by urban housing types, which became widespread and deeply embedded in the local landscape.

Population decline remains a challenge in the studied area, yet buildings can still serve as indicators of vitality and activity. Nowadays inhabitants of the rural area seek greater comfort, larger living spaces, and spend more time indoors, so their homes transform accordingly. Furthermore, craftsmanship has shifted almost entirely to industrial methods and materials, which have become "traditional" in the sense that they are now the norm. These are preferred due to their low maintenance, improved insulation, and greater comfort. Outdoor spaces remain important in the countryside. Since the nineteenth century, houses featured wooden porches, many of which were later enclosed to expand interior space. Nowadays, attics are often transformed into living areas, frequently adding a loggia facing the street. Moreover, gardens and yards are more carefully landscaped, and wooden pavilions have become common leisure structures.

When seeking inspiration, residents often look to cities they have visited, neighboring houses, or older traditional dwellings, although these are only hypothetical models, as in reality, conformation to modern living demands means houses inspired by them are frequently much larger or modified in more than one way. While some residents aim to conform to local norms, many also seek to express their social and economic advancement, resulting in unconventional forms, decorative painting, or distinctive overall designs. Navigating the wide array of available materials presents challenges, and choices are sometimes poorly suited to local conditions or overly vibrant, contributing to a visually cluttered village environment. High-end materials are often financially inaccessible, leading homeowners to express individuality primarily through color selection. Although contemporary color preferences tend toward beiges and oranges, this represents a moderation compared with the bold reds, greens, blues, and pinks popular in the 1990s and early 2000s. Over time, a gradual shift toward more restrained and coherent aesthetics, accompanied by improved material use and design strategies, may further develop.

Notably, all of these dynamics unfold within a largely unregulated context. Such a situation underscores a central argument of this study: in the absence of formal regulations or legal frameworks, opposite to the Habsburg-era prescriptions discussed earlier, fashion functions as a de facto mechanism for regulating and shaping the built environment and its visual character. Local administrations often contribute to poor architectural choices, setting questionable examples in both design and construction practices. Consequently, enforcing coherent standards and regulations remains difficult for them.

While today's changes may seem disruptive, the transformations of the 1950s to 1970s were arguably even more radical. In hindsight, we may nevertheless find ourselves valuing elements of that era. Rather than clinging to nostalgia, architects might adopt a more optimistic, forward-looking attitude, one that channels local energy and creativity in constructive directions. Ultimately, we must acknowledge that the village is constantly evolving, even if it lags behind the city. Preserving valuable architectural elements and appreciating traditional house types is essential. Yet perhaps more important is striving to understand villagers' motivations and preferences, becoming better advisors and collaborators who help align their aspirations with thoughtful, sustainable design.

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Tiny Houses
Cultural Trends and Movements Fashioning Architecture

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Keywords
tiny-houses; fashion in architecture; design competitions; innovative housing solutions; architectural typologies; contemporary living trends

Abstract
The tiny house movement has become a transformative trend in contemporary residential architecture, operating simultaneously as architectural innovation and cultural phenomenon. This paper examines how tiny houses function both as functional shelter and cultural expression, analogous to fashion's dual role of meeting basic needs while communicating contemporary values. Through the lens of "fashioning," understood both as the design process of shaping architectural form and as a mechanism for setting cultural trends, we explore how the tiny house movement shapes and is shaped by contemporary living aspirations. The paper analyses architectural design competitions, such as *Microhome*, as platforms for innovation that simultaneously advance sustainable solutions and establish new residential paradigms. Two design solutions are presented, each addressing different user needs while showcasing how innovative approaches redefine tiny house design as architectural typology and lifestyle statement. Additionally, this paper analyses the regulatory and legal barriers that challenge the mainstream adoption of tiny houses, including restrictive zoning laws and building codes, and how design competitions can serve as catalysts for addressing these challenges.

Introduction

In the intricate relationship between necessity and expression, the tension is particularly illustrated in both architecture and clothing design. Both respond to fundamental human needs (e.g. shelter and clothing,) yet both transcend their utilitarian origins to become vehicles for cultural communication, identity expression, and social commentary. The tiny house movement, as an architectural phenomenon, embodies this duality, operating simultaneously as a practical housing solution and cultural statement.

The act of "fashioning" the tiny house encompasses multiple dimensions: the literal process of designing and constructing these compact dwellings, the cultural mechanism by which they have become fashionable, and the ongoing transformation of housing paradigms through innovative design approaches. Like fashion garments that must protect the body while expressing personal and cultural identity, tiny houses must provide shelter while articulating contemporary values of sustainability, mobility, and intentional living.

Residential architecture has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades, increasingly oriented towards the principles of sustainable development. This is manifested in the adoption of green building technologies and a new creative approach to the design of living spaces, making them more efficient and practical. The "less is more" concept, promoted by architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, is becoming topical again, emphasising the importance of minimalism, which translates into downsizing and opening up to sustainable solutions.

In this context, the tiny house movement represents a cultural shift similar to fashion movements that challenge established norms and propose alternative ways of living. Much like trest designers who reimagine the relationship between body and garment, tiny house architects redefine the connection between inhabitant and dwelling. They create new forms of spatial intimacy and emphasise environmental responsibility. This movement represents a paradigm shift in architectural design, prioritising compact, multifunctional spaces that minimise environmental impact while addressing contemporary housing challenges such as affordability, urban crowding, and homelessness.[1]

Rooted in the principles of simplicity and sustainable living, the tiny house movement has evolved into a global phenomenon, blending cultural influences, technological innovations, and diverse design typologies. However, its integration into mainstream housing systems faces numerous obstacles, including restrictive zoning laws, building codes, and societal misconceptions. At the same time, architectural competitions, such as *Microhome*, have

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1 Aarti Shahani, "Could A Tiny Mobile Studio Solve Your Housing Crisis?," *Innovation*, *NPR*, November 2th 2015, https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2015/11/02/453975501/could-a-tiny-mobile-studio-solve-your-housing-crisis.

emerged as platforms for redefining tiny house design, fostering innovation, and addressing practical challenges.

This paper explores three interconnected dimensions of the tiny house - fashion relationship: first, the emergence of the tiny house movement as a cultural trend that promotes specific forms of sustainable living through exemplary models, explored in a historical evolution of the movement; second, the analogical correspondence between houses and clothing as protective exteriors that communicate cultural values through innovative design; this phase includes an analysis of architectural typologies, as well as of the regulatory and legal barriers; third, the dual meaning of "fashioning" as both architectural design process and cultural trend-setting mechanism, addressing the role of design competitions in advancing sustainable, multifunctional, and technologically integrated solutions.

The authors of the article share an increased interest in the study of this housing concept, participating together with two other collaborators, once in 2022 in the Romanian Order of Architects (OAR) Competition, "Casa mică, Casa cuib," where the proposed solution won the first prize and the second time in 2024, in the International Micro Home Competition organised by Buildner Architecture Competition in collaboration with Kingspan. Both competitions enjoyed great popularity both nationally and internationally, benefiting from widespread participation. The aim was to propel the concept of the micro home as an architectural typology in its own right by redefining the living space and integrating the latest building techniques and technologies. These participations have led to the development of two architectural solutions with an innovative vision, proposing a spatial organisation adapted to the principles of sustainable development, implementing the latest trends in construction techniques and technology.

Method

Methodological Overview

This research employed a combination of systematic literature review, cultural analysis and design-based exploration to investigate the tiny house movement and its relationship to fashion dynamics in contemporary architecture (Fig. 1).

Systematic Literature Review

A comprehensive review of academic publications, industry reports, and policy documents was conducted to identify the defining characteristics, typologies, and principles underlying the tiny house movement. Databases such as *Scopus, Web of Science*, and *Google Scholar* were used to collect literature focusing on sustainability, minimalism, and innovative housing solutions.

Examples of tiny houses from different regions were analysed, including floating homes, prefabricated units, and off-grid designs. Comparative analysis focused on mobility, sustainability, and adaptability to different geographical and cultural contexts. National and international regulations affecting tiny houses were reviewed, with particular attention to Romanian legal frameworks and

the challenges posed by zoning and building codes.Lastly, the focus shifted to analysing architecture competitions worldwide, which serve as platforms for exploring innovative tiny house designs and establishing new trends in sustainable, adaptable, and multifunctional living spaces.

Cultural Analysis
The research examined how tiny houses function as cultural artifacts, analysing their role in expressing contemporary values of sustainability, minimalism, and intentional living. This included studying how the movement disseminates its ideas through media, competitions, and exemplary projects.

Design-Based Exploration
Conceptual frameworks for tiny house designs were developed and applied to architectural competitions, such as the "MicroHome 2024" and "Casa mică - Casa cuib 2022" (Small House - Nest House) These frameworks emphasised sustainable living, multifunctionality, and technological integration while responding to contemporary lifestyle aspirations.

The proposed designs - MicroHome and Nest House - served as practical applications of these concepts. Both designs were evaluated through architectural competitions, where feedback was analysed to refine the concepts. The exploration aimed to address distinct user needs - single adults, small families, and community-based housing solutions - while emphasizing environmental responsibility.

Key Concepts in Tiny Living
The tiny house movement embodies a fundamental tension between necessity and expression that mirrors the relationship between fashion and function in clothing design. Just as garments must protect the body while communicating personal and cultural identity, tiny houses must provide shelter while articulating contemporary values and aspirations. The continuing increase in per capita living space in developed countries is raising concerns about the environmental impact of residential construction, given its significant contribution to greenhouse gas emissions.[2] In addition, the housing crisis in big cities, coupled with rising prices, has made housing increasingly unaffordable.[3] This raises numerous social, economic and environmental challenges that run counter to the principles of sustainable development.[4]

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2 R. H. Crawford and A. Stephan, "Tiny House, Tiny Footprint? The Potential for Tiny Houses to Reduce Residential Greenhouse Gas Emissions," IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science 588, no. 2 (2020): 022073, https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/588/2/022073.

3 International Energy Agency and United Nations Environment Programme, *2018 Global Status Report: Towards a Zero-Emission, Efficient and Resilient Buildings and Construction Sector* (2018), https://wedocs.unep.org/xmlui/handle/20.500.11822/27140.

4 Heather Shearer and Paul Burton, "Towards a Typology of Tiny Houses," *Housing, Theory and Society* 36, no. 3 (2019): 298–318, https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2018.1487879.

In this context (Fig. 2), the "tiny houses" movement has gained popularity, promoting the construction of small houses made of environmentally friendly materials and designed to meet the needs of sustainable housing. This type of housing offers viable solutions to housing problems, representing affordable and mobile options in crowded urban environments.[5] The fashioning of tiny houses involves multiple layers of cultural meaning. At the functional level, these dwellings must optimise space utilisation, integrate sustainable technologies, and provide comfortable living environments. At the expressive level, they communicate values of simplicity, environmental consciousness, and liberation from material excess. This dual function mirrors dress design's role as both protective clothing and cultural communication. By using eco-friendly materials and technologies and reducing utility consumption, tiny houses promote sustainable architecture. Opting for off the grid living by integrating renewable energy sources and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by up to 70% compared to traditional homes, this trend has influenced architectural design, encouraging the adoption of green solutions throughout the building industry.[6]

Furthermore, tiny houses have popularised multi-functional furniture, thus maximising space utilisation and emphasising flexible and adaptable living environments. The minimalism associated with tiny house living invites more conscious consumption choices,[7,8] reflecting broader cultural shifts towards intentional living. Tiny house communities also offer a model of affordable housing, favouring social interaction and challenging the isolating nature of urban life. These aspects determine urban developers to consider more compact and cost-effective housing solutions, thus transforming the housing landscape through the dissemination of new spatial and social paradigms.

Definitions and Cultural Positioning

As a relatively new concept, tiny houses lack a universally accepted definition, and limited academic research has been conducted on this topic.[9,10] Shearer explored tiny house typologies and outlined defining characteristics that distinguish these small-scale dwellings.[11] However, the definition varies across

5 Shahani, "A Tiny Mobile Studio."

6 Crawford and Stephan, "Tiny House."

7 Crawford and Stephan, "Tiny House."

8 Guillaume Lessard, "The Scaling up of the Tiny House Niche in Quebec – Transformations and Continuities in the Housing Regime," *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 24, no. 6 (2022): 625–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2021.2022464.

9 Daiyuan Zhang et al., "A Review of Tiny Houses in North America: Market Demand," *Sustainable Structures* 2, no. 1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.54113/j.sust.2022.000012.

10 Jasmine Ford and Lilia Gomez-Lanier, "Are Tiny Homes Here to Stay? A Review of Literature on the Tiny House Movement," *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal* 45, no. 4 (2017): 394–405, https://doi.org/10.1111/fcsr.12205.

11 Heather Shearer et al., "Planning for Tiny Houses," *Australian Planner* 55, nos. 3–4 (2018): 147–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/07293682.2019.1632358.

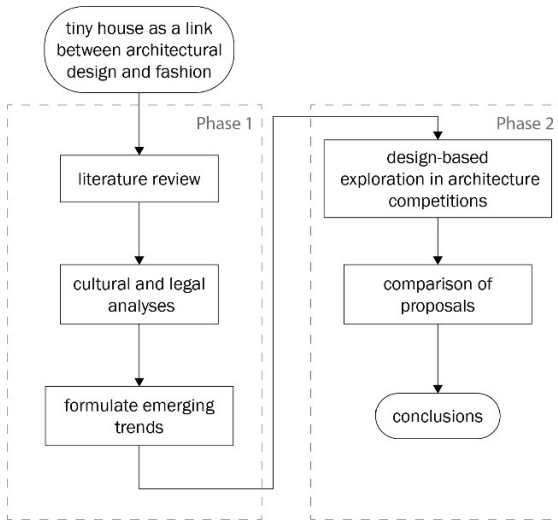


Figure 1. Methodological overview.

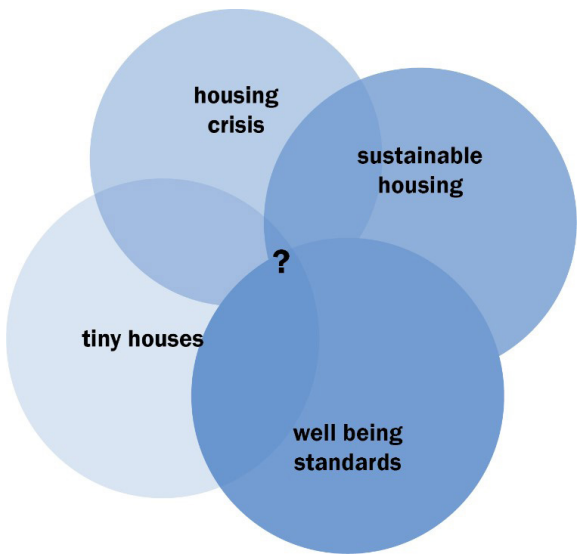


Figure 2. Framing of tiny houses in the current context. Positioning tiny houses within the contemporary housing crisis framework, the diagram illustrates how this architectural movement addresses multiple challenges simultaneously: environmental sustainability, economic accessibility, and social mobility.

countries, communities, and associations, with no global consensus to date. The movement's definitional flexibility mirrors fashion's resistance to rigid categorisation, allowing for diverse interpretations and applications across different cultural contexts.

In 2017, the U.S. introduced an official definition in stating that a tiny house must not exceed 37 m².[12] Tiny houses are compact residential structures, typically ranging from 9 to 38 square meters, designed to maximise spatial efficiency while minimising environmental impact. In Europe, weight is often a more critical factor than size, due to transportation regulations, which limit tiny houses to a maximum weight of 3.5 tons.[13]

This movement challenges traditional notions of urban living by rejecting excessive consumerism, reducing dependency on large-scale infrastructure, and promoting resource-conscious practices.[14] Like dress fashion movements that question established norms while proposing new ways of dressing and being, the tiny house movement questions established housing norms while proposing new ways of living and dwelling. Despite their compact size, tiny houses typically include the same functional spaces as traditional homes, such as living, sleeping, cooking, and bathroom areas.[15] These structures are engineered with sustainability and functionality in mind, utilising innovative design strategies to optimise space and reduce waste. The design challenge mirrors dress design's imperative to create garments that are both functional and expressive within material constraints.

Tiny houses can take various forms, including repurposed shipping containers, retrofitted buses, custom-built homes on wheels, or on permanent foundations. They may also be constructed as wooden cabins, repurposed sheds, prefabricated modular units, trailers, or 3D-printed concrete dwellings. Each design emphasises affordability, adaptability, and a reduced ecological footprint, making tiny houses a viable solution for addressing housing shortages and environmental challenges.[16] Another important aspect is the degree of mobility of these houses, and the literature reveals a possible typology, identifying two main types: mobile (trailer, relocatable and fully mobile dwellings) and permanent (built dedicated for habitation, non-residential building conversions, and tiny house villages).[17]

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12 "Appendix Q Tiny Houses - 2018 International Residential Code (IRC)," 2018, https://codes.iccsafe.org/content/IRC2018/appendix-q-tiny-houses.

13 Shearer and Burton, "Towards a Typology of Tiny Houses."

14 Yasmine Hafza, "A Look at Tiny House Movement's Impact and Challenges," *Architecture & Design*, September 2nd 2024, https://parametric-architecture.com/tiny-house-movement/.

15 Lauren M. Boeckermann et al., "Dreaming Big and Living Small: Examining Motivations and Satisfaction in Tiny House Living," *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 34, no. 1 (2019): 61–71, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-018-9616-3.

16 Hafza, "A Look at Tiny House Movement's Impact and Challenges."

17 Shearer and Burton, "Towards a Typology of Tiny Houses."

Typologies and Cultural Expressions

The diversity of tiny house typologies reflects the movement's capacity to accommodate different lifestyle aspirations and practical needs, much like dress design's ability to serve different social functions through varied garments and styles. According to established research,[18] tiny houses are broadly categorised into mobile and permanent types. As in Table 1, mobile tiny houses include trailer-based homes, relocatable units, and fully mobile structures like caravans or tents, emphasising mobility and flexibility. Permanent tiny houses encompass purpose-built residences, non-residential building conversions, and tiny house neighbourhoods, focusing on more stable living arrangements. Key features such as size, construction, cost, legality, and environmental considerations vary across categories, highlighting the adaptability and diverse applications of tiny houses in different contexts.

TYPE 1: Mobile (fully or partially)	TYPE 2: Permanent (non-mobile)
1a. Small houses on trailers	2a. Built as tiny houses/cabins
- Size: < maximum allowed dimensions (approx. 20 m² or < 3.5 tons in EU)	- Size: generally, under 50 m²
- Mobile, built on trailers	- Semi-detached, usually built by specialised companies or owner/friends/family
- Built by owner/friends/family	- Costs vary significantly ($50,000+ depending on materials and builder)
- The house is owned, the trailer/vehicle can be financed	- Fully legal (meets zoning and construction regulations, potable water, sewage), on owned land, usually in rural residential areas
- Legally classified as caravans or RVs, depending on location	- No particular focus on environmental or community issues (other than personal interests)
- Can be moved from the construction site to a permanent or semi-permanent site in rural or urban areas, camping zones, family- or friend-owned land, or caravan parks	- Represents stability within minimalism
- Residents often prioritise environmental issues and live off-grid	
- May have community-related interests; urban tiny house residents report the small house size necessitates community activities	

18 Shearer and Burton, "Towards a Typology of Tiny Houses."

- Emphasises mobility and freedom - Expresses values of nomadism and flexibility	
1b. Relocatable tiny houses (prefabricated, cabins, containers, tiny houses, kit homes, etc.)	2b. Non-residential building conversions (barns, garages, sheds)
- Size: up to approximately 40 m²	- Size: generally, under 70 m²
- Less frequently moved (<6 months general minimum rental time)	- May serve as temporary housing but is typically not moved
- Built by owner/friends/family, purchased second-hand or as kits	- Detached or semi-detached (attached to a larger property)
- The house is owned, the land is owned/mortgaged or rented	- Lower cost (< $20,000). Often rented or built on friends'/family land
- Legally categorised as primary/secondary/auxiliary residence on owned or rented land	- Legally compliant, but residency permit regulations vary widely by municipality. Found in suburban to rural areas
- No special focus on environmental or community issues (other than personal interests)	- No special focus on environmental or community issues (other than personal interests)
- Represents compromise between mobility and stability	- Often represents resourcefulness and adaptation
1c. Fully mobile dwellings (caravans, boats, vehicles, tents)	2c. Tiny house neighbourhoods (apartment/cabin/urban housing complexes in co-housing or intentional communities)
- Very small (smaller than 1a and 1b)	- Generally, private individual space is small (<40 m²), with shared facilities (e.g., kitchen, garden)
- Highly mobile and often temporary structures	- Designs vary greatly and may include alternative dwellings such as wagon conversions or yurts
- Typically, not built but purchased new/used or repurposed (e.g. buses/trucks)	- Costs vary significantly depending on ownership type and location (rented, owned, shared ownership, or social assistance)
- Costs vary widely (< $1,000–$100,000)	- Fully legal in many countries. Found from urban centres to rural areas
- Often align with the environmental ethics of the tiny house movement	- Frequently founded on strong ecological or social philosophies and rules
- Legally placed in designated zones, caravan parks, camping areas, green zones, or private land (family/friends). Placement duration depends on local government regulations	- Emphasises community and shared resources

- Often exhibit strong community interest. Environmental sustainability is not always a priority, depending on the individual	
- Represents extreme minimalism and flexibility	

Table 1. Typologies of tiny houses.[19]

The typological analysis reveals how different tiny house forms serve distinct cultural functions, from expressing individual freedom through mobility to building sustainable communities through shared resources. Each type represents a different approach to fashioning contemporary living within spatial constraints. Key features such as size, construction, cost, legality, and environmental considerations vary across categories, highlighting the adaptability and diverse cultural applications of tiny houses in different contexts. This diversity mirrors fashion's capacity to serve multiple social functions through varied styles and approaches.

Trending Towards Sustainability: The Movement as Cultural Fashion

The tiny house movement's emergence as a cultural trend demonstrates how architectural ideas, like other fashion trends, are disseminated through media, exemplary projects, and influential personalities. The movement's "fashionable" status reflects its capacity to capture contemporary cultural anxieties about sustainability, authenticity, and meaningful living. This positioning is reinforced through various cultural mechanisms: influential personalities who advocate for tiny living, media coverage that presents tiny houses as solutions to contemporary problems, and architectural competitions that establish new standards for design excellence. These mechanisms mirror fashion's systems of trend dissemination through designers, media, and cultural events.

The Tiny House by Hanne[20] illustrates how tiny houses function as both architectural solutions and cultural statements. The clean lines, natural materials, and integration with the landscape express contemporary values of sustainability and minimalism. The elevated position and large windows suggest openness and connection to nature, while the compact form expresses environmental consciousness and spatial efficiency.

Pro Arguments and Cultural Values

The tiny house movement's arguments extend beyond practical considerations to encompass cultural values and lifestyle aspirations that resonate with contemporary concerns about sustainability, authenticity, and meaningful living.

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19 Shearer and Burton, "Towards a Typology of Tiny Houses."

20 Hanne, "Marco Bruijnes Architecten Tiny Houses Nieuws," *Marco Bruijnes Architecten*, June 21th 2022, https://marcobruijnes.nl/tiny-houses/.

Tiny house movement implies a specific lifestyle of the residents which can lead to several favourable outcomes (Fig. 3) - the interconnected benefits illustrate how tiny houses address multiple contemporary concerns simultaneously, from environmental sustainability to personal freedom. Tiny houses offer environmental, financial, and lifestyle advantages, making them a sustainable alternative to traditional housing. Their small size reduces energy consumption, minimises material use, and lowers waste production, significantly decreasing their carbon footprint. Green technologies such as solar panels, water filtration systems, rainwater collection systems and composting toilets are commonly included.[21,22]

They often use fewer materials during construction and frequently incorporate recycled options. Their compact size also limits the accumulation of material possessions, encouraging more intentional and conscious consumption.[23] Economically, tiny houses are more accessible, with construction costs ranging from $20,000 to $80,000 and minimal ongoing expenses. Monthly utility bills average $125, and annual maintenance costs are around $775, far below those of a traditional home.[24] Moreover, this solution holds significant potential as housing solutions for the homeless, whether funded by governments or non-profit organizations. Their small size, ability to support community-focused designs, and relatively low construction costs make them an accessible and practical option.[25]

Beyond cost and environmental impact, tiny houses encourage a minimalist lifestyle by focusing on essentials. They provide an escape from consumerism, fostering well-being and allowing residents to prioritize relationships and personal growth over material possessions.[26] Sociological studies on the subject indicate that living in small houses can offer benefits such as financial security, freedom and autonomy, strengthened social relationships and simpler living.[27] They can stimulate closeness to nature and outdoor activities, aligning with contemporary wellness and environmental consciousness trends.

Examples Around the World

Origins and Cultural Foundations

In order for tiny house living to become a sustainable solution in Eastern Europe, including Romania, a closer look at the origins of the movement, the definitions and perceptions related to the concept, as well as the challenges

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21 Andrea Chang, "Evaluating Tiny Houses as a Solution to the Housing Affordability and Environmental Crises," *Aletheia* 3 (May 2023), https://doi.org/10.15173/a.v3i1.3197.

22 Hafza, "A Look at Tiny House Movement's Impact and Challenges."

23 Chang, "Evaluating Tiny Houses."

24 Hafza, "A Look at Tiny House Movement's Impact and Challenges."

25 Chang, "Evaluating Tiny Houses."

26 Hafza, "A Look at Tiny House Movement's Impact and Challenges."

27 Severin Mangold and Toralf Zschau, "'In Search of the "Good Life': The Appeal of the Tiny House Lifestyle in the USA," *Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2019): 1, https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8010026.

faced by those who choose to live in such dwellings, is needed. While interest in tiny homes is significant, their integration into the wider housing system remains a challenge.

Promoted as early as the eighteenth century, the concept of simple living became part of the contemporary lifestyles, leading to a wider-spread acknowledgement of small houses. In 1854, Henry David Thoreau published *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, a seminal work describing the author's personal experience of living in a cramped outdoor space (a small cabin) and emphasising the benefits of living reduced to the bare essentials.[28] The movement was also influenced by the work of Le Corbusier, who experimented with small house design in the mid-twentieth century. The *Cabanon de vacances*, called *maison* by the author and designed using the Modulor, became a landmark for this type of dwelling, also approaching the design in a philosophical manner.[29]

Jay Shafer is considered the founder of the contemporary tiny house movement; as early as 1999, he drew attention to the benefits of living in small spaces by building an 8 square - meter mobile home.[30] However, seeing the tiny houses movement only as an American phenomenon overlooks its global roots. Japan's tradition of asceticism and minimalism, shaped by overcrowding and natural disasters, encourages detachment from material excess. Similarly, the 1960s European co-housing models in Denmark focused on shared living and resource sharing. And all these have made an important contribution to the tiny house movement's evolution. There is a global interest in such dwellings, with examples such as the Smart Student Unit in Sweden and Renzo Piano's *Diogene* micro-house in Italy.[31]

Contemporary Solutions and Design Innovation

Contemporary tiny house solutions demonstrate how architectural innovation responds to cultural demands for sustainability, affordability, and flexibility. Emerging expectations for functional and economical tiny houses have led to efficient solutions, including modular homes made from wooden frames,[32]

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28 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Oxford University Press, 2008). Rick Diguette, "Lessons from the First 'Tiny House' Evangelist, Henry David Thoreau," *Washington Post*, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/home/lessons-from-the-first-tiny-house-evangelist-henry-david-thoreau/2017/03/13/3dddc69e-02d0-11e7-b1e9-a05d3c21f7cf_story.html.

29 Philip Jodidio, *Cabins / Hutten / Cabanes* (Taschen, 2014).

30 Emily Nonko, "A Tiny House Movement Timeline," *Curbed*, July 19th 2017, https://archive.curbed.com/2017/7/19/15974554/tiny-house-timeline.

31 Corradi, "Tiny Houses: The New Trend in Sustainable (and Alternative) Living," *Corradi*, 2020, https://www.corradi.eu/en/magazine/tiny-houses-what-they-are.

32 Harvard Graduate School of Design, "GSD Duo Designs Tiny Houses for Cross-Harvard Startup," GSD News, August 8th 2015, https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/2015/08/gsd-duo-designs-tiny-houses-for-cross-harvard-startup/.

metal, expanded clay aggregate, containers,[33] prefabricated,[34] 3D printed houses.[35] The American Jay Shafer is recognised as an important figure of the modern tiny houses movement. His influence began with an article wrote in 1999, highlighting the benefits of living in a small space, and culminated in the founding of the first U.S. company to sell mobile tiny houses that same year. In the late 1990s, Shafer built his first small home - an 8 square-meter mobile cabin. As the movement gained traction, many argue that the global tiny house concept was born in the United States.[36]

In USA as well, Boneyard Studios, founded in 2012 in Washington, D.C., was an innovative experiment in simplicity, sustainability, and urban infill. Situated on a small, undeveloped lot, this tiny house community emphasised collaboration and social sustainability. Each of the four tiny homes, measuring under 220 square feet, was uniquely designed, featuring amenities like rainwater collection systems and solar panels. Communal elements, including an organic garden and shared irrigation system, showcased the potential of collective living. However, zoning laws, which require structures to be at least 400 square feet for habitation, restricted full-time residency, making the homes part-time models for a sustainable village. Disputes over land ownership and community resources eventually fractured the original group.[37]

In contrast, several tiny house projects aim at solving homelessness difficulties.[38] East Union Homeless Village in Seattle, Washington, provides a functional and socially sustainable solution to homelessness. Opened in 2016 as a joint project of the *Low-Income Housing Institute* and Nickelsville, the village consists of 15 insulated and electrified tiny homes, each costing approximately $2,200 to build. Shared amenities include a kitchen tent, showers, and a bathroom pavilion, with residents paying $90 monthly for utilities. This transitional housing serves families of up to three and emphasizes community while maintaining rules to avoid resource disputes.[39]

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33 Justyna Juroszek, "'Small Is Beautiful' New Trends in Architecture and Interior Designs," *Space&FORM* 2021, no. 48 (2021): 31–44, https://doi.org/10.21005/pif.2021.48.B-02.

34 Naidoo Ridhika, "Hangar Design Group: Sweet Home," *Designboom | Architecture & Design Magazine*, March 10th 2010, https://www.designboom.com/architecture/hangar-design-group-sweet-home/.

35 Eindhoven University of Technology, "First Resident of 3D-Printed Concrete House in Eindhoven Receives Key," 2021, https://www.tue.nl/en/news/news-overview/30-04-2021-first-resident-of-3d-printed-concrete-house-in-eindhoven-receives-key.

36 Alec Wilkinson, "Let's Get Small," *New Yorker*, July 25th 2011, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/07/25/lets-get-small.

37 Ford and Gomez-Lanier, "Are Tiny Homes Here to Stay?."

38 Krista Evans, "Tackling Homelessness with Tiny Houses: An Inventory of Tiny House Villages in the United States," *The Professional Geographer* 72, no. 3 (2020): 360–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2020.1744170. Zhang et al., "A Review of Tiny Houses in North America." Ford and Gomez-Lanier, "Are Tiny Homes Here to Stay?."

39 Ford and Gomez-Lanier, "Are Tiny Homes Here to Stay?."

Although USA holds several examples and attitudes towards tiny homes, relevant cases are building up globally too. In The Netherlands, *Tiny House Nederland* has operated as a cooperative and global foundation aiming to promote tiny house adoption among Dutch citizens seeking sustainable living solutions. These include 38 residents and bloggers, as well as 132 potential locations and initiative groups for tiny houses.[40] In 2013, Renzo Piano introduced a version of a micro house in Italy, called *Diogene*, named after the Greek philosopher who rejected the superficiality of material life. The house, with an extremely small footprint of just 6 square meters, was showcased on the Vitra campus and is designed to be self-sustaining.[41] In Sweden, there is the *Smart Student Unit*, an eco-friendly micro house designed by the architecture firm Tengbom in partnership with Lund University in 2013. Measuring just 10 square meters, it is entirely constructed from wood.[42]

Legal Perspectives and Cultural Resistance

The biggest challenge to the implementation of tiny houses is compliance with building codes and urban planning regulations. If they are permanent, they often violate building codes on minimum sizing,[43] and when they are mobile, there are many restrictions related to parking.[44] The primary barrier to the widespread adoption of tiny houses is compliance with building codes and zoning regulations.[45] Tiny houses occupy a grey area between trailers, mobile homes, recreational vehicles, and traditional houses. They often do not fit neatly into any existing legal category. When considered strictly as homes, tiny houses frequently violate building codes regarding minimum size requirements for liveable spaces. Furthermore, certain eco-friendly features commonly used in tiny houses, such as composting toilets, may be legally prohibited. When classified as mobile homes, many regulations restrict where these houses can be legally parked, and mobile home parks or RV communities may not always permit tiny house installations.[46]

In Romania, the law does not define mobile dwellings, and the construction of dwellings requires authorisation and compliance with specific requirements.

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40 TinyHouseNederland, "Over THN," *Tiny House Nederland*, 2020, *https://www.tinyhousenederland.nl/tiny-house-nederland/over-thn/*.

41 "Diogene / Renzo Piano," *ArchDaily*, July 1st 2013, https://www.archdaily.com/396082/diogene-renzo-piano.

42 "Smart Student Unit by Tengbom," *Dezeen*, September 29th 2013, https://www.dezeen.com/2013/09/29/smart-student-units-by-tengbom/.

43 Stephanie Brokenshire, "Tiny Houses Desirable or Disruptive?," *Australian Planner* 55, nos 3–4 (2018): 226–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/07293682.2019.1634114.

44 April Anson, "'The World Is My Backyard': Romanticization, Thoreauvian Rhetoric, and Constructive Confrontation in the Tiny House Movement," in *From Sustainable to Resilient Cities: Global Concerns and Urban Efforts*, vol. 14, *Research in Urban Sociology* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1108/S1047-004220140000014013.

45 Catherine Mingoya, "Building Together. Tiny House Villages for the Homeless: A Comparative Case Study," Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2015.

46 Anson, "'The World Is My Backyard'."

Although in recent years there is an increase in interest of the general population (Fig. 4), the legal constraints are not yet formulating a favourable base for tiny houses. The minimum requirements for a dwelling under Romanian law are based on the number of users, with a minimum area of 58 square meters for the built area and 37 square meters for usable space.[47] Additionally, the dwelling must include: unrestricted individual access to the living space, without interfering with the exclusive possession and use of space by another person or family; a resting area; a cooking area; a sanitary facility; access to electricity, potable water, and the controlled disposal of wastewater and household waste.

Vacation homes can only be built on land owned or leased according to the law, in areas designated by urban planning and territorial development documents approved by law. However, there are initiatives to introduce the concept of tiny houses in tourism, in this sense, noting a number of actions undertaken at the level of media popularisation of the concept, to mention the Tiny Houses festival, but also the OAR Romania competition, "*Casa mică, Casa cuib.*" These initiatives demonstrate how cultural promotion can precede legal recognition, similar to fashion's capacity to establish new norms through cultural influence.

As evidenced by search trends, the growing interest in tiny houses in Romania demonstrates how cultural movements can gain momentum despite regulatory challenges. This pattern highlights fashion's capacity to influence social norms through cultural appeal rather than regulatory mandate.

Architecture Competitions

Architecture competitions function as crucial mechanisms for establishing new trends in tiny house design. These competitions serve multiple functions: they provide platforms for design innovation, create media attention for new ideas, and establish benchmarks for design excellence. Notable international examples include:

Tiny House Competition Series: Organised by Volume Zero, this competition invites participants to design a tiny house for two people, emphasising individuality, sustainability, and resourceful living. The competition encourages exploration of mobile or off-the-grid living spaces.[48]
Microhome Competition Series: Hosted by Buildner as part of their Small-Scale Architecture series, the Microhome competitions challenge designers to create off-grid, modular structures with a maximum floor area of 25 square meters. The

47 "LEGE (R) 114 11/10/1996 - Portal Legislativ," accessed January 13th 2025, https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/8601.

48 'Tiny House 2024 Architecture Competition | Volume Zero', *H*ttps://Volumezerocompetitions.Com, accessed January 13th 2025, https://volumezerocompetitions.com/treehouse-2024.

aim is to address affordable housing crises and promote replicable ideas for small living spaces.[49]

Make it Small 2024: Hosted by Instructables, invites designers to showcase their creativity by developing innovative small-scale projects. This competition emphasises the art of miniaturisation, challenging participants to think big while designing small.[50]

ArcAce's *Tiny House Community* is a design competition that encourages architects and designers to develop innovative concepts for sustainable, off-grid tiny house communities. The competition emphasises ultra-small living spaces, minimalist lifestyles, and self-sustained communities. Participants are tasked with creating designs that include a tiny house village, sustainable farming areas, art studios, and communal gathering spaces.[51]

Other architecture competitions promoting tiny living include N*ano House 2021, MicroHousing 2022, Pocket Home 2021, Compact Living 2021, Small Home Big Life 2023*. In Romania, the competition "Casa mică - Casa cuib" is held annually by Romanian Order of Architects,[52] providing a platform for exploring tiny house design within the national cultural context.

Results: Tiny Houses in Architecture Competitions

This section presents two solutions developed by the authors, responding from different perspectives to tiny house requirements, while addressing two kinds of beneficiaries: one/two adults and small families (Fig. 5). The first solution is a proposal for the International competition Microhome 2024. Based on high-tech solutions and modern materials, the home is offering a living space for maximum two adults, with decreased focus on families. Meanwhile, the Romanian national competition Nest House 2022 is formulated for a small family of maximum 2 adults and 2 children. With a different vision, the house is traditionally inspired by the houses in the Danube Delta in Romania and can work as a compact household, offering an off-grid solution for at least two weeks.

Innovation is one of the desired elements in the tiny house way of living. The proposals show different approaches to embedding technology - while the nest house has advanced technology that makes things possible in the background, the microhome counts on tech to operate.

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49 Buildner, 'MICROHOME International Architecture Ideas Competition. Open to All.', accessed November 24h 2025, https://architecturecompetitions.com/microhome10/.

50 "Make It Small," Instructables, accessed January 13th 2025, https://www.instructables.com/contest/makeitsmall2024/.

51 "ArcAce's Tiny House Community," *ArchDaily*, accessed January 13th 2025, https://www.archdaily.com/972004/arcaces-tiny-house-community.

52 Irina Dobriță, "Lansare apel <<Casa mică, casa cuib>>," OAR, July 29th 2022, https://oar.archi/stiri/lansare-concurs-casa-mica-casa-cuib/.

MicroHome

This design targeted ultra-compact living with high-tech solutions. A key feature was the inclusion of a technical level where retractable furniture systems allow multiple configurations, maximizing adaptability for various activities such as hosting, working, or leisure. Materials were chosen for their lightweight and multi-functional properties, including carbon fiber structural elements and Quadcore AWP insulated wall panels. Smart technologies, such as AI-powered automation, media-enabled walls, and energy-generating systems, were integrated to enhance user experience and optimise space efficiency (Fig. 6).

The concept offers a transformative vision of modern living, where minimal space meets maximum functionality. By integrating adaptability, smart technologies (Fig. 6, 7), and sustainability, the microhome becomes a dynamic, multifunctional solution for contemporary lifestyles.

Adaptability: Microhomes redefine traditional notions of space by enabling temporary maximiszation of specific functions as needed. While the footprint remains compact, the ability to reconfigure spaces ensures that a small living unit can cater to diverse and expansive needs, from hosting guests to creating a home office or a recreational area.

Smart Technologies: Advances in technology pave the way for intelligent, responsive living environments. Walls are not only structural but also functional - integrating media displays, adjustable transparency, heating systems, and energy generation. These "smart walls" enhance the home's flexibility, allowing it to adapt seamlessly to the user's preferences and activities with the aid of AI-powered assistants and electronically actuated systems (Fig. 8).

Sustainability: While often associated with high-tech equipment, sustainability in microhomes is more than energy efficiency. It involves a holistic approach to reducing environmental impact through smart design, renewable energy integration, and resource optimisation.

Multifunctionality: The microhome is not limited to private living. It can serve as a flexible space for various uses - an office, cinema, co-working hub, or even a public venue - showcasing the potential for innovative, collective living solutions within a single unit.

The structure is made of carbon fibre with a multipurpose role - structural and support for the distribution of thermally controlled air inside the glazed wall, double external closing. This wall also has a multipurpose role as it is heating/cooling, electric current generating, media supporting, as well as adjustable opacity. Rainwater is filtered and stored in the technical level. The furniture is electrically retractable like the rest of the installations. For the opaque area of the house base, we have used Quadcore AWP insulated wall panel vertically laid from Kingspan, due to its technical characteristics, but also to its appearance. It has the qualities of closure such as resistance, appearance,

thermal comfort, providing the possibility to adapt it to our solution. This vision of the modern microhome demonstrates how small living spaces can offer adaptability, efficiency, and sustainability, proposing a new paradigm for urban living. The project demonstrates how contemporary tiny houses can express technological innovation and urban adaptability.

Nest House

Developed in response to the "Casa mică - Casa cuib" competition, this design envisioned a self-sufficient floating house suitable for the Danube Delta in Romania (Fig. 9). The competition brief challenged participants to design a small house under 100 square meters. While 100 square meters might seem spacious for a single adult, it presents unique challenges for families, especially when aiming for complete self-sufficiency - not only in energy but also in food production. Within the Romanian legal framework, a 100 square meter dwelling exceeds the minimum legal requirement of 58 square meters for a residential unit. However, it is still considered a small house when designed for a family with at least one child, particularly when the home is conceived as an off-grid and self-sustained unit.

The Nest House stems from the vision of a self-sustaining home, ideally situated in the Danube Delta, Romania. This location, rich in natural resources such as sunlight, water, and fish, inspired the design to integrate these elements into the house's functionality (Fig. 10, 11). The result is a tiny unit that expands its capabilities to harvest and utilize local resources effectively.

The proposal envisions a floating house equipped with a greenhouse and an aquaponics system, solar panels, as well as fresh and waste water tanks (Fig. 11, 12). This combination ensures the house operates entirely off-grid, addressing energy, water, and food sustainability simultaneously. Drawing inspiration from traditional architecture, the design incorporates reimagined roof eaves with adjustable mobility. These eaves provide passive heat control and adapt to enhance privacy, blending functionality with references to cultural heritage. This innovative approach redefines the tiny house concept, balancing modern sustainability with traditional architectural nuances. The concept demonstrates how traditional architectural wisdom can fashion contemporary solutions, integrating historical knowledge with modern sustainability requirements.

Although the house is designed to accommodate up to four individuals, the bedrooms are reduced to the minimum legal size, allowing for the expansion of a more generous and multifunctional living area. The greenhouse, positioned adjacent to the kitchen, plays a critical role in supporting the home's self-sufficiency. Similar to how clothing fashion is tailored to individual needs, the greenhouse is carefully adapted to the specific environmental conditions of the Danube Delta and to the essential needs of its occupants.

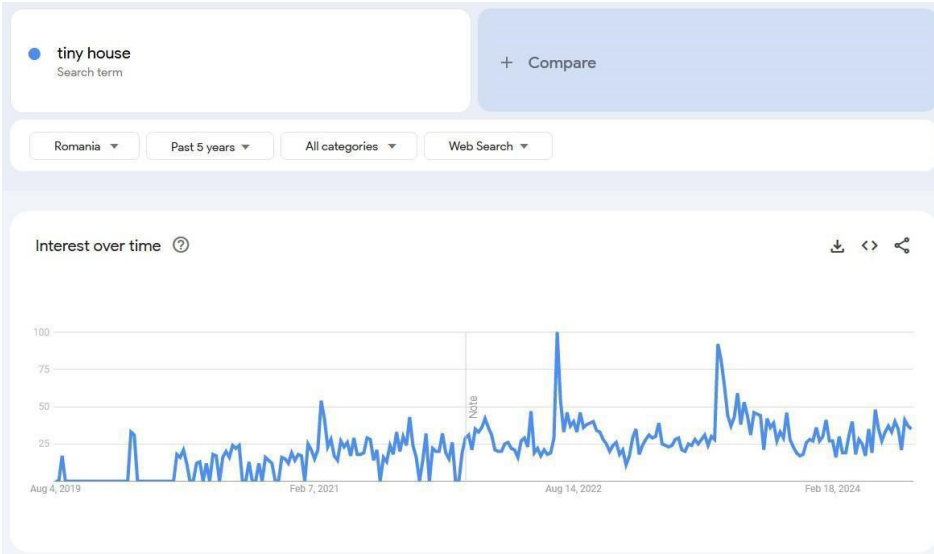


Figure 3. Favourable arguments for the tiny house movement.

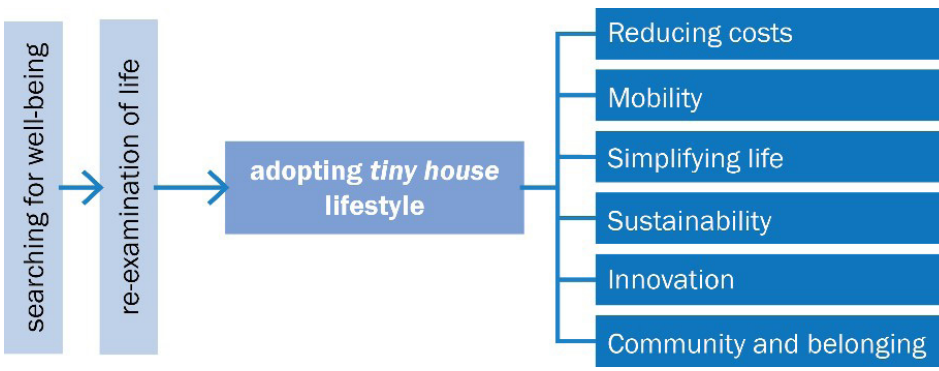


Figure 4. Trends for tiny houses in Romania - evolution in time.

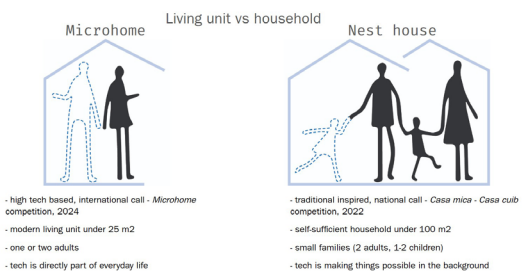


Figure 5. Approaches in architecture competitions promoting tiny house lifestyle.

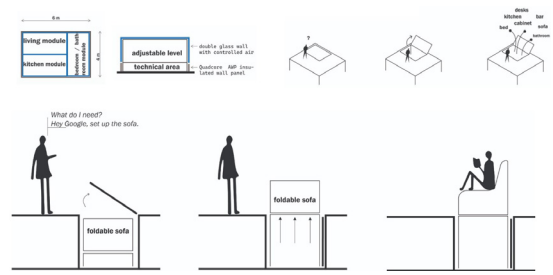


Figure 6. MicroHome concept diagram.

To illustrate the multiple layers integrated into this project, a decomposed axonometric drawing is employed (Fig.11). This method provides a clear representation of how conceptual ideas are translated into architectural reality. Similar to the role of conceptual frameworks in other design fields, where the underlying idea defines the strength and coherence of the final product, the architectural concept serves as the foundation for generating a meaningful and context-responsive proposal.

Discussion – Risks and Contradictions

Critiques of the Tiny House Movement highlight concerns about the dilution of its core principles. Originally focused on reducing consumerism and materialism, the movement has shifted towards marketing, with tiny houses often viewed as weekend getaways rather than sustainable residences. This shift risks presenting tiny living as a temporary experience rather than a viable lifestyle. Questions about sustainability also arise, as the efficiency of tiny homes is diminished if they cannot adapt to residents' changing needs, such as family growth or aging. Additionally, limited adaptability for home working compared to larger homes complicates usability. And again, if tiny houses are primarily seen as real estate investments, they may fail to address genuine community needs.

Tiny houses are designed for optimal use of space, are often customised and oriented towards sustainable principles, and offer a sense of belonging to a community.[53] Living in such a home requires lifestyle adaptations, including reduced possessions, which can create clutter and privacy challenges, especially for families. Financial challenges, such as difficulties in obtaining mortgages, can also push buyers to seek alternative, less favourable financing options. The ethos of minimalism and anti-consumerism is often closely associated with tiny house living. However, it is worth questioning whether this "anti-consumerism" mindset is unique to tiny house residents or if it also applies to apartment dwellers.[54] Recent criticisms point to a possible departure from the philosophical tenets of the movement, particularly related to excessive consumerism and materialism. Their use as a second property can be seen as contradicting the principles of sustainability, turning them into a new form of accumulation, given that the movement is based on three core concepts: responsibility towards the environment, community connectedness and independence from consumerism.[55] The commercialisation of tiny houses has led to a misperception of the concept, transforming them from symbols of simple living and minimalism into "instagramable" trends. These houses are perceived as temporary getaways, influenced by "glamping," which undermines the original intention of modest living.

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53 Shearer and Burton, "Towards a Typology of Tiny Houses."

54 Chang, "Evaluating Tiny Houses."

55 Anson, "The World Is My Backyard."

While the design of tiny houses shares conceptual similarities with clothing design, particularly in the shaping of new ideas, trends, and lifestyles, it is also subject to a distinct set of limitations. Both fields place a strong emphasis on innovation, individuality, and adaptability. However, in architecture, and especially in the case of tiny house design, technical constraints and spatial regulations impose significant boundaries on creative freedom. Economic barriers play a role in shaping the trajectory of the tiny house movement. The cost of sustainable materials, renewable energy systems, and regulatory compliance can hinder experimentation and affordance, particularly when compared to the more fluid and fast-paced nature of the garment industry. Clothes can be tailored with relative precision and flexibility, and the threshold for entry, both in terms of production and consumer adoption, is considerably lower. While wear/vestiary fashion affords immediacy in expressing trends and responding to consumer needs, architecture requires long-term planning, material durability, and adherence to safety standards.

Conclusion. Prospectives for Fashioning Tiny Houses

The analysis of fashioning tiny houses reveals a complex cultural phenomenon that transcends mere architectural innovation. This movement represents a fundamental renegotiation of how we conceptualise home, community, and sustainable living in contemporary society. Like fashion trends in other creative domains, tiny houses navigate the delicate balance between authenticity and commercialisation, serving diverse cultural functions while maintaining their identity as both architectural solutions and lifestyle statements.

The movement's strength lies in its ability to address multiple, sometimes contradictory needs simultaneously. While architects emphasise sustainability and design innovation, users are drawn to freedom, mobility, and simplicity, with environmental concerns often emerging as secondary motivations. This diversity demonstrates how architectural ideas can serve different cultural functions for different users while maintaining coherence as a broader social movement.

The tiny houses movement's influence extends beyond individual dwellings to reshape architectural practice itself. It challenges fundamental assumptions about space requirements while promoting social connectivity and influencing urban design through compact communities with shared spaces. The movement's emphasis on minimalism redefines concepts of home by balancing social and intimate spaces as sites for self-identity expression, paralleling fashion's capacity to reshape relationships between body, clothing, and identity.

Culturally, the movement's impact reaches far beyond architecture to influence broader discussions about consumption, sustainability, and meaningful living. Its success in capturing contemporary cultural concerns while proposing practical solutions demonstrates how architectural ideas can fashion new ways of thinking about fundamental human needs. The movement's three underlying principles - environmental responsibility, community connectivity,

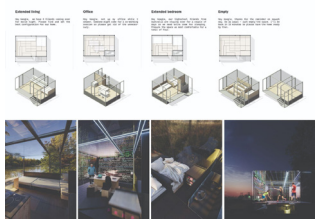


Figure 7. Microhome: different scenarios and configuration for adapting to tiny living.

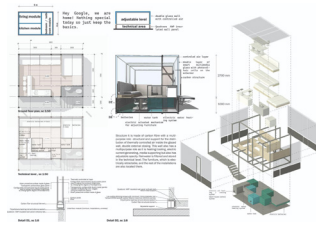


Figure 8.1. MicroHome floor plan depicting the technical under-layer.

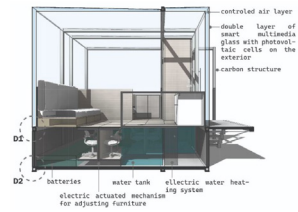


Figure 8.2. MicroHome section, depicting the technical under-layer.



Figure 10. Nest House exterior perspective and facades, illustrating the context for the proposal.

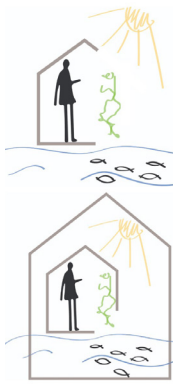


Figure 9. Nest house concept diagram.

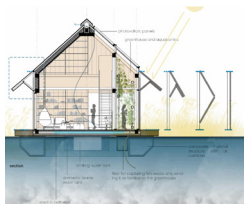


Figure 11.1. Nest House section.

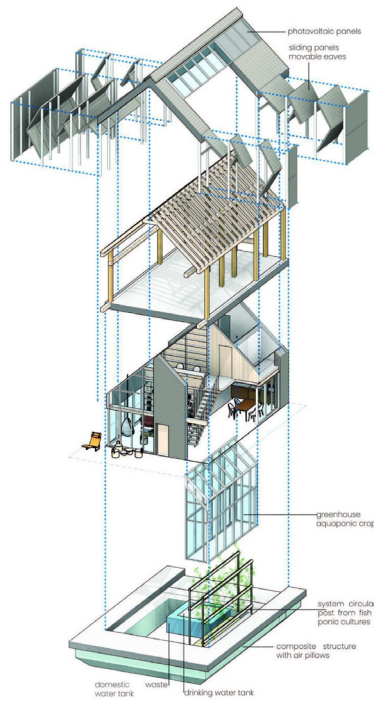


Figure 11.2. Nest House decomposed axonometry.

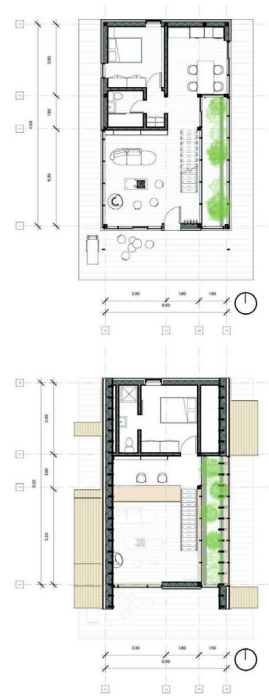


Figure 12. Nest House ground floor plans.

and independence from consumerism - remain relevant for addressing contemporary challenges, though their application requires ongoing negotiation between ideal and practical concerns.

The future success of the tiny house movement depends on its capacity to maintain authenticity while adapting to changing cultural and practical needs. Like successful fashion movements, it must balance innovation with tradition, individual expression with social responsibility, and commercial viability with cultural integrity. Through examining how tiny houses are fashioned as both architectural solutions and cultural statements, we gain insights into broader processes of cultural change and architectural innovation, illustrating how built environments both reflect and shape cultural values.

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Fig. 1, 2, 3, 5: by authors.

Fig. 4: Google Trends. (n.d.). Google Trends. Retrieved January 10th 2025, from https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&geo=RO&q=tiny%20house.

Fig. 6-12: by authors, from proposal for *Casa Mica Casa Cuib* Competition 2022.

Layered Modernities

Modernisation and Traces Within Rebreanu's *Ion*
Architectural Layers of the First Modern Romanian Novel

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Keywords
Ion; distant reading; fiction; literature; cultural landscape

Abstract
Liviu Rebreanu's 1920 novel *Ion* is regarded as Romania's first modern novel, a work which dives into psychological realism, and doesn't shy away from social and economic commentary, aiming a certain synchronisation with concerns and techniques from modern European literature. It shifts focus towards morally complex characters from a rural Transylvanian setting, exploring themes of landownership, national identity and the cultural climate of the region in the beginning of the twentieth century. The paper aims to analyse the architectural and social components of the fictional village of Pripas, a substitute for the settlement of Prislop, near Năsăud, in which the author lived together with his family for nearly a decade, and to unravel new information regarding the way in which the fictional work captures a particular socio-economic and cultural landscape.

Introduction

Liviu Rebreanu's 1920 opus *Ion* is considered Romania's first modern novel.[1] This attribute resides in the work's initiatory qualities, as it represents the first literary effort from the newly formed state, that delved into psychological realism, not shying away from social and economic commentary and aiming a certain synchronisation with concerns and techniques from modern European literature. The novel represented an exception from what, at the time, was the *status quo* of Romanian written works, breaking away from Romanticism and shifting the focus from idealised heroes and patriotic themes (as was the case with Romania's traditionalist movement, *Sămănătorism*) towards morally ambiguous dynamics with complex, realist characters. The novel builds upon Rebreanu's own observation of facts and events, with the fictional world mirroring the author's own experience as a young member of Transylvania's Someș Valley petty bourgeoisie, as the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century saw the development of a new social group in the historical region's rural scenery, that of the marginal Romanian intellectuals. Culturally disassociated from the administrative power – the Austro-Hungarian Empire[2] and its institutions, and socially separated from the pastoral environment, yet marked by comparable difficulties to its inhabitants, their strive for modernity is both contrasted and complemented by their relationship to the timeless peasant. The author's exploration of this dichotomy illustrates traces of a world in transition, in which the new intellectuals are the catalysts for change.

The setting of the story remains, however, a rural environment. Even though the image of the village of *Pripas*, Rebreanu's main territory for the development of the novel, is by far not a romanticised version of pastoral life, the background of the otherwise multifaceted modern literary creation remains somewhat embedded in the familiar peasant existence portrayed so often by the writer's peers and predecessors. The uninformed reader can understandably hesitate in regarding the novel as a truly modern one as, after all, highly different kinds of literary works, which we typically recognise as having modern qualities, such as Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, or L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,* were written decades or years before Rebreanu's *Ion.*

A short synopsis of *Ion* unfolds as follows. The titular hero, a Transylvanian peasant from a rather unfortunate family, finds himself split between the appreciation of *love* and that of *land*, hence the names of the two volumes which comprise the novel – *The Voice of the Earth [Glasul Pământului]* and *The Voice of Love [Glasul Iubirii].* The actions and the characters within the novel

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1 Eugen Lovinescu, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane*, vol. 2 (Editura Ancora, 1926).

2 Between 1867 and 1918, Transylvania represented a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, under Hungarian administration, with social, cultural and political ramifications leading up to limited rights for the region's Romanian population.

revolve around this duality, with Ion first aiming to achieve an enhanced social status, by marrying Ana, whom he does not love, the daughter of wealthy landowner Vasile Baciu, for her dowry. This course of action leads down a road of violence, emotional abuse and isolation, resulting in Ana taking her own life. Once the financial gain pursuit is met, Ion finds himself affected by his deeper emotional needs, returning to his first, sincere love, Florica, who is meanwhile married to Ion's rival, George Bulbuc. This continuous internal conflict fueled by materialistic ambitions and human frailty, lead to Ion's tragic death, at the hands of his foe, George. The main events of the novel are observed by the Herdelea family, members of Transylvania's Romanian petty bourgeoisie, which offer the lens through which the rural universe is depicted. The main storyline of the literary work is complemented by nuanced scenes which portray a complex and dynamic sociocultural context, with themes such as landownership, social stratifications, ethnic discrepancies, or gender inequality being explored through the perspective of both Transylvania's Romanian peasants, and that of its emergent *petite bourgeoisie*, within the final years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The novel thus becomes a chronicle of one of the historical region's pivotal moments during its past, representing an original medium for the exploration of a territory on the brink of change. The present paper aims to navigate the imaginary space of *Ion*, investigating the way in which the novel reflects and shapes our understanding of the Transylvanian rural landscape at the end of the Dualist Period.[3] The article deals with elements of literary topography, examining the author's work as a representation of place. The study complements direct words from Rebreanu related to the novel with segments of literary criticism, while also developing a distant reading of the novel, which measures the prevalence of the architectural elements within its fictional universe.

I Write About Myself as I Write About Them[4]

In order to understand the full scope of the author's intentions, and to align the nuanced narrative with the settings in which it develops, one needs to explore the cultural scenery in which Rebreanu places the novel, diving into the hardships and the difficult conditions of Transylvania's rural scenery, and into the landownership and national identity problems within the historical region at the beginning of the twentieth century, shortly before World War I. The

3 The Dualist Period refers to the Austro-Hungarian Empire's existence between 1867 and 1918, as a result of the 1867 compromise between the Austrian Habsburg Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary, forming and empire with two semi-independent states under the rule of a single monarch. The two powers would continue to have independent governments and parliaments, while foreign policies and the army were a common concern. The empire dissolved in 1918, at the end of World War I.

4 Costi Rogozanu, *Naratorul cel rău. Un studiu despre realismul românesc: Rebreanu, Preda, Dumitriu* (Editura Tact, 2024), 21. "The ideologic-narrative algorithm could be resumed as such: I write about myself as I write about them, about the peasants. It appears both in Sămănătorism [n.a. „la sămănătoriști"] and in Poporanism [n.a. „la poporaniști"], with a suplimentary degree of lucidity at the latter."

circumstances within which the author writes the novel are equally relevant, as between initial documentation and completion, important social movements occurred within Romania's historic regions, such as the 1907 Peasants' Revolt or the political difficulties leading up to the 1921 Agrarian Reform. The circumstances in which the writer comes across the subject of the novel are explained by Rebreanu himself:[5]

> "…*Ion* takes his origin from a scene which I saw three decades ago. It was a day in the beginning of spring. The earth [was] damp, sticky. I was out with a riffle for wild pigeons. Roaming on the hillsides of the village's surroundings, I saw a peasant, dressed in holiday clothing. He couldn't see me… All of a sudden, he bent and kissed the earth. He kissed it like he would kiss a lover… That scene astounded me and imprinted in my mind, but without a specific purpose, only as an observation. I wasn't even curious to find out why the man kissed the earth. Finally, he observed me, because, pretending that he is in a hurry, he headed steadily towards the village. Even though I didn't see his face, and, as such, I did not know him, I could have found out who he was and what made him do this unusual gesture. But I repeat, it interested me solely as an oddness, as a peasant peculiarity. This scene took place on the edge of the village of Prislop, near Năsăud, where my parents have been living for about ten years and where my father was a teacher. I, myself, was at a decisive crossroads in my life. After many hesitations and battles with my own self, I abandoned a career, to my parents' sorrow, who were at the point in which they thought that the firstborn of nine children has settled and was earning his own living, found themselves all of a sudden with me remaining without any purpose. When I told them, emphatically, that I want to dedicate myself to writing, I can still hear my father's exclamation: - Then why didn't you chose theology? As a priest you could write as much as you want, while also being a man in the world, with a secure career."[6]

The origin point of the fictional work is thus set in the real-life village of Pripas, with an event occurring within the physical space of the village – the peculiar kissing of the earth – serving as a generator of a fictional environment. At the same time, these revelations from the author highlight an important process in the historical region's past – the emergence of Transylvania's Romanian *petite bourgeoisie*. It is estimated that between 1867 and 1919, "7778 Romanian youth from Transylvania and the Banat regions undertook university studies at

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5 All translations from Romanian to English are made by the author.

6 Liviu Rebreanu, *Opere IV: Ion*, text ales **și** stabilit, note, comentarii **și** variante editoriale de Niculae Gheran, addenda **și** variante manuscrise de Valeria Dumitrescu (Editura Minerva, 1970), 664–65.

82 universities and academies in Central and Eastern Europe,"[7] with 83,10% out of the total number of students being of rural origin, from families of priests, teachers, and farmers.[8] This larger access to education represents one of the factors which contributed to the appearance of the new social group within the region's rural territories, with an important role in financing these studies being played by scholarships from certain funds and foundations. Between 1867 and 1919, out of 406 students within the Bistrița-Năsăud Region, 283 received scholarships, 216 of which were being granted by the Năsăud Based Frontier Regiment Funds,[9] helping the rural regions of Transylvania align with European values.[10] Receiving a scholarship from the Austro-Hungarian state, Rebreanu, the son of a teacher, followed the courses of the Ludoviceum Military Academy in Budapest between 1903 and 1906, his career continuing afterwards within the Austro-Hungarian army, which he abandoned in 1908. The archetypes of the priest and of the teacher family within Transylvanian rural territories play an important part in the novel, as they represented the empire's vectors for modernity within the traditional, archaic environment of the village.

During the same testimony, the author also offers important information regarding his career as a writer:

> "[…] after finishing high school […] I had to choose between the two careers which I could follow without any financial help from home: priesthood and the army. I chose the latter, because at the time it seemed to me more compatible with the passion for writing, which tempted me from a while back. Naturally, I soon came to find out how wrongly I pondered. But, especially, I had to understand that I could not be a Romanian writer as long as I will be obliged to live in a foreign environment, speaking and thinking in foreign languages… Over two-thirds of my study years I've spent in foreign schools. Romanian books fell in my hands solely by chance and [were] most of the time of inferior quality. My literary trials, although with Romanian soul, I meditated them in a foreign language, either German, or Hungarian, before writing them in Romanian. Finally, I had to realise that, if I wanted to achieve something, I had to dismantle beforehand, in my soul and in my mind, everything that had been imprinted by so many years

7 Cornel Sigmirean, "Satul și formarea intelectualității românești din Transilvania în epoca modernă. Cazul comitatului Bistrița-Năsăud," *Revista Bistriței XV* (Editura Accent, 2001), 223.

8 Sigmirean, "Satul și formarea intelectualității românești," 223.

9 Created by the Habsburg monarchy in the second half of the 18th century, The Frontier Military Regiments represented permanent military units recruited from the local population which had a military, social and cultural role along the empire's eastern border. After the military units were dissolved at the beginning of the second half of the 19th century, the organisation's assets were transferred into civil administrations, having an important cultural and educational impact within the region.

10 Sigmirean, "Satul și formarea intelectualității românești," 224–26.

> in a foreign environment, especially at the age most accessible to all influences and that this could not truly happen except for the place where I could breathe a Romanian atmosphere, pure and clear from the miasmas of yesteryear, namely in the Country and especially in Bucharest."[11]

Coming directly from the author of the novel, these confessions, addressing both the origins of *Ion*, and those of his own literary pursuits, are of utmost importance, illustrating, similarly to the novel, two distinct and dissimilar figures. As Costi Rogozanu writes in his study on Romanian literary realism, "Rebreanu, for example, does not write a historic novel, but produces a historical, high-value fresco. Firstly, he places face to face history (namely the small working-class bourgeoisie novel) with non-history (the ahistoric peasant intrigue). Titu Herdelea is part of a history, Ion is not."[12] The writer is a member of the traceable part of history, namely as a figure of the *petite bourgeoisie* at the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with Titu Herdelea representing a substitute for the writer himself. Like Titu Herdelea, Rebreanu is the son of a teacher, with his early life being spent within the Transylvanian village of Prislop, near Năsăud (which is also present in the novel as the fictional Armadia), with the latter urban settlement representing an enclave of latinity within the Someș River valley region.[13] At the same time, Rebreanu's words become a testimony of the difficulties that intellectuals of Romanian origin were facing within the historical region during those times, aspects that would also be reflected within the work. As such, the novel received, besides its overall pastoral setting, a concrete historical and personal set of lenses, which observe and interact with the peasants, sharing some of the hardships of Transylvania's rural environment at the beginning of the 20th century. The author adds:

> "In those years, there came the idea of complementing the simple bickering for land between peasants, which could become too monotonous, with a secondary action, both parallel and intertwined with the main one, an action which would concern Transylvania's intellectual class, and, first of all, the teacher and priest families."[14]

The literary work becomes a receptacle of people, places and events which are directly linked to Rebreanu's life and his surroundings. The main storyline of the novel is thus not only complemented by the misadventures of the teacher's family, as the peasant's strive for land is mirrored and linked to the emerging intellectual's misfortunes, both groups being marked by social discrepancies and financial difficulties. At the same time, Rebreanu's own realist-objective

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11 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 664–65.

12 Rogozanu, *Naratorul cel rău*, 67.

13 Cornelia-Nicoleta Vlașin, "Fondurile grănicerești năsăudene și formarea elitelor românești din Țara Năsăudului," *Revista Bistriței* XXX–XXXI (2016–2017): 179–80.

14 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 670.

perspective towards pastoral life is present in the Herdelea family members' outlook, a sign of modernity, characteristic of the *petite bourgeoisie*, which distinguishes them from the lower-class peasant group. The author further details his preoccupations regarding the land property subject during that specific period:

> "But, in those days, the main preoccupation of my life was to leave for Bucharest, and I was preparing my departure, spiritually, by diving into exclusively Romanian lecture. It was soon after the peasants' revolts of 1907, which had gravely shaken the Romanian state and had spread disconcert in Transylvania as well. Many different volumes and brochures, in which the causes of the revolts and the solutions through which these could be avoided in the future were discussed, fell into my hands […] These lectures opened wider horizons for my embryo-state novel. The problem of land was shown to me as larger, more varied and more lasting than I had deemed, when sketching the story of Ion Glanetașu."[15]

It is commonly known that *Ion* was published in 1920, two years after the end of the First World War and the Unification of Transylvania with Romania. However, it is often the case that one "has to be reminded that Ion is written before the unification, and that it concerns a character which lived in a different country to Romania, according to other rules, and very dissimilar social structures"[16] – defining the novel not as a retrospective literary work, but rather as an observational piece of historic events taking place. The general scheme of the novel was put together by Rebreanu in 1910, with the author first starting to actively write it in 1913, the name of the initial version of the book being *The Dowry*. The years before saw the author quit the Austro-Hungarian Army in 1908, fleeing to Bucharest, serving a sixth month prison sentence from February 1910 to August 1910 on account of his defection, and, although engaged in several literary and journalistic pursuits, facing economic hardships, as well as identity crises, regarding both his literary works and his political allegiances during the Great War:

> "Finally, soon after Romania's entry into the unification war, in August 1916, when in almost every night the bell of the Metropolitan Church would toll, announcing enemy airplanes or zeppelins, in a night like this I resumed *The Dowry*, to write it again. <<I resumed>> is a way of speaking; in fact, I did not even look at the first version. I started to write it all over, as if the first text never even existed… The first chapter, according to the plan, had to contain the main character presentation within a Sunday

15 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 669.

16 Rogozanu, *Naratorul cel rău*, 78.

> *hora*[17]... That night with alarming dangers was maybe the most prolific of my life."[18]

Even though the conditions in which the writer worked on the novel could represent aninteresting subject in itself, we are more concerned with the period in which it was written, as the almost final version of the work, renamed *Ion*, "faithful in its dominant lines to the definitive form," was completed on the "14th of August 1917, at 3 ½ o'clock", with the final transcription and publication process being prolonged until the 3rd of October 1920."[19] In this sense, it is surprising to learn that the first modern Romanian novel is not only developed, but also predominantly completed before the official formation of the modern Romanian state. The importance of this revelation resides not only in the fact that the novel proceeds the Romanian Unification, but rather in the way in which it is perceived as an emblematic novel of Romanian culture, highlighting its universality within the collective imaginary and its nationalistic themes. As such, it is worth noting that in the cinematic adaptation of the novel, *The Curse of the Land – The Curse of Love [Blestemul Pământului – Blestemul Iubirii],*[20] celebrated at the time of its release for discovering within the novel, "beyond the realist nature and the psychological substance of the text, [the] structures and reverberations of a folk epic,"[21] was not shot at Prislop or near the Someș Valley Region, but rather in Fântânele, Sibiu.[22] In this regard, even though the film's location is set in a different cultural and architectural environment to that of the novel, the lack of correspondence doesn't affect the artistic product, but rather confirms *Ion's* relevance to the entire Transylvanian region.

The earliest important voice in Romanian literature to express that *Ion* represents the country's first modern novel is considered to be the historian and literary critic Eugen Lovinescu.[23] According to Rogozanu,

> "The revelation is not that *Ion*, a novel with peasants, is the first modern and bourgeois novel, as Lovinescu was expecting, the revelation is that it has been expected to come from somewhere other than the most capitalistically developed territories in which Romanians lived. It was normal that the free trade obsessed Empire offered such productions. […] the realistic Romanian novel is born

17 Traditional Romanian dance, performed in a ring, which represents an important socio-cultural event within the rural environment.

18 Rebreanu, *Ion,* 673.

19 Rebreanu, *Ion,* 692.

20 Mircea Mureșan, dir., Blestemul pământului – Blestemul iubirii (Casa de Filme 5/ Româniafilm, 1980).

21 Valeria Sava, "'Blestemul pământului, blestemul iubirii' – Cronică de film," *Revista Cinema*, no. 4 (April 1980), https://aarc.ro/en/articol/blestemul-pamantului-blestemul-iubirii-cronica-de-film.

22 Mircea Mureșan (dir.), Ion – The Lust for the Land (Casa de Filme 5, Româniafilm, 1980), https://en.cinepub.ro/movie/ion-the-lust-for-the-land-1980-drama-film-online/.

23 Lovinescu, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane*, vol. 2.

> from the thin and precarious group of the small bourgeoisie, protean by definition, unstable by constitution."[24]

The same critic also suggests what differentiates Rebreanu from other Romanian writers:

> "Rebreanu distinguishes himself through the introduction of the Transylvanian petty bourgeoisie within the European literary narration system. […] It is not by chance that the method appears in Transylvania. There, the small Romanian bourgeoisie lives a drama not only through the nationalistic Hungarian politics, but also one marked by opportunism, dividing itself between the hope of protection from Vienna and the hope of economic integration within an increasingly tough capitalist system."[25]

Inasmuch, it can be seen that the modernity of the novel can be understood both through its realist lens, with Rebreanu depicting a rich social tapestry which can be clearly delimited within a historic time-frame, but also through the unique character of the voice which narrates the events, both reasons being related to the identity of the author, a member of Transylvania's Romanian *petite bourgeoise* within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an identity which transpires in the narrative voice, but also through the author's substitute, Titu Herdelea, and this character's family. Therefore, *Ion* constitutes a highly personal representation of a socio-cultural landscape, a set of filtered traces from an enclave, both resisting and longing for modernity.

Worldbuilding

There are clear correlations between the built and unbuilt territories of the fictional Pripas village and that of the social and economic climate of Transylvania at the beginning of the past century. The fictional village in which the main narrative takes place is based on the village of Prislop – now named *Liviu Rebreanu*, within the Bistrița-Năsăud county – with Rebreanu creating a map of the village, marking each dwelling with the name of its inhabitants or owners (Fig.2). This drawing does not represent a singular event within his literary production, as other works, such as *The Uprising* [Răscoala],[26] or *Adam and Eve* [Adam și Eva] received similar studies. (Fig. 3, Fig. 4). If the 1932 novel concerning the 1907 Peasant Revolt – which also represents a direct continuation of *Ion* – is centred around villages located in the "interfluve which separates [the] Teleorman and Dâmbovnic rivers"[27] within the Argeș County, the village of Prislop, the basis for Pripas, is tied to Rebreanu in a more personal, direct manner (Fig.1).

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24 Rogozanu, *Naratorul cel rău*, 19.

25 Rogozanu, *Naratorul cel rău*, 34.

26 Theodor Cepraga, "'The Uprising' Novel Map. Real and Imaginary Space in Liviu Rebreanu's Vision," *International Review of Social Research 2016; 6(2): 91-97.*

27 Cepraga, "'The Uprising' Novel Map," 95.

The Addenda to the 1970 edition of *Ion,* from the Minerva publishing house, contains an extended list of "people names, places, houses and hills,"[28] helping us better understand the geography of the village. Each corner of the map contains the names which define the surrounding landscape, such as "Zăhata (border, beyond Gîrla Popii) underneath Pădurea Roșă which goes all the way to Pintic and Cepan" […] "Lazurile (locurile dincolo de Gîrla Dracului pînă la Lușca etc.)," "Măgura Cocorilor sau Calului (?) (măgura din dreapta satului, cu pădure în vîrf ca o pălărie" or Luncile. Other natural elements can also be found, such as the river entitled "Pîrîul Dracului (pîrîul de lîngă dascăl)," the river which passes the teacher's house.[29]

Besides the landscape, the built environment is also presented in detail, with the village houses being displayed among two streets, with the second street presenting a ramification towards its northern part, beyond the intersection where the *church* and the *cemetery* are positioned. The houses of the villagers are all marked with either the owner's name, or by their occupation or purpose, in the case of *the teacher's house* – "Casa Dascălului," the priest's house, the mayor's house and the tavern – "cârciuma." An exception to this rule is represented by the *Romani characters' residence*, writing "not the name of one or more Romani families but <<Țiganii>>," an "integrated-yet-segretated hamlet on the edge of another village, Lușca." [30] Last but not least, a set of crosses and a bridge are also represented upon the hand-drawn map. The map of Prislop from the Habsurg Empire Second Military Survey (1853-1858; 1869-1870), is strikingly similar to Rebreanu's drawing, presenting a similar street structure and natural elements. The position of the church is slightly modified, but the author's inspiration from the village is evident. Both the real and the fictional settlements are organised in a linear way, with most of the villagers' houses being placed among the main street of the village. The secondary street also encompasses a number of dwellings, with the church being placed at a crossroads with a third street, in a similar way to the original village's structure. The organisation of the architectural objects also represents a trace of the Transylvanian territory's political and socio-cultural narrative, as the establishment of the Năsăud 2nd Frontier Regiment "brings a first great change within the architectural field. For a better surveillance and administration, the military authorities, through administrative measures, determined the inhabitants to leave behind their scattered dwellings and to develop new ones, displayed along the main road."[31] Moreover, even though Rebreanu's drawing does not include contour lines regarding the elevation, the imagined natural surroundings, *Zăhata, Luncile, or Măgura Calului represent foothills similar*

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28 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 629.

29 Rebreanu, *Ion,* 646-651.

30 Anca Pârvulescu, Manuela Boatcă, "The longue durée of enslavement: Extracting labor from Romani music in Liviu Rebreanu's *Ion*," *Literature Compass* 17, no. 1–2 (Wiley, 2020): 16.

31 Ioan Radu Nistor, "Gospodărie și arhitectură populară la Năsăud," *Arhiva Someșană* (2006): 225.

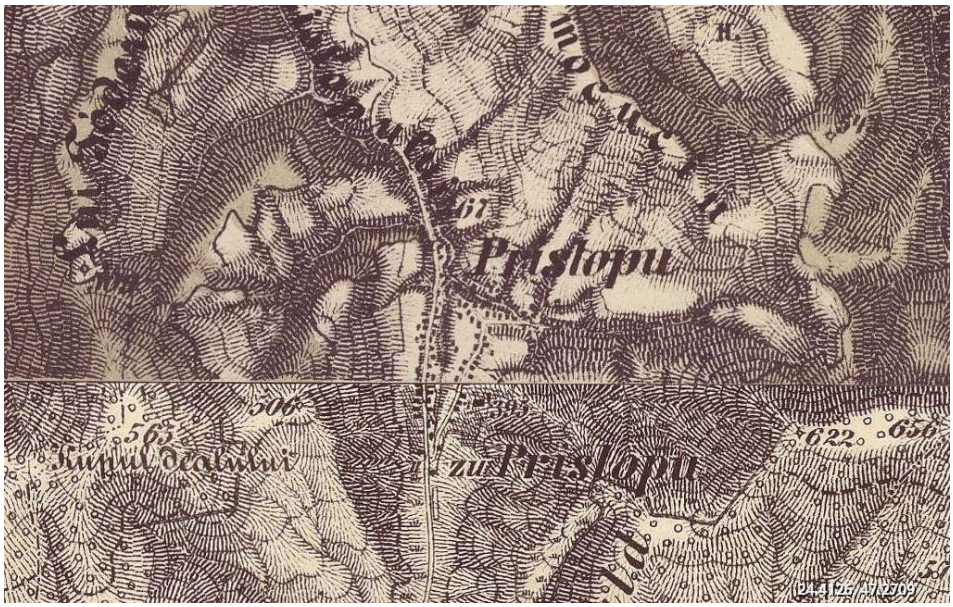


Figure 1. Map of Prislop, the village on which Rebreanu's fictional Pripas is based. Map of Transylvania (1853-1858; 1869-1870) – Second Military Survey of the Habsburg Empire.

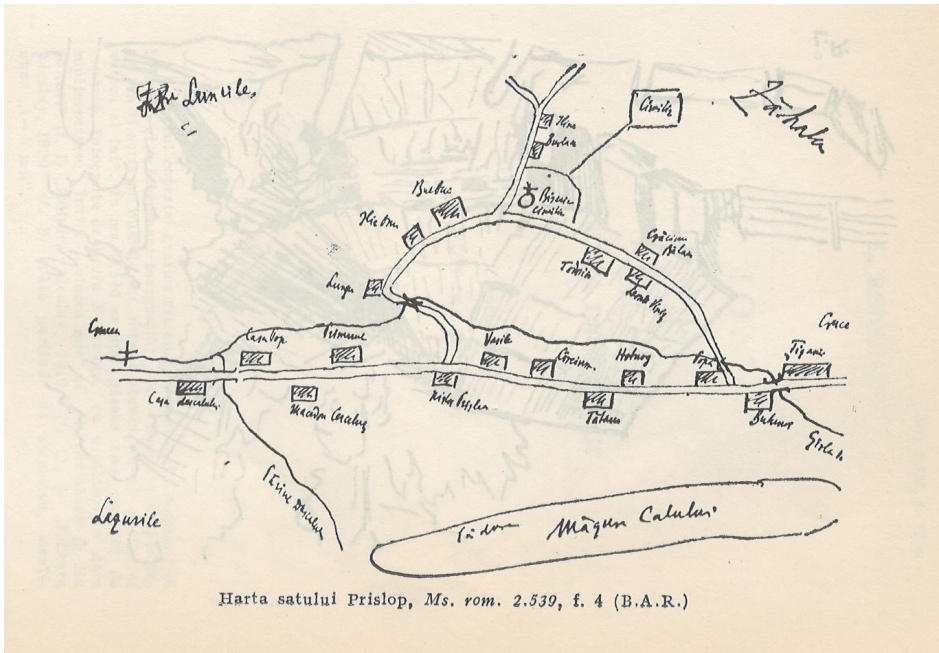


Figure 2. Hand-drawn map of the fictional village of Pripas, created by Rebreanu.

to the existing topography of the original Prislop, with the village's natural landscape clearly serving as an inspiration. Having been a military officer in the Austro-Hungarian army at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is highly likely that the writer had access to the historical maps, possibly using the documents as a direct source within his creative process.

Maybe still more interesting from an architectural point of view, Rebreanu even creates an illustration of the title-character's home, "Casa Glanetașului." The sketch – demonstrating both the author's capacity and desire to outline the atmosphere of the novel, is a *croquis* which depicts a single-levelled dwelling, with a small porch and an annex destined for livestock adjacent to the home. The roof of the building is a hipped roof, covered with wooden shingles. The part which accommodates the family seems to be plastered, having one door and one window, while the stable's wooden structure is left exposed. A small garden is also drawn, contoured by a wooden fence and several tall trees[32] (Fig. 5). An important detail regarding the house resides in its composition, with both the living space and the annexes being placed under one roof. This typology represents one of the oldest forms of dwellings within the Năsăud region, typical for impoverished families or newcomers. These houses are rather "small, covered with wooden shingles. The windows are reduced in number and in dimensions. The houses are plastered [...] both inside and outside, but the exterior can [sometimes] be unplastered, with plaster being applied solely between [the] wooden beams. These types of constructions are mainly made out of wood, rarely out of other construction materials. [...] These dwellings were placed towards the edge of a village, and at the end of its streets."[33] Rebreanu's attention to the architectural details of the house underline a certain ambition for authenticity, an aspired faithfulness of the imagined place to its original inspiration.

Realising that the writer kept such a detailed journal which accompanied and sustained his literary efforts, the idea to survey the depictions of the architectural environment within the novel came naturally, with such a thorough visual documentation process potentially being linked to complex spatial dynamics between characters. Upon documenting the subject of distant reading in regard to Rebreanu, we came across an existing quantitative analysis of the novel *Ion*, in the form of the article entitled "The Character Network in Liviu Rebreanu's Ion: a quantitative analysis of dialogue."[34] As the title of the aforementioned paper reveals, the research is concerned especially with dialogue between the novel's characters, "Who Speaks and How Much," "Who Speaks to Whom?," "Quantifying Social Class and Gender," analysing the

32 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 652.

33 Nistor, "Gospodărie și arhitectură populară," 226.

34 Vlad Pojoga, Laurențiu-Marian Neagu, Mihai Dascălu, "The Character Network in Liviu Rebreanu's Ion: A Quantitative Analysis of Dialogue," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, 6.2, 2020: https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2020.10.02.

"mobility" and "sociability" of some of the novel's heroes.[35] The paper revealed significant new information, further adding to the archival character of the work, providing "a reassessment of the positions of characters in the novel" in which "village intellectuals actually talk more than peasants in what is a rural novel," with Titu Herdelea also representing "a more important node in the network [n.a. of characters] than Ion in terms of sociability and mobility." The analysis "Ion and Titu: Where They Speak and How Much," indicates that Ion's array of conversational interventions take place mainly in Pripas, with Jidovița, Armadia and Bistrița being the only other three places in which the character speaks, while Titu's area of spoken occurrences is much larger and more diverse, with almost half of the dialogues in which he participates being placed in Pripas, while the others are attributed to locations such as Jidovița, Lușca, Armadia, Măgura, Gargalău, Sângeorz, Cluj, and Sibiu.[36]

The Architecture of *Ion*

Considering that the author's map of Pripas seems so deliberate, we proposed an analysis aimed at measuring the prevalence of the architectural elements mentioned in relation to the village. The inquiry is based on a distant reading of the novel, searching for the Romanian word for *house* – *"casă."* The investigation included the articulated, possessive or plural forms of the word, such as *"casa," "casei," "casele,"* and so on. Other similar words, such as the Romanian term for *home* – *"acasă,"* were also taken into consideration. Meanings for *"casa"* which do not refer to architecture, such as *"Casa Bernstein"* or *"casa de fier,"* used as a synonym for the word *safe*, were not considered.

The results were indeed surprising. Within the almost 600-page novel, forms of the Romanian word for *house* appear for a total of 444 times. From this total, only 79 times the word *"casa"* is used as a part of expressions which do not necessarily point out to specific places in the universe of the novel. Examples for this type of situations include set phrases such as "He went from house to house" – *"A umblat din casă în casă,"* "As if an entire house crashed over her" – *"Ca și când o casă întreagă s-ar fi prăbușit peste ea,"* or general sayings in which possessing a house implies a good social status, "A decent coachman, who has a good house" – *"Un cărăuș foarte cumsecade, care are casă bună."* From the remaining results, 171 instances refer to the Romanian word for *home* – *"acasă,"* with characters heading, leaving or being at home, as well as referencing or thinking about their residence.

When accounting the number of appearances related to each house presented in the village, the findings corroborate the results of the aforementioned dialogue quantitative analysis, with a total of 162 appearances being attributed to the Herdelea house,[37] the petty bourgeoisie family of Romanian descent

35 Pojoga, Neagu, Dascălu, "The Character Network," 23-42.

36 Pojoga, Neagu, Dascălu, "The Character Network," 43.

37 Considering both the house in Pripas and the one in Armadia.

representing a substitute for the author's own household. The other main characters in the novel account for a total of 58 times, in the case of Ion, the titular character of the novel, with all instances related to his family being recorded, be it if the reference is related to Ion, his father – Alexandru Pop Glanetașu or his mother – Zenobia Glanetașu. Following *Ion*, the most mentioned houses are that of Vasile Baciu – Ion's father-in-law, a wealthy peasant – 52 times, and George Bulbuc, Ion's main foe within the novel – 36 times, with references related to Toma Bulbuc also being included. Father Belciug's house is mentioned a total of 14 times. Other mentions from the village of Pripas include: Macedon Cercetașu (3), Maxim Oprea's widow (2), Florea Tancu – the mayor of Pripas, Trifon Tătaru, Simion Lungu, Simion Butunoi, and Dumitru Moarcăș, each with one mention. Other intellectuals' houses are represented by that of the Lang family (Jidovița, 13), the Grofșoru Household (Armadia, 3), Virginia Gherman (Lușca, 1), the Jidovița notary (3), the Calvinist priest of Gargalău (2) and the Friedman household (Gargălău, 1).

Rebreanu does not embellish the description of the houses with an excess of details, crafting the built image of the village through rather atmospheric touches, with each architectural object representing an extension of the characters, highlighting specific behaviours or traits of its inhabitants. The number of apparitions from each house are reflective of the perspective of the novel, with the high amount of occurrences from the Herdelea family home signalling that the events within the literary work are dependent on their presence and influence. As such, upon presenting the houses, the Herdelea family home is the first one being introduced:

> "The house of the teacher is the first one, cut deep into the side of a hill, with its door towards the street and with two windows which gaze straight into the village's heart, scrutinising and accusing. On the porch's mantelpiece, in front of the door, where in the morning the teacher washes himself, and in the afternoon, when Misses Herdelea is done with the house's chores, lays a small greenish clay pitcher."[38]

The house of the teacher's family, part of the village's intellectuals, is placed first, in an apparently privileged place, with the windows and the door positioned towards the village, the house becoming almost an observatory. As such, the dynamic between the members of the petty bourgeoisie and the peasants is set from the beginning, through a choreographic gesture, with the desired modernity set at odds with the allegedly conservative pastoral life and its ancient rules.

The following house introduced by the narrator is that of Ion's family, placed almost in opposition, across the street from the teacher's. Another important element which the narrator brings forwards during this description is the

38 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 12.

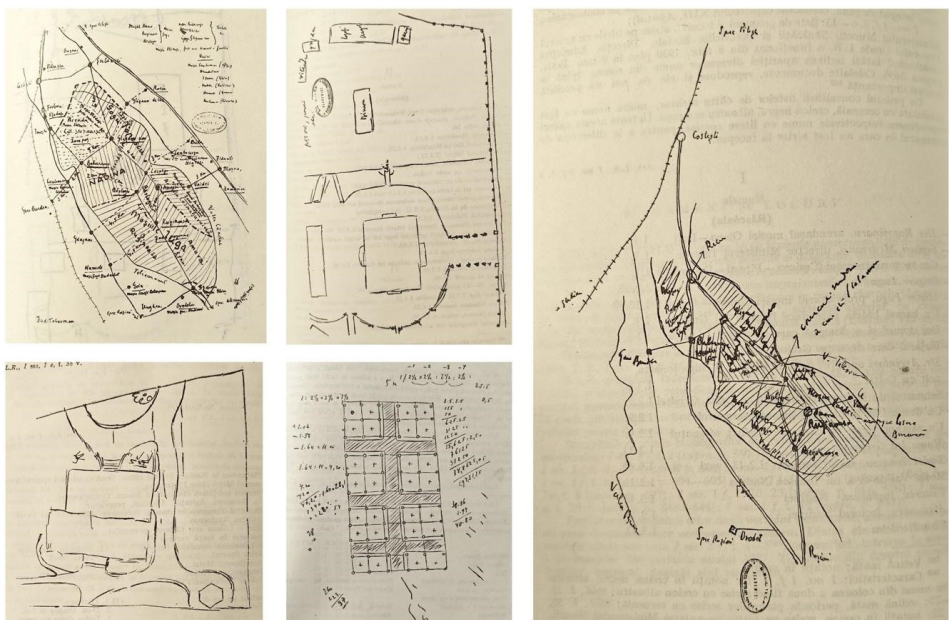


Figure 3. Several hand drawings by Rebreanu for the novel *The Uprising* [*Răscoala*].

physical separation between the Herdelea family home and the rest of the village, with a water feature being introduced as a symbolical bordering element between the two social classes, between two dissimilar yet complementary worldviews:

> "The road passes Pîrîul Doamnei, leaving on its left Alexandru Pop-Glanetașu's house. The door is closed with its latch; the straw roof seems to be a dragon's head; the recently whitewashed walls can hardly be seen through the fence's cracks."[39]

Whereas the Herdelea family home looks outward, aiming to interact and to exert a certain influence, we find that the Glanetașu household is enclosed and ominous, underlining the village's immutable nature and its aversion to change. The intellectuals seek dialogue, whereas the peasants live by tougher, primitive rules.

The third house which receives an individual description is that of Vasile Baciu, the rich peasant and Ion's future father-in-law, with the titular character longing for his possessions:

> "He passed before the house of Vasile Baciu, the third one from the tavern. He stopped thinking of Ana. He only now felt avenged and worthy. But he said to himself that the girl cannot know what bravery he had committed earlier, and for him to tell her, it didn't seem right. Better for her to find out from others and to want him more. He looked long at the new house, hidden behind the shadow of the three old apple trees from the small garden, at the windows, black as some sleepy eyes, at the wide yard, the sleepy stables, the wooden gate with tall columns, and a happiness bestowed upon him, as if all that was his."[40]

These three instances in which individual architectural objects are depicted represent a basis for the future narrative of the novel, with the Herdelea family's dwelling isolated nature, separated from the rest of the village by the small river, gaining an observational position from which the settlement's highest social class members can perceive and almost study a world so different, and yet so similar to their own. The author doubles this relationship by placing the titular character's house across the street, separated from the teacher's dwelling by both the road, but also by the *Pârâul Doamnei* stream. In Rogozanu's view, this particular opposition which is present throughout the novel offers its realism, "through the mirroring of two foreign worlds, which were however simultaneous in time and space. They lived in the same village, they would sometimes go to the same dance" with the "main tension during the village *hora* being not that between quietness and noise, neither that between the peasant youngsters,

39 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 12.

40 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 48.

but that between a small, spectating bourgeoisie and a people which dances, sweaty, loving, presented as if being in a cage at the zoo."[41]

However, the village teacher's home does not represent solely a lookout point from which the family watches the events unravel. As it can be understood from the total number of references within the text, amassing to more than the other main characters' houses number of appearances combined, it represents a hotspot within the narrative, a place in which the peasants express their issues, or come for advice, resulting in two distinct social categories with echoing predicaments placed together. Through Ion and Zaharia Herdelea, the peasant's desire for land and possessions is mirrored by the marginal intellectual's uncertainty regarding his own household, as a lack of paperwork between the Herdelea family and the priest Belciug leads to the teacher's family leaving the village, an expression of the difficulties of the small Romanian petty bourgeoisie in Transylvania at the beginning of the twentieth century, shortcomings that the author was fully aware of, through his personal experience.

The dynamic within and between the social groups of the village are effectively conveyed in the Herdelea family's aspiration for a household:

> "In Pripas, at the beginning, it was harder for him than in Feldioara. When the state school was founded here, the village took the responsibility to offer an adequate place and a garden for pomiculture. In time, the state promised to build a new school, in which the teacher would have a decent apartment. For the time being, however, Herdelea was forced to spend his own money to repair a peasant house where he could live more humanely. After a year, the cunning peasant, seeing his cottage transformed into a presentable home, terminated the rental agreement and moved in himself. The teacher had to spend more money on another house, where the same thing happened... Then, because the state was no longer even thinking about the new school, Herdelea made a big decision. The commune had offered a piece of land belonging to the church on the edge of the village for the fruit garden. With Belciug's consent, the teacher set about building his own house on the church site. At that time, they were very good friends. The priest assured him that the garden would remain Herdelea's property as a donation from the commune and the church for his zeal in educating the children of Pripas. It never crossed the teacher's mind to ask for any paperwork. A friend's word is holier than any piece of paper. Later, he asked for it, but the priest began to hesitate."[42]

41 Rogozanu, *Naratorul cel rău*, 76.

42 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 98-99.

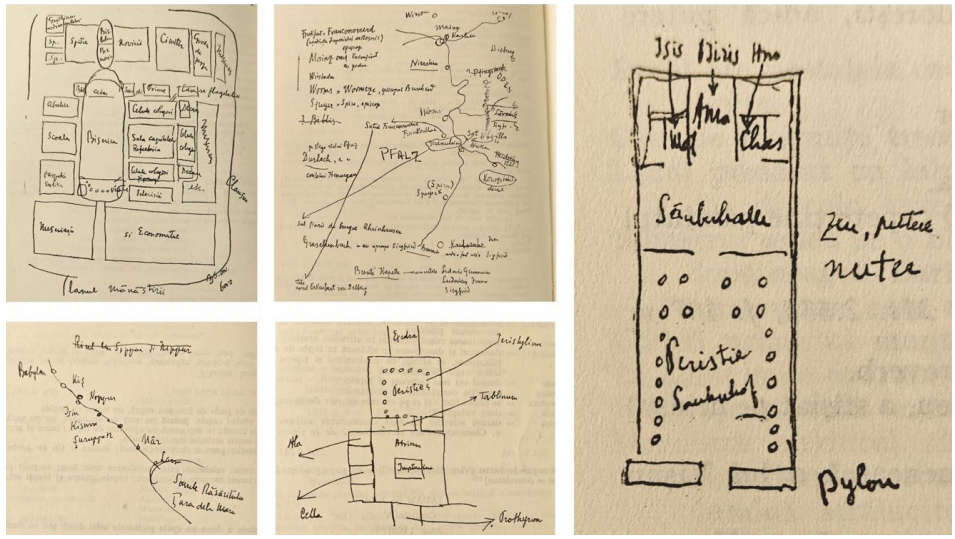


Figure 4. Several hand drawings by Rebreanu for the novel *Adam and Eve* [*Adam și Eva*].



Casa Glanetașului — reproducere după desenul romancierului.
Ms. rom. 2.540, fila 39 v., aflat în posesia familiei Rebreanu.

Figure 5. Sketch for the novel's titular character's house, drawn by Rebreanu.

The marginal intellectual's precarious condition is also rendered by one of the sequences in which we gaze into the Herdelea household interior. The family's ambition for a privileged image is contrasted by its actual financial power, as a symbol of the petty bourgeoisie's fragile position within the empire's social system:

> "He was ordered to pay a significant sum to the Bernstein company in Bistrița, from which he had purchased the salon furniture three years ago, in monthly installments of twenty crowns. Herdelea did not think it wise to burden his salary with such futile debts, especially since he had regular deductions for other installments and complications, as a result of which his creditors collected what they were owed directly from the tax office. He said that, since they had been living without a salon for so many years, they could wait a little longer until things got easier. But the girls nagged him so much that he finally had to admit that they were right and that they needed a nicer room where they could receive future suitors..."[43]

Other architectural objects or institutional headquarters which appear within the novel are represented by the church, which appears for a total of around 100 times, the Pripas state school with a tally of 37, the tavern(s), with 35 apparitions, and the courtroom, which is mentioned 26 times, each built entity tying together important narratives within the novel.

In the case of the church, it is represented as "old, worn out and deteriorated,"[44], with the Greek-Catholic priest Belciug, who, like Herdelea, is caught between his official relationship with the Austro-Hungarian administration and the pastoral life within Pripas, aiming to build a new church: "For his dearest ambition in life was to see a holy place of worship built of stone, tall and beautiful, to replace the old and dilapidated one that brought dishonor both to him and to the entire village."[45] Other passages detail the priest's nationalistic sentiments: "Before construction began on the church, he used to say that once he would have seen it consecrated, he would die happy. Now he set himself another goal: to ask God to grant him enough days to see Romania, <<the mother of our dreams>>, and then he would die in peace."[46]

Even though the school represents an important node within the novel, it is not the subject of any notable descriptions . There is, however, an important distinction regarding Zaharia Herdelea's place of work, as the educational institution is a state school, under the Austro-Hungarian administration. Upon

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43 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 277-78.

44 Rebreanu, *Ion,* 13.

45 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 263.

46 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 443.

being offered the possibility to work for the village school, the teacher's patriotic sentiments are dismissed for his family's need of financial security, as working for the Romanian school of the commune did not offer the same benefits and stability, such as pension rights or the perspective of income growth. At the same time, the state school's teaching language was Hungarian, with "Romanians which taught Romanian children to speak only in Hungarian were no longer Romanian, but complete renegades."[47]

During Zaharia Herdelea and Ion's trip to Bistrița for a trial, the courtroom is depicted as "a heavy house, with two stories and small windows, like cunning eyes,"[48] highlighting both the Romanian intellectual's and the peasant's lack of thrust regarding the Austro-Hungarian institution, and the contrast between the urban development and the village's environment.

Other buildings within the village are seldom described, representing more of a collective character, or instruments for social commentary:

> "On the right and on the left the houses watch timidly behind the green fences, covering their faces underneath their eaves, wrecked by rain and cattle."[49]
>
> "The widow's house is right across the street from the small church, torn and tattered. Widowhood is sheer poverty."[50]

A building which distinguishes itself among the houses from Pripas is that of the tavern, which, dissimilar to the villager's homes, has a ceramic tile roof. The description of the tavern also highlights some of the villagers' behaviours and interests:

> "The tavern wasn't fancier than other houses in the village, except it had a ceramic tile roof, and, towards the street, two small windows, defended by a wire mesh, coloured drink bottles, jars with mottled sweets, and several goods which the peasant would look for. The room from the front was larger, floored, and furnished with only a few long tables and two-times more fir benches, which the maid would hand polish with sand every Friday, until they would become white as lime for the Sundays in which the villagers would come to drown their sorrows in liquour."[51]

Given that property and landownership represent central themes within the novel, references to houses are often used as a form of expressing wealth,

47 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 97.
48 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 383.
49 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 13.
50 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 13.
51 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 38.

like in the case of Ion's parents, with his mother coming from a wealthier family, while his father is presented as being rather unfortunate and a poor administrator of his wife's significant dowry, paving the course for the family's downfall and generating Ion's character arc:

> „But she wanted Glanetașu, and her parents, not wanting to go against her wishes, finally gave her away and endowed her with four cornfields and two hayfields, as well as the house at the head of the village with the surrounding garden. When the young couple moved into the house where the old couple had lived until they built their own across the street from the priest's, they even found pots on the stove, and in the yard a pair of oxen and two cows, a flock of chickens and about five ducks... A complete household, if only Glanetașu had been a man to take care of it."[52]

For Vasile Baciu, his daughter personified his fortune, „She embodied his land, house and cattle." An important episode which details the peasant's relationship to property is represented by an exchange between Ion and Vasile Baciu, during Ion's long-awaited reception of Ana's dowry:

> "<<Right... It'll be ready in a few days,>> Stoessel concluded, rubbing his hands together. Then, patting Vasile on the shoulder, he added jokingly, <<And just like that, you came here a rich man and now you're leaving a beggar! Haha...>>"
> Both peasants darkened. The notary's joke struck them right in the heart. They went out and stopped at Zimălei's tavern. Vasile, in particular, felt a burning thirst that stirred his blood... The tavern was empty, because outside the blizzard was raging more fiercely. They drank in silence for a while. Then Ion, seeing that he was still unsettled, began to tell him not to worry, that they would live together like in paradise. Vasile listened for a long time, questioning him incessantly. The triumph in his son-in-law's eyes was so provocative that Vasile soon felt it penetrating his brain and shaking his foundations.
> "You thief, you thief, you left me out in the cold!" Vasile Baciu suddenly burst out, poisoned by rage, and dug his hands into his son-in-law's throat."[53]

Additionally, the roads of the village are not simply mere décor, but part of the narrative thread, an area of social interaction, under the permanent observation of the entire settlement. It is clear that Rebreanu's map for Pripas also represents an instrument through which the author has control over the mobility of his characters in the world of the novel, offering further realism to the way in

52 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 56-57.
53 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 407.

which his characters roam through the streets, with their steps being relative to the rural environment, in a lifelike manner, as if they lived in a real space.

Conclusions

The main preoccupation of the present paper was to analyse the way in which a fictional work can offer insight into the realities of a specific historic period, with the novel *Ion* becoming not only an objective weaver of places and lives, through its realist and documented depiction of the hardship of Transylvanian rural life at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also a subjective lens towards the way in which a specific, marginal social class interfered with this milieu. Both entities, that of the peasant and that of the *petite bourgeoisie*, were parts of structures which would soon undergo profound transformations. Placing them within the same environment, unfolding the way in which they interact and influence each other represented an important part of Rebreanu's innovation, on a literary level.

His concern with the realism of *Ion* transcended narrative instruments, using historic maps and real places as means of authenticity, going as far as creating concept sketches for the titular character's house, showcasing a certain enthusiasm towards the faithfulness of his fictional world, which is also accomplished through the use of drawing. The architectural layers of the novel represent extensions of the characters, becoming traces of the conflict between the aspiration for modernity through education, morality and principles, specific to the petty bourgeoisie, and the opposition to change, characteristic to the peasants and their archaic set of rules centred around property and landownership. In the same time, the prevalence of the Herdelea household within the narrative further consolidates the idea that the novel's focus is not on Transylvania's Romanian peasant, but rather on the historical region's petty bourgeoisie and its relationship with pastoral life, highlighting the marginal intellectual's precarious condition, caught between a desire of emancipation within the larger dynamics of the empire, social injustices and nationalistic ambitions.

Furthermore, the novel encompasses several historical traces relevant for Transylvania's Someș Valley region's road towards modernisation, such as the apparition of the new marginal intellectual social class within its rural areas through the means of education and scholarships, or the impact of the Năsăud 2nd Frontier Regiment on its built environment. At the same time, being written before the Romanian Unification of 1918 (and, consequently, before the end of The First World War), *Ion* offers valuable insight into the atmosphere within Transylvania before these important historic events. Moreover, it is not that common that an author, from any type of creative field, offers as much insight into their own creative process as Liviu Rebreanu has done, insofar as warning his readers not to try to create definitive connections between the real and the fictional components of his work:

> "Some readers from around Năsăud tried to identify the people from the novel. It is unnecessary for me to show what mistake someone would do by believing that some artistic creations are identical to everyday life beings. The artist never copies reality. Reality was for me only a pretext in order to create another world, a new one, with its laws, with its occurrences… One of my characters, even the most insignificant, has the features of who knows how many persons I've seen or observed, adding to these others which I had to add to it in order to motivate some of its gestures or deeds."[54]

More than a century after *Ion*'s initial publication, a direct investigation of the actual origins of its characters is not that consequential, for it is the generalness of the work, which resonates for the entire Transylvanian rural environment from the Someș Valley region, in a specific historical context, that generates its importance. The distant reading further widens the traces left by a world on the brink of change, unveiling the dynamics of social groups from real places from our past. As such, by placing together direct testimonies from Rebreanu, the author's hand drawings that complement the imaginary of the novel and through the quantitative inquiry of architectural elements within the literary work, the present paper further consolidates *Ion*'s position as an invaluable representation of place, confirming the conclusions of other studies which challenge the classification of the novel simply as a rural, pastoral life centred effort, and highlighting its broader, modernist preoccupations.

Furthermore, the literary creation represents a receptacle of intangible cultural heritage, made possible by the author's personal, subjective perception of real events. In this sense, it becomes more real than the stories which came after it – from the literary tourism generated by readers searching for the titular character's real home, to the creation of a memorial house in a Prislop (with the village now bearing Rebreanu's name) which the writer had never lived in.

> "The house of the memorial museum in Prislop, where the novel <<Ion>> originated, is not, as one might think, the one where Liviu Rebreanu lived upon his return from Gyula (1908), when he came back to his family after being forced to give up his military career. The current building is a copy built by locals after the original collapsed, albeit a successful one, which became a memorial museum in 1957. Another teacher, Mihail Martin, sacrificed himself on the altar of Rebreanu in these places, setting in motion the aforementioned headquarters, as well as the statue of the novelist (the work of sculptor R. Ladea) and, more recently, an amphitheatre that enlivens the museum's memorial, often frozen in its design."[55]

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54 Rebreanu, *Ion*, 662.

55 Cornel Lupeș, "Aici n-a locuit Liviu Rebreanu," *Studii și cercetări etnoculturale* 17 (2012): 74.

It is perhaps fitting that the memory of the author within the environment which generated his fictional universe is represented by a replica of the architectural object which represented the writer's actual home for the duration of his stay in Prislop, a fabricated, yet realist trace of things which once were, akin to his novel.

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Illustration Credits

Fig. 1. Second Military Survey of the Habsburg empire, https://maps.arcanum.com/, accessed on February 1st, 2025.

Fig. 2. Hand-drawn map of the fictional village of Pripas, created by Rebreanu. Image source: Liviu Rebreanu, *Opere IV: Ion*, text ales și stabilit, note, comentarii și variante editoriale de Niculae Gheran, addenda și variante manuscrise de Valeria Dumitrescu (Editura Minerva, 1970), 651.

Fig. 3. Several hand drawings by Rebreanu for the novel *The Uprising* [Răscoala]. Image source: Liviu Rebreanu, *Opere VIII: Răscoala*, Ediție critică de Niculae Gheran, Variantele *în* colaborare cu Valeria Dumitrescu, București (Editura Minerva, 1975), 634-69.

Fig. 4. Several hand drawings by Rebreanu for the novel *Adam and Eve* [Adam și Eva]. Image source: Liviu Rebreanu, *Opere VI, Adam și Eva,* Ediție critică de Niculae Gheran, Variantele în colaborare cu Valeria Dumitrescu (Editura Minerva, 1970), 406-28.

Fig. 5. Sketch for the novel's titular character's house, created by Rebreanu. Image source: Liviu Rebreanu, Opere IV, Text ales și stabilit, note, comentarii, și variante editoriale de Niculae Gheran, Addenda și variante manuscrise de Valeria Dumitrescu, (Editura Minerva, 1970), 652.

Haussmann's Paris Through the Lens of Literary Criticism

Hugo and Zola on the Urban Fashion of Modern Paris

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Keywords
Paris represented in literature; Hugo; Zola; Haussmannian Paris; urban modernisation

Abstract
This study examines the urban transformations of nineteenth century Paris through the literature of Victor Hugo and Émile Zola, in conjunction with the urban theories of Gustavo Giovannoni, Camillo Sitte, and Françoise Choay. Hugo's Notre-Dame de Paris mourns the loss of the medieval urban fabric and critiques the isolation of monuments from their historical context, offering a nostalgic vision of the city. Conversely, Zola's La Curée delves into the effects of Haussmannian modernisation, including real estate speculation and social polarization. Both literary perspectives highlight the tension between modernity and tradition, exposing the impact of urban "fashion" on the city's memory and collective identity. The study employs Walter Benjamin's methodology, emphasising literature's capacity to reveal hidden dynamics of urbanisation. It demonstrates how literature critiques and illuminates urbanisation processes, offering deeper insights into how architectural interventions shape social and cultural cohesion.

Introduction and Methodology

This article explores nineteenth century Parisian urban transformations through the critical perspectives of two seminal literary works: Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) and Émile Zola's *La Curée* (1871). Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, written before the interventions of Baron Haussmann, anticipates such transformations and imaginatively reconstructs a medieval cityscape already endangered in his time. Through this literary reconstruction, Hugo seeks to preserve the medieval urban fabric within literature, foreseeing the imminent physical transformations that would soon erase it. Modern Paris took shape under Napoleon III and Georges Haussmann, whose vast program of urban transformation began after Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's election in 1848; three years later, on December 2, 1851, he became emperor through a *coup d'état*.[1] In *La Curée*, Zola's character Aristide Saccard epitomises the speculative drive behind Haussmann's redesign, in which the creation of grand boulevards masked deep social inequalities and widespread displacement. Together, these works reveal the tensions between modernization and the preservation of historical identity, offering complementary perspectives for understanding the urbanistic ambitions and conflicts of the era.

The study integrates literary critique with the theory of urbanism to explore the cultural and societal dimensions of urban evolution. The analysis interprets urban portrayals through the theoretical frameworks of Camillo Sitte, Gustavo Giovannoni, and Françoise Choay. Literature does not exist outside history, but rather internalises and transforms it; thus, the interplay between narrative and context allows fiction to function as a critical tool in reading the urban fabric.[2] While literary description lacks the normative precision of urban planning, it offers an insightful form of truth, capable of exposing historical tensions, symbolic meanings, and social contradictions embedded in the built environment.

Combining textual analysis with historical and theoretical perspectives, the study shows how literature can critique and illuminate urban planning practices, providing nuanced insights into their cultural and societal impact. Urban literature reveals not only built forms, but also the mental and emotional geographies that shape the perception of the city, what Schiavo refers to as the interplay between material production and narrative consciousness.[3]

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1 Mary McAuliffe, *Paris Napoleon an III-lea, baronul Haussmann și crearea unui oraș al visurilor*, trans. Adina Ihora (Corint Istorie, 2022), 29-30.

2 Philippe Hamond , *Expositions. Literature and Architecture in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. Katia Sainson-Frank and Lisa Maguire (University of California Press, 1992), 4-5.

3 Flavia Schiavo, *Parigi, Barcellona, Firenze: forma e racconto. Dalla città ottocentesca a quel-la contemporanea* (Sellerio, 2004.), 68-69.

The paper employs Walter Benjamin's literary approach to interpret urban and social phenomena.[4] In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin collects quotations and fragments from nineteenth century literary, journalistic, publicistic, philosophical, and iconographic sources, treating them as traces of urban life. He employs a dialectical method, juxtaposing seemingly disparate fragments to reveal the tensions between modernity and the past, while analysing urban transformations as symptoms of modernity. Benjamin conceives of the city as a text to be read, with literature serving as a privileged document for understanding its imaginary. Urban development cannot be analysed as a purely technical, static process, but must be understood in relation to its social and symbolic implications, which are dynamic and interconnected.[5] In this way, literature not only documents these changes but also interprets them, enriching theoretical analysis with a subjective dimension that underscores the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity.

Victor Hugo and the Vanished Paris: The Medieval Core and Its Displacement

Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*,[6] first published in 1831, reflects his enduring attachment to this city, combining admiration for medieval architecture with empathy for marginalised communities. Written more than two decades before Baron Haussmann began his major urban restructuring of the city in 1853, the novel anticipates the large-scale transformations that would later reshape Paris. It serves both as a literary homage and as a mental reconstruction of a medieval city whose physical traces were already under threat. Following the novel's success, Viollet-le-Duc won the 1843 restoration competition for the cathedral, a project that lasted over a decade.[7]

More than fiction, the novel offers a literary reconstruction of medieval Paris - a landscape already under threat in Hugo's time and today largely lost, accessible only through imagination. In this sense, Hugo's narrative becomes a work of urban memory, anticipating the disappearance of much of the city's medieval core and preserving it in detailed, vivid prose for posterity. It thus serves as a key reference for understanding the symbolic and material implications of nineteenth century urban change.

Since the fifteenth century, Paris was already a vast city. Despite assumptions, Paris expanded by only a third during the nineteenth century. As Hugo remarks

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4 Benjamin Walter, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin Mclaughlin (Harvard University Press, 2002).

5 Ben Moore, *Invisible Architecture in Nineteenth-Century Literature. Rethinking Urban Modernity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024.), 2.

6 *Notre-Dame de Paris*, novel by the French writer Victor Hugo, a call for social justice with a tribute to medieval architecture and Gothic heritage, published in 1831. Original Edition: Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Charles Gosselin, 1831).

7 McAuliffe, *Paris*, 41.

in "Bird's-eye view of Paris,"[8] the problem was not size, but the loss of beauty: "[…] truth to tell, has lost far more in beauty than ever it has gained in size."[9] For Hugo, architecture is the primordial writing of human society, reflecting a nation's rise and decline. He mourns the demolition of the old urban fabric, which he regards as a custodian of collective memory. Similarly, the urbanist Gustavo Giovannoni[10] argues in *Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova*[11] (1931) that a city's collective memory is integral to its identity.[12]

Hugo's step-by-step reconstruction of medieval urban growth begins with Paris as a single island, linked by two fortified bridges, Grand-Châtelet to the north and Petit-Châtelet to the south. From these points, the city expanded beyond the Seine.

> "[…] the houses press upon one another, accumulate, and rise in this basin like water in a reservoir. They begin to burrow deeper in the ground, they pile storey upon storey, they climb one upon another, they shoot up in height like all compressed growth, and each strives to raise its head above its neighbour for a breath of air."[13]

Later, Charles V extended this enclosure, and by the fifteenth century, Paris's physiognomy became clearly defined (Fig. 1). It was divided into three distinct parts, each with unique privileges, customs, and morphology: [1] La Cité, [2] the University, and [3] the City. Together, they formed an urban ensemble whose identity depended on their interrelation. La Cité, on the island, was the city's core, hosting Gothic churches; the University, on the southern bank, held the colleges; and the City, on the northern bank, contained palaces. *Notre Dame* stood in La Cité, the Sorbonne in the University, and the Louvre in the City.

Île de la Cité, the historic nucleus of Paris, was perhaps the area most profoundly transformed by Haussmann's interventions. His new urban model introduced geometric regularity, broad boulevards, and visual coherence - elements that came to define nineteenth century urban taste. From the towers of Notre-Dame, Hugo imagines how the medieval city might have appeared: the island overflowing with rooftops, and, opposite, three streets converging into a square once lined with old houses (Fig. 2). On its southern side stood the

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8 Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, trans. Jessie Haynes (P.F. Collier, 1902), 112.

9 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 112.

10 Gustavo Giovannoni (1873–1947) was an Italian architect, architectural historian, and urban planner active in the first half of the 20th century, known for his contributions to urban heritage conservation and the development of architectural preservation theory.

11 In 1913 Giovannoni published his most important essay: *Città vecchia ed edilizia nuova*, where underlining the diversity of the historical city centre that for structural and social reasons cannot effectively comfort to the modern city.

12 Gustavo Giovanonni, *Orașe vechi și noul urbanism*, trans. Cristian Severin (Gemma Total Adversting, 2016), 182.

13 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 113.

Hôtel-Dieu; to the north, a Gothic monastery; and to the south, the bishop's palace.[14] These elements were connected to the mainland by five bridges: to the north, the stone Pont-aux-Changes and Pont Notre-Dame, along with the wooden Pont-aux-Meuniers; to the south, the stone Petit-Pont and the wooden Pont Saint-Michel - each lined with houses[15] (Fig. 3). According to Hugo, at that time, Paris was not only beautiful but also cohesive, an architectural and historical creation of the Middle Ages. In this context, later interventions increasingly favored formal clarity over historical richness, reflecting a shifting urban aesthetic toward regularity and visual unity.

Hugo and the Aesthetic Realignment of the Cityscape

Hugo observes that nineteenth century interventions fragmented Paris into a stylistic patchwork, where pompous new constructions like the Stock Exchange, "[…] an abnormally white colonnade supporting an abnormally smooth frieze - it is perfectly square and costs twenty million francs,"[16] eclipsed meaningful monuments. This was a reference to the material capacity but artistic incapacity of the new architectural style, thus: "Our fathers had a Paris of stone our sons will have a Paris of stucco."[17] Hugo argues that nineteenth century Paris lost more of its beauty through the demolitions of its old quarters than it gained through urban expansion. The large-scale interventions of the period, aimed at the historic urban fabric, are presented by Hugo as less valuable than the beauty of the older city, which he considered to far surpass the new architectural forms.

In Hugo's view, the Middle Ages can serve as an example, where architecture was a conscious art: "Again, not only the structure of the edifice but its situation revealed the idea it embodied."[18] The way Paris was transformed contested the social scale and dimension inherited over the centuries, a fact also affirmed by Hugo.

Through the lens of the writer's Romantic attachment to the Middle Ages, it can be stated that such a sharp critique of nineteenth century urban restructuring is fueled by this inclination. Nevertheless, while he describes the architecture lucidly, he also calls it "the great manuscript of the human race,"[19] "[…] architecture is the chief, the universal form of writing."[20] Hugo critiques nineteenth century urban interventions, using the Bourse, located near Boulevard Montmartre, as an example of opulence devoid of essence. He views this period as a mere imitation of historical styles rather than a thoughtful adaptation to the city's context. He argues that the heritage of a city should be

14 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 119.
15 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 116.
16 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 132.
17 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 132.
18 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 176.
19 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 176.
20 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 180.



Figure 1. Map of Paris and its development at the beginning of Charles VII's reign in the year 1422.



Figure 2. Axonometric view of Notre-Dame and the context of the Île de la Cité in the eighteenth century.

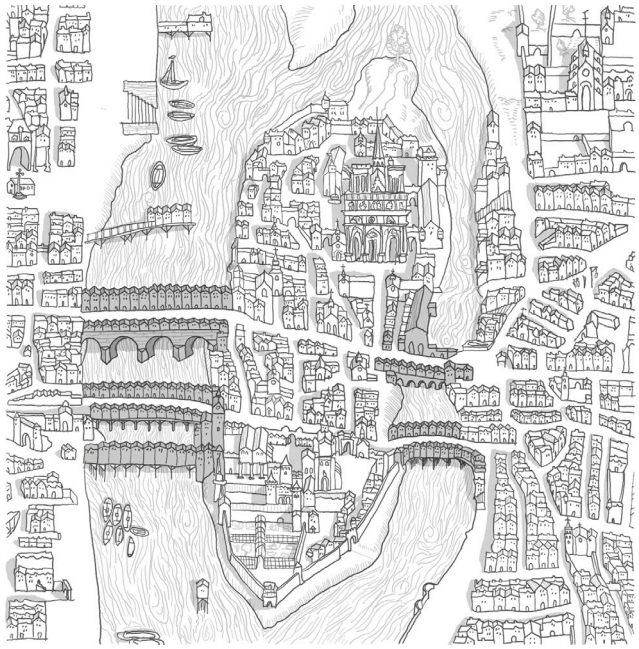


Figure 3. Axonometric view of the Île de la Cité in the sixteenth century with the 5 bridges crossing the Seine.

enriched by the present, not replaced. While Boulevard Montmartre improved circulation, it also destroyed traditional neighborhoods and significant cultural spaces. Hence, Hugo denounces the aesthetic rupture with the Gothic past, lamenting the loss of an architectural tradition rooted in the Middle Ages:

> "The Paris of to-day has, therefore, no typical characteristic physiognomy. It is a collection of samples of several periods, of which the finest have disappeared. The capital is increasing in houses only, and what houses! At this rate, there «will be a new Paris every fifty years. The historic significance, too, of its architecture is lessened day by day. The great edifices are becoming fewer and fewer, are being swallowed up before our eyes by the flood of houses. Our fathers had a Paris of stone our sons will have a Paris of stucco. As for the modern structures of this new Paris, we would much prefer not to dilate upon them."[21]

In contrast, literary historian Ben Moore proposes a more complex temporality: rather than viewing modernity as a complete replacement of the past, he suggests that Gothic architecture, exemplified by structures such as the Notre-Dame Cathedral, may resurface within the visual logic of the modern city. In this interpretation, modernity may not be defined by stylistic uniformity, but by the coexistence of dissonant forms and temporal fragments.[22] The demolitions that took place after 1853 altered the area's character, producing forced relocations and the loss of historic structures, thus sacrificing urban memory and social cohesion for functionality. For Hugo, such architecture may be considered a lost art, reduced to a tool of propaganda: it may lose its relevance and originality, deceive the viewer, and cease to transmit meaning. As he writes in *Notre-Dame de Paris*:

> "But when the sun of the Middle Ages has wholly set […], architecture, too, grows slowly pale, wan and lifeless. She becomes mean and poor, of no account, conveying nothing to the mind— not even the memory of the art of other days. […] farewell to vital force, to originality, life or intelligence; as a lamentable beggar of the studios she drags herself from copy to copy."[23]

In Hugo's critical stance, one can discern a militant spirit for the integrity of the monument. The architectural object and its surrounding context are tightly bound in a relationship of complementarity. When discussing haussmannian interventions, we must mention the interventions on the Île de la Cité. Half of the island's built fabric crumbled under the demolition ball. The consequence was the isolation of the object from its context. In shaping this new Paris, Haussmann's approach followed a codified model of urban aesthetics - where

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21 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 132.

22 Moore, *Invisible Architecture*, 158.

23 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 184.

the alignment of façades, regulated heights, and freed monuments became visual standards, increasingly adopted across European capitals. Both Pont Saint-Michel and Pont-aux-Changes were entirely rebuilt, both of which had houses attached to them, similar to the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, which still retains such a configuration. In Paris, however, these were not preserved, being considered inadequate for the new requirements, and deemed modest houses with "[…] the plaster dropping from the walls, smoke-blackened beams, a dismantled chimney-piece, cobwebs in every corner; in the middle a tottering company of broken-legged tables and stools."[24]

This grotesque image, characteristic of Romanticism, reflects the nineteenth century view of the Middle Ages as dirty and harmful. From 1858, restructuring intensified around the cathedral, especially on the southern side, exposed after the demolition of the bishop's palace, already centuries old, and standing between the cathedral and the southern branch of the Seine. The demolition was further extended over the entire area in front of the cathedral to enlarge the small parvis and create a more imposing frontal view of the cathedral by expanding the square to its current dimensions.[25] Thus, the monument's relationship to its native context was altered (Fig. 5).

Quasimodo, the main character of the novel Notre-Dame de Paris, identifies with the cathedral. His grotesque description reflects Hugo's attitude toward the cathedral's style and life. From my perspective, seen through the eyes of an architect, the hunchbacked bell-ringer embodies the context. However, it is important to note that it is the grotesque surrounding that grants the cathedral its monumental character:

> "So much so, that to any one who knows that Quasimodo really lived, Notre-Dame now appears deserted, inanimate, dead. One feels that something has gone out of it. This immense body is empty - a skeleton ; the spirit has quitted it; one sees the place of its habitation, but that is all. It is like a skull - the holes are there for the eyes, but they are sightless."[26]

This situation illustrates a structural limitation within nineteenth century urban planning, which, following the logic observed by Camillo Sitte,[27] in *Der*

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24 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 291-92.

25 McAuliffe, *Paris*, 41.

26 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 153.

27 Camillo Sitte (1843–1903) was an Austrian architect, urban theorist, and professor, renowned for his major influence on late 19th-century urban planning. His work combined the analysis of historic urban spaces with aesthetic principles, advocating for a harmonious integration of functionality and artistic expression in the city.

Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen,[28] tended to separate monuments from their historical contexts. Conversely, opposing the prevailing trends of clearing space, Sitte preferred integrating churches into squares.[29] In this process, the monument became detached from its spatial and symbolic fabric, and the surrounding "[…], chilly, narrow, and gloomy streets in the vicinity of Notre-Dame"[30] with their irregular configuration, once served to generate unexpected perspectives and a heightened sense of spatial depth. From my perspective, Victor Hugo's view may suggest that the appropriate response would have been not merely the physical restoration of the monument, but also the preservation of the surrounding urban texture. In this sense, the Romantic imagination offers a framework for understanding urban integrity, one that may still inform contemporary approaches to architectural intervention.

This leads to the broader concept of contextualism, where the monument's relationship to surrounding elements defines urban character. Giovannoni highlights that the significance of a monument is inseparable from the spatial conditions in which it originated, its perspectives, proportions, materiality, and visual interplay, or at least, from the contextual coherence preserved through historical urban planning.[31]

Apart from the former bishop's palace and the demolished houses around the cathedral, it is important to mention the relocation of the Hôtel-Dieu hospital. Initially, it was not part of Haussmann's restructuring plans. However, it was kept on the island due to Napoleon III's wishes. Hôtel-Dieu, a dark building housing 800 patients, polluted the Seine with waste. In fact, Hugo describes the hospital, "[…] this glowered the furrowed, beetling front of the Hotel-Dieu, with its roof as if covered with boils and warts."[32] Haussmann, concerned with hygiene, wanted to relocate it entirely, as Île de la Cité was already too crowded for his liking. Napoleon III's insistence however, led to the new hospital being located on the northern branch of the Seine which, as a consequence, required more demolitions. Baron Haussmann's restructuring is also evident in the significant decline in the island's population. By the late 1860s, Île de la Cité's population dropped from 20,000 to under 5,000 - a 75% decline.[33] The romantic island described by Hugo now merely became an administrative center, devoid of the human charm provided by the context, which once generated unexpected

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28 *Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, published in 1889, is Sitte's most important work. Therein, Sitte examines the squares, streets, and public spaces of historic European cities and formulates aesthetic principles for urban design. The book critiques the rigidity of grid-based planning and instead proposes an urban composition inspired by organic forms, adapted to topography and visual perspectives.

29 Camillo Sitte, *The art of building cities*, trans. Charles T. Stewart (Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1945), 20-24.

30 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 161.

31 Giovanonni, *Orașe vechi*, 182.

32 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 119.

33 McAuliffe, *Paris*, 41.

perspectives toward the central monument: the cathedral. Through Hugo's retrospective lens, this represented the loss of the full expression of the Middle Ages, as represented by the nineteenth century Romantic imagination.

Amid extensive urban interventions, collective memory and urban continuity started to become crucial. Against such a landscape shaped by generations, Camillo Sitte's late nineteenth century critique of modern urbanism gains relevance: "A completely unhampered work of art may be possible in the abstract, but never in perceptible reality."[34] Wherever the artists create, they must work within the boundaries of technical and contextual limitations. In this light, Sitte suggests that urban planning may benefit more from modest, context-sensitive interventions than from large-scale restructuring, which often responds to abstract ideals rather than local specificity. While Romantic sensibilities valued spatial complexity and layered historical presence, the emerging urban model of the nineteenth century emphasised clarity, symmetry, and stylistic coherence, qualities that came to define the visual identity of modern cities everywhere. Hugo expresses skepticism toward these changes through his satirical depiction of the Stock Exchange building:

> "Again, a building should be appropriate to the climate. This one is obviously constructed for our cold and rainy skies. It has an almost flat roof, as they obtain in the East, so that in winter, when it snows, that roof has to be swept, and, of course, we all know that roofs are intended to be swept. And as regards the purpose of which we spoke just now, the building fulfils it to admiration: it is a Bourse in France as it would have been a Temple in Greece."[35] (Fig. 4)

The pursuit of geometric uniformity and axial perspectives was not just a matter of functionality, but also reflected prevailing aesthetic norms. However, applying these principles to older urban fabrics, often shaped by irregular growth, raises questions about their impact. The effectiveness of strict façade alignment in such contexts may be limited, as it risks compromising the very character it aims to organise. According to Sitte, attempts to recreate organic irregularity within a rigid framework risk producing spatial inconsistencies disguised as harmony. Similarly, Victor Hugo highlights the importance of authentic historical character in urban fabric: "To the seeing eye, the spirit of a period and the features of a King are traceable even in the knocker of a door."[36] Furthermore, Sitte considers that art has a well-defined place in city planning and that the city itself is a work of art continuously influencing its inhabitants.[37]

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34 Sitte, *The art of building cities*, 72.

35 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 133.

36 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 132.

37 Sitte, *The art of building cities*, 73.



Figure 4. The Brongniart Palace, Paris Stock Exchange.

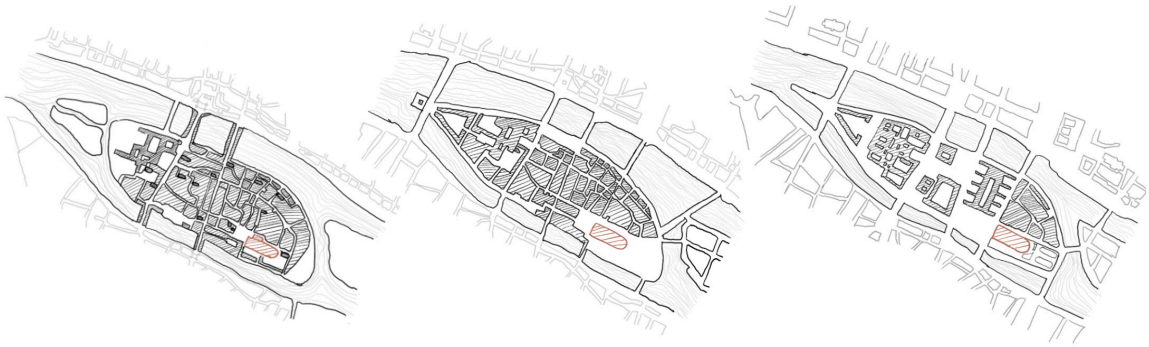


Figure 5. Planimetric representations of the Île de la Cité:
1st plan - The Middle Ages: 1422–1461; 2st plan - The island during Victor Hugo's time, before the Haussmannian interventions: 1841; 3st plan - After the Haussmannian interventions: 1868.

Conclusions of Victor Hugo's Critique

Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* is not only a literary achievement but - retrospectively read - a lens through which we can perceive the tensions that would come to shape nineteenth century urban transformation. Written before the sweeping interventions of the Second Empire, the novel anticipates the kinds of changes that would later accelerate the erosion of historical urban fabric - an issue that resonates with Françoise Choay's[38] reflections, on the fragility of collective memory in the face of rapid development.[39] Hugo's concern for monuments like Notre-Dame also reflects Giovannoni's idea that heritage value depends on its native context, and that the meaning of such structures is inseparable from the urban texture in which they are embedded. From this vantage point, literature offers a valuable perspective. As Philippe Hamon suggests, fictional texts may reveal concealed social dynamics often obscured by dominant ideological frameworks.[40] Hugo contributes to this interpretive dimension by depicting Île de la Cité as a space marked by historical disintegration, an approach that parallels Camillo Sitte's critique of overly rationalised urban planning which overlooks organic spatial relationships.

The architectural style promoted during the Second Empire - characterised by geometric clarity and monumental form - can be interpreted as both a visual ideology and a mechanism of spatial reorganisation. Thus, through fiction, a mentally preserved Paris is offered to posterity, accessible only through imagination as Victor Hugo admits: "Nevertheless, admirable as the Paris of to-day may seem to you, conjure up the Paris of the fifteenth century; rebuild it in imagination; look through that amazing forest of spires, towers, and steeples; […] and then compare."[41] Hugo's narrative reasserts the role of the writer as an observer and interpreter of urban change, one who reframes spatial transformation within broader questions of identity and continuity. Within the literary account, history does not dictate form, but is rearticulated through narrative. This dialogical relationship between imagined and real topographies enables literature to act as a critical mirror to dominant urban ideologies.[42]

In conclusion, *Notre-Dame de Paris* demonstrates how literature can illuminate both the symbolic and experiential dimensions of urban transformation. Hugo presents the city not only as a functional structure, but as a layered repository of memory and meaning - one in which past and present must interact to sustain a coherent urban identity. Considered alongside Émile Zola, Hugo's work

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38 Françoise Choay (b. 1925) is a French architectural historian and theorist, noted for her influential work on urbanism, heritage conservation, and the history of architectural thought. Her research bridges the analysis of urban form with the cultural, political, and philosophical contexts that shape cities.

39 Françoise Choay and Vincent Sainte Marie Gauthier, *Haussmann păstrător al Parisului*, trans. Kazmer Kovacs (Simetra, 2014), 50-51.

40 Hamond, *Expositions*, 5-6.

41 Hugo, *Notre-Dame*, 134-36.

42 Schiavo, *Parigi, Barcellona, Firenze*, 68-69.

contributes to a multifaceted critique of nineteenth century urbanism: Romantic and memorial in tone, and complementary to Zola's socio-economic realism.

Emile Zola's Critique of Haussmannian Paris: Architectural Spectacle and the Rewriting of the City

Émile Zola's *La Curée*[43] provides a literary critique of Haussmannian Paris, focusing on the speculative and aesthetic transformations that reshaped the city during the Second Empire. Though Napoleon III promoted a vision of prosperity for all, implementation largely benefited those with capital and political ties. What began as urban modernisation soon merged with real estate speculation, shaping a city defined by monumentalism and visual uniformity. In *The Kill*, Zola's character Aristide Saccard epitomises the speculative drive behind Haussmann's redesign, in which the grand boulevards concealed inequality and displacement. Haussmannian operations focused on reorganising the existing territory and involved restructuring, consolidation, and densification. These transformations were quickly transferred from paper to the urban reality. The break from the past was all the more impactful due to the opulent *immeubles de rapport* that took shape in place of the modest houses.

> "[…]on the ground floor stone balustrades and on the upper floors gilded wrought-iron railings. The display of decoration was profuse. The house was hidden under its sculpture. Around the windows and along the cornices ran volutes of flowers and branches; there were balconies shaped like baskets full of blossoms, and supported by tall, naked women with wide hips and jutting breasts; and here and there were fanciful escutcheons, clusters of fruit, roses, every flower it is possible for stone or marble to represent. The higher one looked, the more the building burst into blossom. Around the roof ran a balustrade on which urns, at regular intervals, stood blazing with flames of stone; and there, between the bull's-eye windows of the attics, which opened on to an incredible mass of fruit and foliage, mantled the crowning portions of this amazing spectacle, the pediments of the turrets, in the midst of which the naked women reappeared, playing with apples, adopting poses amidst sheaves of rushes. The roof, loaded with these ornaments and surmounted by a cresting of embossed lead, with two lightning conductors and four huge, symmetrical chimneystacks carved like all the rest, seemed the finishing-piece of this architectural firework display."[44]

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43 *La Curée* (Title of the edition consulted in English: *The Kill)* is the second novel in Émile Zola's Les Rougon-Macquart series, written between 1871 and 1872 and published in 1872. It deals with property speculation and the life of the bourgeoisie in the French Second Empire, against the background of the reconstruction of Paris by Baron Haussmann. Original Edition: Emile Zola, *La Curée*, (Charpentier, 1872).

44 Emile Zola, *The Kill*, trans. Brian Nelson (Oxford University Press, 2004), 16.

The ornamental overload of these palaces turned the city into a theatrical display of imperial authority, alien to its residents. This display became the most characteristic example of Napoleon III's style: "[…], Napoleon III style, that opulent bastard of so many styles."[45] As Ben Moore argues, this arabesque design produces an overwhelming visual spectacle, fantastical yet devoid of meaning, where architectural excess replaces coherence, and ornament becomes a sign of accumulation rather than expression. It is architecture emptied of artistic intent, transformed into a visible mass of capital.[46] This gesture exemplifies what Nikolai Gogol called the domestication of monumental architecture: public grandeur reduced to decorative private mimicry.[47] The Haussmannian city functions as a stylised setting, where form substitutes for meaning, and opulent facades play the role of costumes concealing the buildings' underlying structure.

Such operations, tracing circulation routes through old areas, were intended more for visitors rather than locals. The model of Paris, which in all cities followed the same pattern, was transposed through what was called the boulevard (Fig. 6). Passersby were made to believe that the beauty and width of this distinctive urban space corresponded to the rest of the city's streets as well.[48] It was supposed to be perceived as something natural, that the city had always had. In *The Kill*, architectural fashion camouflages rupture, inequality, and displacement behind unity. Foreign visitors, less attached to the city's past, tended not to mourn the loss of its lively and picturesque old quarters as much as long-term residents did. This disorientation is voiced in a remark by Monsieur Hupel de la Noue, a Parisian character who laments the city's transformation:

> "— Yes, it's quite amazing,' interjected Monsieur Hupel de la Noue. 'Just imagine! I've lived in Paris all my life, and I don't know the city anymore. I got lost yesterday on my way from the Hôtel de Ville to the Luxembourg. It's amazing, quite amazing!"[49]

Here, the repetition of "amazing" conveys not admiration but a sense of alienation, as he struggles to navigate and recognize a city reshaped beyond his familiarity.

Thus, a new, deceptive reality was created, in contrast to the city's development over the previous centuries, as it was not an extension, but rather a rewriting of the existing. Practically, one could speak of two incompatible organisms, the old and the new, so that any compromise would have been harmful both to

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45 Zola, *The Kill*, 17.

46 Moore, *Invisible Architecture*, 118.

47 Gogol Nikolai, *Arabesques*, trans. Alexander Tulloch (Ardis, 1982), 126. *Arabesques* is a collection of writings, first published in 1835, that includes both essays and fiction. The essays address topics like history, geography, and architecture.

48 Giovanonni, *Orașe vechi*, 177.

49 Zola, *The Kill*, 26.

one and the other, affecting the character of the old and hindering the proper development of the new.

Curated Modernity and the Architecture of Appearance

One recurring question about Paris concerns the architectural uniformity often associated with Haussmannian buildings (Fig. 7). Although today these are viewed as emblematic of Parisian identity, contemporary reactions were often critical. As with any large-scale spatial construct, the city must be understood as a structure that evolves and is perceived over time. Therefore, for any observer, urban design, the sequence of spaces, and perspectives evoke a mental image of the city.[50]

Zola referred to the new style as a "bastard" overloaded with elements, while other voices echoed his discontent. Most of the housing built at that time were standardised rental properties, valued for profitability and quick construction rather than individuality.[51] These structures were easy to build and replicate, prioritising economic return over architectural distinction. Uniformity was encouraged. Straight boulevards left wide expropriated bands, acquired by speculators. Their repetitive, impersonal design served investor interests. Speculation around demolition and boulevard projects shaped today's urban image. Investors focused less on architecture and more on potential compensation. Thus, "[his] first plan had been to acquire at a very low price some building which he knew beforehand was condemned to imminent demolition, and to make a big profit by obtaining substantial compensation."[52] The property in question was located along the planned extension of Boulevard Malesherbes, originally envisioned by Napoleon Bonaparte and realised under Napoleon III to connect peripheral neighborhoods. Yet, behind this modernization agenda there was a deeper motive: the Empire's economic interest in the speculative opportunities it created.

The mechanisms enabling this transformation and rapid enrichment were simple. Once the construction of a new road was decided, the commissioners of the Roads Service drew up cadastral plans and evaluated the properties. At that time, one of the methods of calculating compensations was counting the annual rents. Thus, the commission presented a lower sum than the estimate, knowing that negotiations and concessions would follow.[53] As a result, the old properties were purchased before demolition, and the rents were renegotiated with the tenants. The new owner "pitilessly refused to renew the leases unless they agreed to a huge increase in rent."[54] Desperate tenants often accepted the terms without resistance. In essence, "[…], in their case there was a double profit: the rent was increased and the compensation due to the tenant for his

50 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (M.I.T. Press., 1990), 9.
51 McAuliffe, *Paris*, 92.
52 Zola, *The Kill*, 70.
53 Zola, *The Kill*, 73.
54 Zola, *The Kill*, 72.



Figure 6. View of Boulevard Haussmann, Paris.

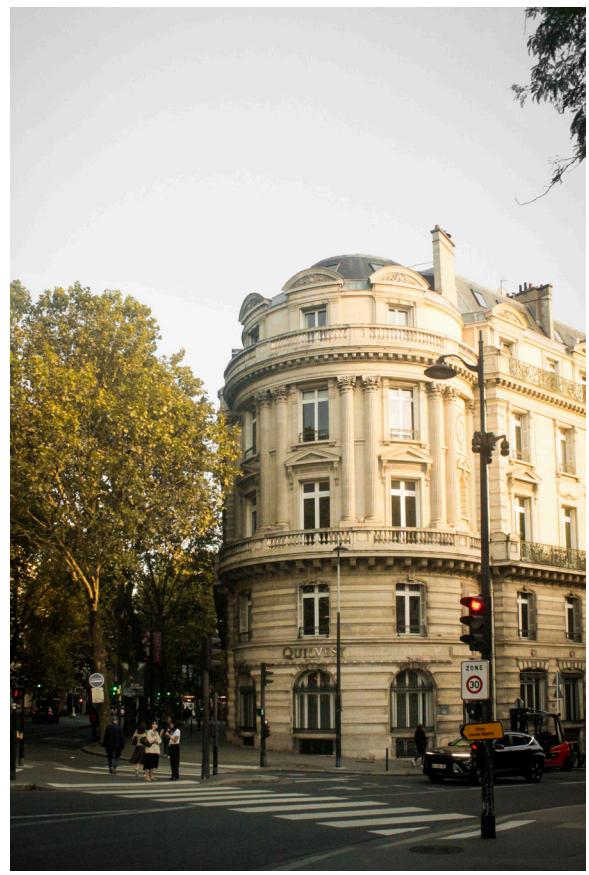


Figure 7. Apartment buildings typical of Haussmann's style.

lease went to Saccard."[55] The logic of this financial machine involved several protagonists. In addition to those in the field, concerned with deceiving the old tenants, there were also people inside the commissions, who, in exchange for a percentage of the compensation, campaigned for the requested sum to be fully paid by the Empire's treasury. For example, through this strategy, a property valued at 200,000 francs ended up being compensated at 500,000 francs due to fictitious rental contracts.[56]

Faced with high compensation costs, the municipality bought properties and raised rents, hoping people would leave without further claims. However, this plan proved unfeasible, as the process was too lengthy and complicated. Opportunistic developers entered the scene, purchasing the properties and agreeing to return them to the Empire in exchange for the concession of the land, which became much more profitable later. Thus, the construction possibilities for the new *immeubles de rapport* emerged, while "Paris was […]disappearing in a cloud of plaster-dust."[57] In Zola's narrative, modern architecture did not evolve organically from the city's past; rather, it was imposed as a dominant aesthetic ideology. Moreover, Giovannoni admits that it is necessary to return to the existing city to understand how it was constructed.

During the intense construction phase of the mid-nineteenth century, building height was regulated in relation to street width, applying the principle that a structure's height should not exceed its depth. By the 1850s, rigid norms were predicated onto Paris's irregularity; height and façade limits ensured aesthetic regularity. The goal was for the buildings to compose a unified whole. This imposed uniformity in a city defined by diverse historical layers led painter Édouard Manet to voice his disillusionment. Although he did not romanticise Paris as Victor Hugo did, but rather painted it in the naturalist style also expressed by Émile Zola, Manet saw the new Paris as cleaner and more modern, but regretted that, through modernisation, it had lost much of what he considered to be its essence and attraction.[58] Jules Ferry, a French minister, denounced Haussmann's projects as serving the wealthy.[59] He portrayed the urban reforms as personal ambitions masked as public benefit, marked by costly demolitions and speculative development. Ferry also questioned their social impact, pointing out the unequal distribution of economic gain. Those who suffered the most were the working class, left in poverty and forced to move massively from their shabby homes in central Paris to the Parisian periphery, into equally dilapidated housing.[60] Haussmann's urban strategy prioritised physical transformation over the integration of a comprehensive social plan.

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55 Zola, *The Kill*, 72.
56 Zola, *The Kill*, 74.
57 Zola, *The Kill*, 94.
58 McAuliffe, *Paris*, 284.
59 McAuliffe, *Paris*, 289.
60 McAuliffe, *Paris*, 290.

In his novel *Les Misérables,*[61] Victor Hugo depicts the social dimension and criticises Haussmann's distant attitude towards this aspect. He objects to the society that could so severely condemn someone like Jean Valjean for simply stealing a loaf of bread, or the Empire's attitude towards the poor: "They are all small men, sire, and it would take two of them, one upon the other, to make one of your grenadiers. […] They are not dangerous. In short, they are good canaille."[62] Napoleon III's desire was to transform Paris into the most beautiful capital in the world. When he took power, more than a third of the almost one million residents struggled to survive poverty.[63] Hugo emphasises that the empire's interventions only deepened the chasm between opulence and poverty. The bourgeoisie lived along the grand boulevards, while the poor resided at the city's margins. Thus, life around Paris changed significantly: "The Paris of 1862 is a city which has France for its suburbs."[64] Observing the changes brought by the Second Empire, McAuliffe argues that Haussmann did not diminish poverty by clearing the narrow streets and slums, but only removed the means necessary to cope with it.[65] Bourgeois life along the new boulevards vast and opulent is faithfully captured through naturalistic descriptions, where the wealthy class sees it as a testament to modernity:

> "As the brougham rolled on, they gazed fondly at the wide pavements, with their benches, their variegated columns, and their slim trees. […], this uninterrupted double row of big shops, where the shopmen smiled at their fair customers, these currents of stamping, swarming crowds, filled them with absolute contentment, with a feeling of perfection in the life of the streets. They drove on, and it seemed to them that the carriage was rolling over carpets along the straight, endless roadway, which had been made solely to save them from the dark backstreets. Every boulevard became a corridor of their house."[66]

Through Giovannoni's didactic approach, a perspective is offered on this 19th-century urban phenomenon, characterised by solutions formulated by local administrations or real estate speculators, aimed at generating profit. Poor constructions were deemed unworthy of the city's beauty, and narrow streets were considered inadequate for urban traffic. Those in charge of the city opted for a solution to these problems: rewriting the urban fabric, without realising

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61 *Les Misérables* is a sprawling epic set in early 19th-century France, exploring themes of justice, morality, and social inequality. The story centers on Jean Valjean, a man struggling for redemption after being imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread. Original Edition: Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven & Cie, 1862).

62 Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables,* trans. Charles E. Wilbour (The Modern Library, 1931), 110-11.

63 McAuliffe, *Paris*, 83.

64 Hugo, *Les Misérables,* 105.

65 McAuliffe, *Paris*, 209.

66 Zola, *The Kill*, 168-69.

that, in fact, the opposite is achieved.[67] Perhaps the most striking critique comes not against ornament, but through exposure. As Ben Moore notes, it is only in the final chapter of The Kill that a boulevard under construction is directly depicted. Saccard and his colleagues visit the demolition site that will become the Boulevard du Prince-Eugène, where the symbolic spectacle of urban renewal gives way to a raw vision of social erasure. The buildings appear like dissected bodies, their pale insides exposed to the air, wallpaper in tatters marking the ghostly absence of those who once lived there. The scene recalls not the triumph of modernity, but its violence, denouncing urban progress as rupture, carried out in silence behind the veil of aesthetic unity:[68]

> "[…], tall, gutted buildings, displaying their pale insides, opened to the skies their wells stripped of stairs, their gaping rooms suspended in mid-air like the broken drawers of a big, ugly piece of furniture. Nothing could be more forlorn than the wallpaper of these rooms, blue or yellow squares hanging in tatters, marking the positions, five or six storeys high, right up to the roofs, of wretched little garrets, cramped holes that had once contained, perhaps, a whole human existence. […] The gap yawned still wider in the midst of these ruins, like a breach opened by cannon; the roadway, as yet hardly set out, filled with rubbish, mounds of earth, and deep puddles, stretched out under the leaden sky, amid the sinister pallor of the falling plaster dust, edged with the black strips of chimneys as with mourning border.[69]

Gustavo Giovannoni argues that understanding the logic of the modern city requires returning to the structure of the historic one. Built in response to needs different from our own, the city has nonetheless retained coherence through the persistence of its urban plan. Initially, it integrated practical concerns such as hygiene and spatial rationality. Small houses lined the streets and opened toward inner gardens rather than the street, reflecting a different conception of domestic space. Later transformations replaced these single-family dwellings with apartment blocks, leading to a shift in character due to increased density and relaxed height regulations.

Of course, there were also voices that praised Haussmann's approach. Under this scrutiny, we can mention Jules Simon,[70] although at the beginning of the works, he was a staunch critic of the Prefect of the Seine. He states that the modernisation costs of Paris are insignificant, as Haussmann committed himself to building a magnificent city and succeeded it.[71] Russian urban planner M.

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67 Giovanonni, *Orașe vechi*, 165.

68 Moore, *Invisible Architecture*, 123.

69 Zola, *The Kill*, 247-48.

70 Jules Simon (1814-1896) was a French statesman and philosopher, and one of the leaders of the Moderate Republicans in the Third French Republic.

71 McAuliffe, *Paris*, 316.

Dikansky[72] expressed hope that future generations would follow Haussmann's example, evaluating his work primarily through the lens of circulation efficiency.[73] In contrast, Giovannoni offered a critical perspective, arguing that centralising traffic routes had exacerbated, rather than eased, congestion. At the same time, Dikansky concluded his discourse by questioning whether it is ethical for one generation to destroy the achievements of the previous one.[74] Urban expansion can involve extensive demolitions, as was the case in Paris during Haussmann's transformations. Hence, Zola's critique raises the question of intergenerational responsibility, both for what is inherited and for how the found urban legacy is reframed while going forward.

Conclusions of Emile Zola's Critique

Émile Zola's *The Kill* offers a pointed critique of nineteenth century Parisian urban transformation, addressing the concept of urban fashion and the social implications of Haussmannian modernisation. His detailed portrayals of boulevards and edifices, marked by excessive ornamentation and visual spectacle, reveal how the city became a symbol of imperial power, masking social fragmentation and the erosion of historical continuity. This aesthetic obsession, as Zola shows, aligned with the economic interests of the elite, echoes Gustavo Giovannoni's concerns regarding the disruptive effects of large-scale interventions on historic urban environments.

The role of fine art literature, as demonstrated by Zola, is crucial in understanding these processes. In this sense, Zola adopts the perspective of his character Claude Lantier[75] himself, using literature as the medium through which built space becomes an aesthetic allegory, rendering visible architecture's ideological underpinnings.[76] Zola's naturalist lens reveals the speculative forces and inequalities shaping new Paris. While the architecture of the Second Empire offers a spectacle of stylistic unity, it conceals deep structural divisions, producing an aesthetic surface that separates individuals from the real conditions of their social life.[77]

Standardised constructions, such as the Haussmannian buildings, became expressions of homogenisation and profit-driven design, sidelining both individuality and urban identity. Zola anticipates what Benjamin would call the

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72 Michel Dikansky (1894–1975) was a Russian-French architect and urban theorist, known for his contributions to the development of modernist city theory. Dikansky emigrated to France, where he published significant works on urbanism and city organization.

73 Michel Dikansky, *La ville moderne* (La Bonne Idee, 1927), 149.

74 Dikansky, *La ville moderne*, 149.

75 Claude Lantier is a fictional painter in Émile Zola's *L'Œuvre* (1886), part of the Les Rougon-Macquart cycle. He embodies the struggles of the avant-garde artist in late 19th-century Paris, grappling with the tensions between artistic idealism and the constraints of modern society.

76 Moore, *Invisible Architecture*, 122.

77 Moore, *Invisible Architecture*, 120.

fetishization of urban space - a city as visual commodity reinforcing hierarchies. Beneath this dream city, however, lies a reality marked by displacement and social fragility. In conclusion, *The Kill* demonstrates how literature can serve as a critical instrument in exploring urban and social change. Zola's narrative reveals that cities are not solely physical infrastructures, but also symbolic and experiential landscapes where past and present converge to shape collective consciousness.

Conclusions

This study has contrasted Hugo and Zola's critiques of 19th century Paris, revealing complementary perspectives on its urban and social consequences. In *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Hugo anticipates the logic that would later contribute to the erosion of historical identity and collective memory in favour of a standardised urban model. By imaginatively reconstructing a medieval Paris already under threat in his time, he preserves in literature an urban fabric at risk of disappearing, showing how monuments, once removed from their native context, risk becoming sterile entities.

In *The Kill*, Zola offers a direct critique of Haussmannian transformations, as the novel's action unfolds during the height of these works. From a naturalist perspective, he exposes the speculative mechanisms and social inequalities intensified by modernisation. Paris becomes a spectacle of appearances, where architectural opulence conceals marginalisation, and urban transformations operate as instruments of power and capital.

This dual approach is valuable because it examines the urban fashion of nineteenth century Parisian redevelopment from two distinct temporal standpoints: one that restitutes and memorialises the city before Haussmann (Hugo), and one that critiques the transformations as they unfold (Zola). In the studied literary context, the concept of urban fashion refers to the adoption and dissemination of planning models that reflect the values of a particular era. Haussmannian interventions became emblematic of the nineteenth century, influencing many European cities. However, both Hugo and Zola challenge this trend by highlighting its cultural, respectively social consequences.

The language of urbanism tends to present proposed interventions in positive terms, implying that the relationship between innovation and conservation is manageable. This language often obscures contradictions, imbalances, or uncertainties. In contrast, literary discourse recovers these tensions, emphasising the social dimension of urban transformation and revealing aspects neglected by official narratives.[78] Through fiction, Hugo and Zola not only document change but interpret it, transforming the city into a semiotic space.

78 Schiavo, *Parigi, Barcellona, Firenze*, 136-38.

Thus, the link between architecture and literature in the nineteenth century exceeds mere historical or metaphorical coincidence. It functions as a complex interpretive mechanism for understanding the urban and social realities of the era.[79] Therefore, this paper shows how literary study complements urban analysis, offering a more nuanced understanding of city histories and social dynamics.

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Fig. 1: Redrawn by the author after: *Sixième plan de la ville de Paris, et son accroissement, depuis le commencement du règne de Charles VII l'an 1422, jusqu'à la fin du règne d'Henry III l'an 1589 : Tiré des lettres patentes qui ont ordonné les ouvrages, des contrats passés avec les entrepreneurs, des registres de la chambre des Comptes, de l'Histoire et des Mémoires du temps* / par L.C.D.L.M. ; A. Coquart del. et sculp. Bibliothèque nationale de France, public domain image, redesigned by the author for analytical purposes. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8593327d.

79 Hamond, *Expositions*, 7.

Fig. 2: Redrawn by the author after: *Paris au XVIIIe siècle. Plan de Paris en 20 planches ([Reproduction en fac-similé]) / dessiné et gravé sous les ordres de Michel-Étienne Turgot, prévôt des marchands, commencé en 1734, achevé de graver en 1739 ; levé et dessiné par Louis Bretez.* ibliothèque nationale de France, public domain image, redesigned by the author for analytical purposes, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b530111615.

Fig. 3: Redrawn by the author after: *Plan et perspective de la ville de Paris telle qu'elle étoit sous le règne de Charles IX... / Dheulland, delin. et sculp.* Bibliothèque nationale de France, public domain image, redesigned by the author for analytical purposes. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53085117b.r=Plan%20et%20perspective%20Paris%201550?rk=64378;0.

Fig. 4, 6, 7: photo from the author's archive.

Fig. 5: Redrawn by the author after:

1st plan - *Plan de Paris / dressé par A.-M. Perrot; pour servir à la lecture de l'Histoire des ducs de Bourgogne par M. de Barante.* Bibliothèque nationale de France, public domain image, redesigned by the author for analytical purposes, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8444499x/f1.item;

2st plan - *Plan de Paris divisé en XII mairies et 48 quartiers et tous les monuments... / dressé par Hennequin fils, revu et augmenté par Fauchet. (1841).* Bibliothèque nationale de France, public domain image, redesigned by the author for analytical purposes, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b530852005/f1.item;

3st plan - Plan d'ensemble des travaux de Paris à l'échelle de 0,001 pour 10 mètres (1/10 000) indiquant les voies exécutées et projetées de 1851 à 1868. Bibliothèque nationale de France, public domain image, redesigned by the author for analytical purposes, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b530068310.

Rearchitecture as a Trend
Between Language and Practice

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Keywords
rearchitecture; regeneration; transformation; language; architectural discourse

Abstract
This paper inserts the term *rearchitecture* as a working notion, emphasising the connection between linguistics and architectural practice through transformations of the built environment. The research explores how the prefix *re-* functions as a marker of adaptation examined through its morphological, semantics and pragmatics dimensions. It also reveals how interpretive processes provide insight into the relation between physical conditions and prevailing trends. Language invites imagination through words and syntax, whereas architecture renders them visible. This relationship between conceptual intent and material expression defines the scope of the study, framing architectural objects and their function. The urban development of Cluj-Napoca provides a lens on how this vocabulary becomes active in design and discourse. The conversion of disused industrial sites and the adaptation of existing buildings illustrate negotiations between economic factors and societal expectations. Investment dynamics and decision-making actors determine the scale of interventions, while memory provides continuity and symbolic depth to design choices. This perspective extends the reflection on how architectural discourse influences collective imaginaries of the built environment. Beyond technical solutions, the prefix *re-* sustains narratives of heritage and transition. In this sense, linguistics becomes a key instrument for interpreting the evolution of urban space.

General Context

The theoretical dimension of architecture highlights how concepts and terminology influence practical decisions. Words carry descriptive value as well as critical orientation: they position works within broader debates on sustainability and local identity. This discursive layer reveals that language actively contributes to how practices are understood and evaluated. At the same time, architecture develops in response to social and technological change, adapting its forms to the priorities of each era and shaping how people engage with space. Through this evolving practice, the built environment mirrors collective values while guiding their adaptation over time.

Historical cycles amplify these dynamics, since priorities are continuously reframed through evolving narratives of progress. What is often described as fashion in architecture expresses a relation between established forms and emerging needs. As Charles Jencks observed, changes in architecture represent a process of ongoing reinterpretation that adapts past spatial models to present realities, rather than a simple succession of styles.[1] Within this rethinking process, equally important is the relation between creative intentions and the physical environment. Decisions about building, preserving, or reconfiguring spaces depend on both material and symbolic values. The built fabric embodies memory, which acts as an active agent in urban life, influencing choices that surpass pragmatic reasoning. In this broader discussion, several theoretical contributions have shaped the understanding of architectural transformation.

For instance, Șerban Cantacuzino's 1989 book *Re-architecture: Old Buildings/ New Uses*, provided a practical and conceptual foundation for adaptive reuse, presenting sustainability as a necessity in response to ecological crises and resource limitations. In this study, his term "*Re-architecture*" becomes "*rearchitecture*," designating a progressive approach in which reuse and rehabilitation replace demolition with strategies of reuse, aimed to reduce environmental impact while enhancing living conditions.[2]

Another perspective is given by the Dutch architect and theorist Reinier de Graaf, who recently expands on this discussion by examining the complexities of regeneration processes and also investigating how architectural language mediates the relationship between ideas of progress and renewal. In his book *Architect, Verb: The New Language of Building*, he critiques contemporary architectural practices, arguing that architecture should not be seen as a static product but as a continuous process of adaptation. He emphasises that spaces must evolve in response to shifting environmental and societal conditions, reinforcing the idea that architecture is more of a verb than a noun,

1 Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, rev. and enl. ed. (Academy Editions, 1977), 7–9.

2 Șerban Cantacuzino, *Re-Architecture: Old Buildings / New Uses* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989).

it is a dynamic force that drives change.[3] Complementing this view, David Cheshire's work entitled *Regenerative by Design,* expands the discourse on sustainability by emphasising processes of renewal and improvement through architecture. It focuses on restoring ecological balance and enhancing social well-being by integrating natural systems and community participation into the design process. This perspective defines architecture as an active agent of environmental and cultural regeneration, aligning ecological principles with creative and ethical responsibility.[4] Within this framework, rearchitecture emerges as a working notion that embodies adaptation and reinterpretation. It extends beyond the preservation of buildings, redefining their role in the urban fabric by linking memory, material resources and contemporary needs.

The dialogue between Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, later published in *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, offers an essential perspective on architecture as a cultural and symbolic act that transcends its functional dimension. Nouvel describes urban transformation as a sequence of "*successive derivations toward a regenerative recreation that no one would have thought possible*," capturing the unexpected and paradoxical character of architectural change. In his exchange with Baudrillard, this idea exposes the tension between reality and imagination, between loss and reinvention, suggesting that architectural evolution is both material and conceptual. Its relevance to the notion of rearchitecture lies in the emphasis on continuous recreation, where transformation deepens meaning rather than merely restoring form.[5]

This theoretical grounding becomes tangible in the recent development of Cluj-Napoca, where successive interventions have reconfigured its industrial and cultural landscape. From the conversion of factories to the renewal of emblematic buildings, these projects show how rearchitecture responds to economic forces, cultural memory and social expectations. Together, they create a valuable context for observing how language and design interact in shaping urban transformation.

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate how vocabulary contributes to the understanding of rearchitecture in the built environment. By approaching it as a working notion, the research emphasises the capacity of language to connect theoretical reflection with professional practice while revealing how terminology frames both conceptual thinking and practical action.

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3 Reinier de Graaf, *Architect, Verb: The New Language of Building* (Verso, 2023), ch. 2, 3 and 10.

4 David Cheshire, *Regenerative by Design* (RIBA Publishing, 2024), 14–18.

5 Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture* (U. Minnesota Press, 2002), 25–30.

The first objective is to examine how the prefix *re-* functions as a linguistic marker of change. Observed through morphology, semantics and pragmatics, these terms structure discourses and highlight strategies of adaptation and renewal. In this perspective, vocabulary operates as an instrument of design culture, framing the categories through which transformation is imagined, communicated and implemented within the field of architecture.

The second objective focuses on recent interventions in Cluj-Napoca, where transformations illustrate the way *re*-terms categories resonate with the urban practice. These examples reveal the interaction between words and projects, showing how language gives form to architectural decisions and makes visible the dynamics of change in the contemporary city.

In pursuing these aims, the study positions rearchitecture as a tool for interpreting the relationship between language and practice, offering insights into how conceptual categories and design strategies converge in shaping the built environment. To support this argument, the research incorporates term analysis within case studies, connecting theoretical reflection with observed architectural interventions.

Methodological Approach and Theoretical Framework

This study follows a qualitative methodology designed to explore critical dimensions, symbolic meaning and interpretation instead of quantitative measurement. The approach is interdisciplinary, drawing from both linguistics and architecture. Its purpose is to examine how language shapes professional discourse and how architectural practice reinforces linguistic structures.

The first component consists of a critical reading of specialized literature in architecture and linguistic theory.[6] These works provide a background for understanding the evolution of professional terminology, belonging to the same discursive landscape in which architectural language circulates. The literature review supports the linguistic analysis by showing how vocabulary and concepts are embedded within debates on sustainability and territorial identity.

The second component of the methodology is linguistic analysis. Terms prefixed with *re-* were identified in theoretical writings and practice documents, then examined through their structural, interpretive and contextual dimension. Morphological analysis highlights the recurrence of the prefix and its capacity to generate new categories of meaning. Semantic analysis clarifies the range of interpretations associated with words such as reuse or regeneration. Pragmatic analysis considers how these words are used in presentations, where they serve to justify design choices and align with wider environmental and social agendas.

6 See the theoretical works previously discussed by Baudrillard and Nouvel, de Graaf and Cantacuzino, which frame architecture as both a linguistic and cultural practice.

The third component examines contemporary urban practice, with emphasis on recent interventions in Cluj-Napoca. The city has witnessed significant transformations of industrial and cultural sites, offering a relevant context for observing how architectural vocabulary translates into practice. Case studies were selected based on their ability to illustrate processes of adaptation and reconversion. Each case was documented through available project files, planning reports, and public discussions, providing material for analysing how multiple factors converge in architectural decisions.

A final interpretive step develops the discussion that connects linguistic findings with the case studies, paving the way for the concluding reflections of the research. Through these combined steps, the methodology establishes rearchitecture as a working notion that operates at the intersection of language and practice. It demonstrates how terms, theories, and projects inform one another, creating a field where change is shaped and experienced. This approach reinforces the value of interdisciplinary methods for understanding architecture as both discourse and a material action.

Terminology and Interpretation

Linguistics, as the scientific study of language, provides a systematic foundation for understanding how meaning is formed and interpreted.[7] When placed in dialogue with architecture, it reveals how terminology functions as a tool that guides practice and influences cultural perception. Through morphology, semantics and pragmatics, linguistic theory offers a comprehensive approach for analysing how words frame architectural strategies.[8]

Morphology, the branch of linguistics concerned with the internal structure of words, studies how morphemes combine to create meaning.[9] A morpheme is the smallest unit that carries meaning and is classified as either free, when it can stand alone as a word (such as "build"), or bound, when it must attach to another element and contributes to grammatical meaning. For instance, with the suffix *-ing* in *building* indicates continuous action.[10] According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the prefix *re-* is a derivational morpheme that consistently

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7 The definition of *linguistics* as "the scientific study of language" is taken from Longman Active Study Dictionary, 3rd ed. (Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 390, included in the British National Corpus.

8 George Yule, *The Study of Language*, 4th ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2010), ch. 6, 9 and 10.

9 Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy, *An Introduction to English Morphology*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 24–27.

10 California State University, Northridge. 2024. *Language Development in Children (CD 361 OL)*. Department of Communication Disorders and Sciences, College of Health and Human Development. Section *Morphemes*. Accessed September 2024. https://www.csun.edu/~vcoao0el/webct/de361s61_folder/tsld002.html.

signals repetition, renewal, or return, as in *rebuild or reuse*.[11] It generates new words or shifts meanings. Therefore, this brief analysis shows that morphology enriches both linguistic expression and conceptual understanding, as a single prefix produces entire families of central terms used in contemporary architectural practice.

Semantics focuses on the meanings encoded in words and structures, analysing how concepts are represented and evolve in significance. As P. R. Kroeger explains in *Analysing meaning. An introduction to semantics and pragmatics*, it explores the relationship between expressions and the ideas they convey, highlighting how meaning is constructed within language.[12] Applied to architecture, semantics articulates meaning as it emerges through form. It reveals how material and proportion communicate ideas through their intrinsic qualities, extending the functional dimension of design. A colonnade may evoke order and stability, while a transparent façade suggests openness and lightness. In this perspective, architectural semantics emphasizes how design elements embody and transmit shared cultural values.

Pragmatics extends the study of meaning to how language is used in specific situations, where interpretation depends on context. According to Kroeger, it examines how meaning emerges through interaction and how users infer intentions beyond literal content.[13] Transposed to architectural terms, pragmatics highlights the lived experience of space and influence on behavior. The plan of a museum guides visitors along a narrative of discovery, while the layout of an office balances collaboration with privacy. In both cases, meaning evolves through use and perception, shaped by cultural context. Pragmatics demonstrates that architectural language, like verbal language, operates dynamically, adapting to its audiences and circumstances.

The study of terminology is revealing the conceptual tools through which architecture negotiates continuity and transformation. Morphology explains word formation, semantics clarifies symbolic meaning, while pragmatics illuminates contextual use. Together, they show how terms composed with the prefix *re-* generate conceptual categories that shape professional practice and cultural interpretation. Within this theoretical frame, rearchitecture emerges as a working notion that synthesises linguistic precision with architectural adaptability. It offers a template through which the transformation of the built environment can be understood and applied across different contexts.

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11 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "*re-*" Oxford University Press, Accessed September 2024. https://www.oed.com.

12 Paul R. Kroeger, *Analyzing Meaning: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*, 3rd ed. (Language Science Press, 2022), ch. 2–4.

13 Kroeger, *Analyzing Meaning*, ch. 10-13.

The importance of *re-* is also associated with sustainability principles. The 3R: *reduce, reuse, recycle*, established a foundational vocabulary for ecological responsibility.[14] Over time, it expanded into the 6Rs, adding actions such as *repair, refuse*, and *rethink*.[15] In recent years, sustainability discourse has grown into the 10Rs principles, incorporating *reimagine, repurpose, respect*, and *responsibility*.[16] Each extension refines ecological thinking and enriches the language of sustainability, where the recurrence of *re-* signals refreshment and ethical commitment. Through this interplay, rearchitecture extends the lifecycle of buildings by conserving resources and enhancing resilience.

The diagram above connects sustainability principles with architectural practices, defining rearchitecture within the broader logic of the circular economy. It functions as a conceptual synthesis that explains the notion of rearchitecture.[17] Through its circular structure, the diagram conveys the idea of continuity and renewal that defines rearchitecture as both a methodological and conceptual approach to the built environment.

In conclusion, this chapter traces how language contributes to the understanding of architectural transformation and how meaning evolves from words into spatial reasoning. By outlining the mechanisms through which architecture communicates change, it establishes a framework for interpreting renewal as part of a wider cultural and environmental process. This perspective prepares the transition from theoretical analysis to the examination of rearchitecture within contemporary urban realities.

Case Studies

The case studies presented in this chapter were not selected as ideal examples of best practice, but rather for their relevance, providing a context in which different strategies of transformation could be observed. The analysis aims to present how various architects have emphasised particular aspects of renewal and prioritised distinct approaches to adaptation. Together, these cases illustrate how the theoretical dimensions of rearchitecture manifest in practice

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14 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Sustainable Materials Management: The 3Rs Initiative and Materials Management*, 2007, Accessed December 2024. https://archive.epa.gov/oswer/international/web/html/ndpm-3rs-initiative-and-materials-management.html.

15 Wigan Council, *Using the 6Rs of Sustainability, Wigan Council – Go Green Initiative, n.d.*, Accessed December 2024. https://www.wigan.gov.uk/Council/The-Deal/Deal-Communities/Go-Green/Communities/6rs-of-sustainability.aspx.

16 Sustainable Academy. *The 10Rs of Waste Management*, Sphero Lab, n.d., Accessed December 2024. https://thesustainablesacademy.com/sphero-lab/professional-development/the-10-rs-of-recycling/.

17 European Parliament, *Circular Economy: Definition, Importance and Benefits*, Accessed December 2024. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20151201STO05603/circular-economy-definition-importance-and-benefits.

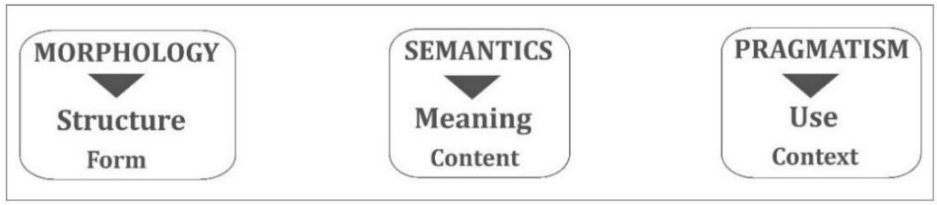


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram showing the relation between language and architecture.



Figure 2. Conceptual diagram of the interdependence between circular economy, sustainability and rearchitecture.

and how language and design intersect in shaping contemporary urban development.

Libertatea - Liberty Technology Park

Supporting Argument

This case was selected for its relevance to the morphological and semantic dimension of rearchitecture. Through the study of form, structure and the preservation of identity expressed through its historic name, this case illustrates how industrial heritage can be reinterpreted while maintaining its original layout and architectural character.

Case Study Presentation

In 1870, Viennese craftsman Franz Triska opened a small carpentry and piano workshop in Cluj-Napoca.[18] As production expanded over the following decades, the workshop evolved into a wood-processing operation and gradually became a prominent local enterprise. The complex reached its peak development after nationalisation in 1948, when the industrial platform was reorganised by the state and transformed into the Libertatea furniture factory, which soon emerged as one of the major furniture producers in Transylvania.[19]

Most of the current platform was built during the socialist period and reflects the rational logic of mid-twentieth century industrial planning, which is evident in its spatial organisation. The buildings from this stage preserve their original character through exposed brick façades and concrete frames, elements that define the site's robust and functional expression. After 1990, peripheral halls and auxiliary spaces were either abandoned or fell into disuse, leaving a smaller but coherent cluster of production structures.[20]

After the 2008–2009 financial crisis that reshaped the local real-estate market, the former *Libertatea* factory emerged as a site with significant redevelopment potential. In 2011, the real estate developer Fribourg Development became involved, taking over the industrial platform and initiating a comprehensive rethinking of its future. To explore potential directions, an invited design competition was launched, initiating a phase of envisioning new scenarios for the site. Following the competition, the developer advanced the project by adopting an internationally developed architectural concept elaborated by Chapman Taylor and carried out in collaboration with the local architectural firm Arhimar. By the end of 2013, these successive interventions of the first

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18 S. Chiorea, Gh. Cosac, and L. Vajda, *Fabrica de mobilă Libertatea Cluj 1870–1970* (Cluj: Întreprinderea Libertatea, 1970) ch. 1-3.

19 Attila Varga, *De la sunet de pian la Hi-Tech. Fabrica de mobilă Libertatea din Cluj (1870–2016)* (Editura Argonaut, 2016).

20 Laurenția Niculina Moldovan, *Antreprenoriatul clujean între tradiție și contemporaneitate. Studiu de caz: Libertatea – Liberty Technology Park (1870–2020)* PhD diss., Romanian Academy, 2025.

phase culminated in the inauguration of Liberty Technology Park, marking the site's transition from a deteriorated industrial complex to a contemporary technological campus. In 2020, Arhimar continued the project with an urban restructuring plan that proposed the addition of six new building volumes, ranging from office and service facilities to collective housing and a kindergarten, as illustrated in Fig. 5.

The morphology evolved progressively as the large production halls were adapted into offices and communal spaces, maintaining the legibility of the original spatial order through preserved façades, materials and overall massing. The new interior introduced flexibility and openness, while altering the spatial character of the original industrial architecture. From an economic perspective, the project reflects the broader shift from production-based activities to innovation and services that characterises Cluj's current development. The new functions introduced at Liberty contributed to this transition by reactivating a previously underused industrial area. While the intervention aligned with the city's emerging creative economy, it also illustrates how adaptive reuse projects often participate in larger processes of economic restructuring, where regeneration and real estate dynamics become closely intertwined. [21]

From another perspective, the ensemble negotiates between permanence and change. The structural grid and the rhythm of openings remain dominant compositional elements, contributing to the continuity and legibility of the original design. Ecologically, the intervention demonstrates how spatial reconfiguration can integrate environmental awareness. The landscaped courtyards function as "breathing voids" within the dense urban fabric, enhancing spatial permeability and microclimatic comfort while fostering collective appropriation of open space. Through this semantic reorientation, from production to collaboration, the intervention preserves the site's industrial scale while mitigating its former functional rigidity.

The contrast between old and new underlines both the strength and the fragility of the morphological identity: the robust industrial grid survives within a context now marked by typological diversity and shifting scale. Culturally, the project mediates between industrial memory and the evolving identity of Cluj. By maintaining recognizable spatial patterns within a changing urban context, Liberty reinforces continuity as a shared cultural value rather than a formal motif. Therefore, the project explores how adaptive reuse can preserve certain valuable aspects of character through selective conservation. The intervention retains the material substance and typological rhythm of the original complex, while the morphology has been reinterpreted to accommodate

21 Institute STAR-UBB, *Întreprinderea de prelucrare a lemnului Libertatea (1870),* project *Digital Cluj-Napoca: Facilitarea învățării și cercetării integrând ultimele tendințe privind cunoașterea și utilizarea spațiului urban*. Accessed December 2024. https://a60194.wixsite.com/digitalcluj/copia-iris.



Figure 3. *Libertatea* Factory Hall in 1954.

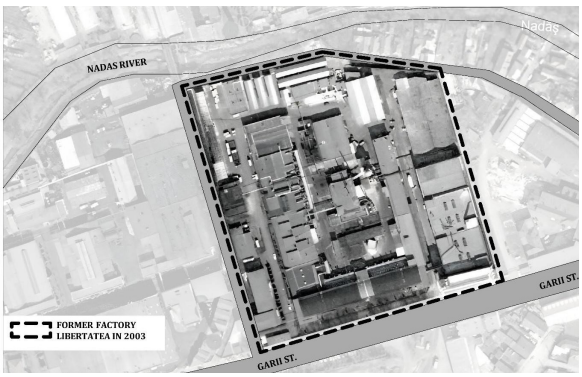


Figure 4. *Libertatea* Factory in 2003.

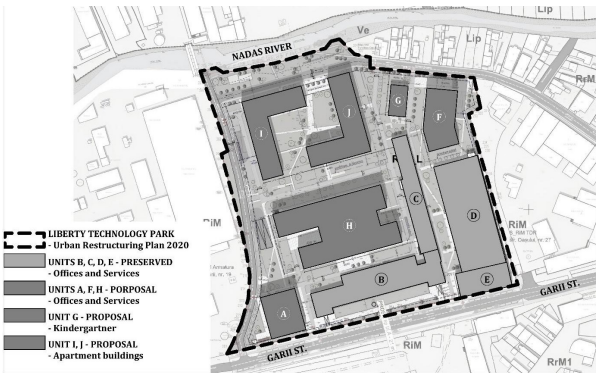


Figure 5. Urban restructuring plan, 2020.



Figure 6. Liberty Technology Park, 2025.



Figure 7. Liberty Technology Park, 2025.

new uses and perceptions. The continuity of form suggests a translation of industrial memory into a contemporary architectural language, rather than its complete transformation, offering insight into the morphological dimension of rearchitecture.

***Flacăra* - Binarium**

Supporting Argument

This case study exemplifies the pragmatic and semantics perspective of rearchitecture. Pragmatics emphasises context, use and human experience into spaces that are inhabited and adapted to everyday practices. Semantics, on the other hand, uncovers the meaning and the content of the study area. The main goal is to reveal if rearchitecture sustains new forms of social and economic life.

Case Study Presentation

The Flacăra factory, established in 1949, was also one of the key industrial units in Cluj during the socialist period. It specialised in textiles and garments, supplying domestic markets and occasionally exporting to international partners within the Eastern Bloc. After the 1990 transition, Flacăra experienced the challenges of privatisation, entering into decline. In 2006, the company was divided into separate entities due to accumulated debts, and in 2008 the land and factory buildings were sold to the German real estate company LBBW Immobilien.[22]

The new owner's initial proposal envisioned the development of a multifunctional center by demolishing all the buildings. But following the onset of the financial crisis that came shortly after, they began renting interior spaces to local artists and the site gradually evolved into an informal cultural space. Several areas of the former factory were temporarily used for events such as the TIFF festival and for photography workshops.

In 2014, the property was purchased by iQuest, a software developer, that shortly had entered the construction phase under a project designed by the architecture practice Dico și Țigănaș. In the first stage, the concept adopted an adaptive reuse approach that preserved the original industrial structure of the former hall. In subsequent stages, the intervention was expanded through demolition and rebuilding of new office buildings within the site. The inner courtyard was transformed into a public space with open access, redefining the relationship between the buildings and the surroundings.[23]

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22 Institute STAR-UBB. *Întreprinderea de confecții Flacăra.* Digital Cluj-Napoca Project: *Facilitarea învățării și cercetării integrând ultimele tendințe privind cunoașterea și utilizarea spațiului urban.* https://a60194.wixsite.com/digitalcluj/copia-mucart, Accessed December 2024.

23 Dico și Țigănaș Official Website, *Binarium, Cluj Napoca.* Accessed December 2024, https://dicositiganas.ro/ro/portofolio/birouri/binarium-cluj-napoca/.

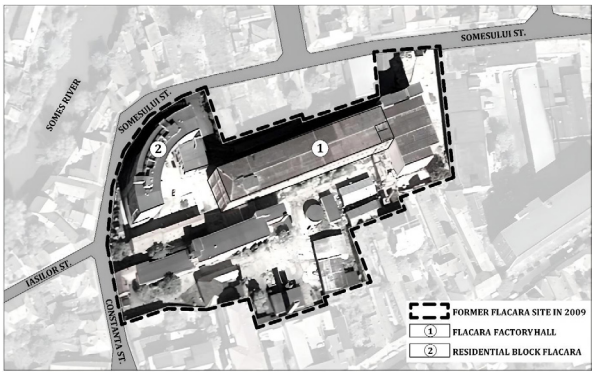


Figure 8. *Flacăra* Factory, 2009 satellite image.

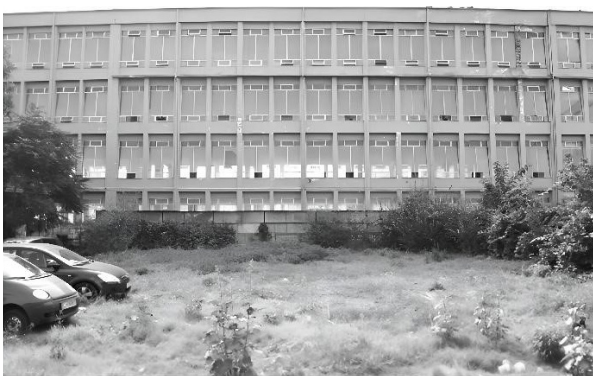




Figure 9. *Flacăra* Factory Hall in 2015.

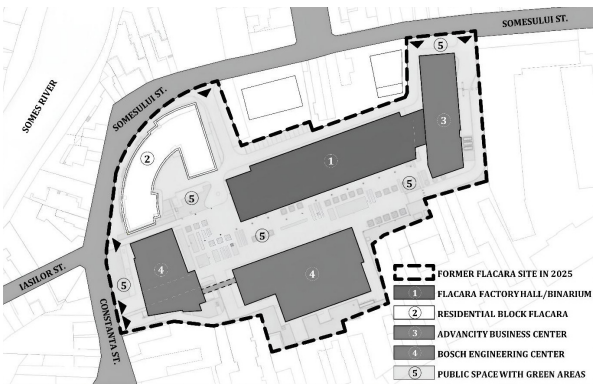


Figure 10. Current buildings, 2025.



Figure 11. Binarium, 2025.

Across the wider perimeter of the former factory, the study shifts toward a semantic register, as the significance of the place continues to inform its perception. Extensive redevelopment has reshaped the ensemble, yet the residential block known as Flacăra preserves a stable point of reference that keeps the name active in everyday language. Through this continuity, the area remains collectively understood as a distinct urban fragment shaped by its industrial past.

Zooming in, the analysis of the former Flacăra hall reveals a pragmatic rearchitecture akin to the moment when new vocabulary inserts itself into an inherited morphological structure, reshaping and renegotiating its semantic relations. The retained structural frame operated as a robust "grammar" for transformation, and its continuity ultimately defined the character of the resulting project, Binarium.

The interior was restructured to suit contemporary work practices, with former production zones reconfigured into open and flexible environments. Circulation was adjusted to enable smoother movement and a clearer functional logic, while the façade was carefully reworked to refine proportions and strengthen material expression, supporting the building's contemporary presence. Read through a linguistic lens, the intervention operates like a morphological and syntactic transformation: existing structural "roots" are retained, but their "inflections" are modified through new spatial uses, and their "sentence order" is recalibrated through revised circulation and façade composition. In this way, the project suggests an adaptive process in which continuity and change co-produce meaning and its approach has been noted in several awards.

The transformation of *Flacăra* Hall into Binarium also reflects broader conjuctions. Economically, the adaptive reuse of the building aligns with Cluj's emergence as a regional IT hub, providing the infrastructure required by companies in a rapidly expanding sector. Ecologically, the reuse of the existing structure helped mitigate the environmental costs of demolition and reconstruction, while the integration of green space added an element of sustainable intent. Culturally, the project was recognised as a resource capable of serving contemporary needs and it was reintegrated into the active life of the city. At the same time, this process invites reflection on semantics and how much of the site's cultural and symbolic value can be retained once its function and perception have been redefined.

Through its transformation, the former industrial factory has become part of the city's expanding digital economy, illustrating how rearchitecture weaves together contextual integration and economic reinvention. The surrounding area remains in gradual transformation, as new developments continue to appear.

Casa de Modă - HUB UTCN

Supporting Argument

This case study illustrates how rearchitecture can bring together form, meaning and use within a single process. The building preserves the clarity of composition while introducing a function that reshapes its role in the city, expressing the idea of continuity through change.

Case Study Presentation

The Fashion House, built in the 1970s, is an example of modernist architecture in Cluj-Napoca. Conceived as a functional facility and a cultural symbol, the building was designed for the textile and garment industry, which played a significant role in the city's economy during the second half of the twentieth century. Besides the production workshop, the building hosted fashion shows with exhibition spaces, serving as a venue for professional activities dedicated to the textile field. The initial façade design featured a clear structural grid with large glazed surfaces that ensure natural light. Its formal language reflected the socialist ambition oriented toward progress and the development of Cluj's textile sector.[24]

The early post-1990 years marked a turbulent phase in Romanian urban development, as the liberalisation of the real-estate market progressed more rapidly than the capacity to regulate it. Weak planning instruments, inconsistent zoning frameworks and limited urban oversight encouraged a wave of rapid and often uncoordinated construction, reshaping many urban areas through interventions driven primarily by immediate opportunity rather than by coherent spatial vision. Within this broader context, the site surrounding the Fashion House underwent a similar transformation. Two new buildings were erected on the adjacent plot, altering the street's proportions and reducing the openness that had previously framed the ensemble. Their placement covered one side of the building's long-windowed façade and deleted the green setting that once enhanced its architectural presence. Through this accumulation of additions, the Fashion House gradually lost part of its spatial clarity and legibility within the evolving urban fabric.

On the other hand, the decline of state industries, combined with the growing pressures of global competition, eroded its position within the economic landscape it once represented. As a consequence, the building shifted toward temporary uses that sustained a minimum level of visibility during its period of uncertainty. Across this transitional phase, the structure maintained its coherence, offering a framework that later enabled its architectural reconversion.

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24 D. A.-L. Chis, *Casa de Modă: locul unde modelele erau simpli angajați ai cooperativei*, Cluj Web Story, January 5, 2023, accessed December 2024, https://clujwebstory.ro/casa-de-moda-locul-unde-modelele-erau-simpli-angajati-ai-cooperativei/.

In 2017, the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca acquired the property and initiated its transformation into an educational hub, also designed by Dico și Țigănaș. This step provided the building with a clear institutional function and connected it to the university's wider network of faculties, research centers and student activities. Through this new program, the structure gained renewed relevance and a coherent operational role within the city's educational landscape.[25]

In the following, the analysis unfolds across the three interpretive dimensions of rearchitecture, with the aim of clarifying how the building's conversion into an educational hub negotiates continuity with its inherited structure while introducing a new layer of institutional meaning.

From a morphological perspective, the intervention engages the existing modernist structure with a high degree of precision. The volume and load-bearing system were preserved, a choice that aligns the project with contemporary strategies of adaptive reuse but also imposes certain constraints. While the original façade and proportions remain legible, as they were till the project started, the reorganisation of the interior introduced a new programmatic hierarchy: former production and display areas now host conference rooms, classrooms and research laboratories. The upper floor, reinterpreted to accommodate the main auditorium, marks a moment of architectural inflection in which the new function asserts itself without disrupting the coherence of the inherited form. The result is a recalibrated building that retains its spatial clarity yet accommodates a fundamentally different operational logic.[26]

At the semantic level, the transformation entails a shift of meaning that mirrors larger cultural and economic changes in Cluj-Napoca. The Fashion House once materialised the ambitions of the textile industry and the rhetoric of socialist modernity, functioning as an emblem of production, design and public representation. Its spaces projected an image of progress rooted in material output. Today, the same architectural shell conveys an entirely different narrative, associated with academic activity, knowledge production and institutional life. This transformation reframes the building's role within the city, moving it from the sphere of industrial display to that of intellectual labor. The continuity of the structure thus contrasts with the discontinuity of its meaning, revealing how architecture becomes a medium for shifting cultural priorities.

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25 Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, *Rector's Report for the 2016–2020 Term*, March 2020, 18, 172, 221–226, accessed December 2025, https://www.utcluj.ro/media/page_document/279/raport_rector_2016_2020.pdf.

26 Dico și Țigănaș Website. *UTCN HUB Cluj-Napoca*. Accessed December 2024. https://dicositiganas.ro/ro/portofolio/altele/refuncionalizare-pentru-invatamant-cluj-napoca/.

Viewed pragmatically, the project aligns with contemporary functional expectations and institutional routines. Spaces once governed by the rhythm of textile production now host teaching, research, and public events, inserting the building into the university's wider network. Through a linguistic lens, the industrial framework operates like a stable lexical root, while the new programs act as morphological inflections that adjust meaning to a different reality; the redistribution of uses and circulation reads as a syntactic rewrite that reorders spatial "sentences" into a coherent new logic. The reuse strategy extends the structure's lifespan and avoids the environmental costs of demolition, yet it also raises a grammar-like tension between present fit and future reinterpretation, since interior specialisation may condition how easily the building can be re-inflected in later cycles of change.

The university's decision to acquire and adapt also the curtainwall building constructed after 1990, a former bank which had covered the lateral façade of the Fashion House, represented a meaningful step in stabilising this part of the urban fabric. Reusing the existing structure reduced environmental and material consumption while preserving a centrally positioned resource suitable for the expansion of academic activity. The interior was reorganised to accommodate contemporary educational programs, but the façades remained unchanged, expressing the contrasting conditions. This situation prompted the architects from Dico and Țigănaș to develop a proposal for a mediating structure intended to clarify the relationship between the two volumes and to guide the ensemble toward a more coherent architectural identity. Although the proposal has not yet been realised, it remains a possible direction for future improvement and carries the prospect of strengthening the unity of the ensemble at a later stage.

The transformation of the former Fashion House into HUB UTCN brings forward the operational constraints that shape rearchitecture in settings marked by layered urban conditions. The project progresses through calibrated interventions guided by an inherited structural order and by the compact configuration of the surroundings. The building now functions as an active academic environment, and its current state reflects a trajectory shaped by programmatic demands that anchor it within the city's institutional network. This evolution highlights how architectural transformation depends on context-specific pressures, available space and the material character of the structure already in place. Through this perspective, HUB UTCN offers a grounded view of rearchitecture, one in which the long-term performance of a building results from precise adjustments and sustained alignment with present institutional needs.



Figure 12. Fashion House in 1990.

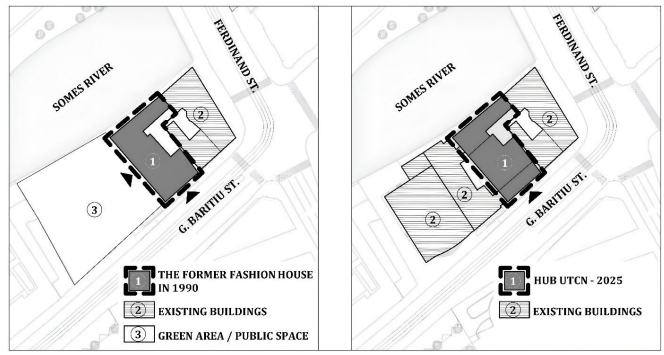


Figure 13. Transformations between 1990 and 2025.





Figure 14. HUB UTCN 2025. Back and front facades.





Figure 15. Renderings of HUB UTCN's façades proposal.

Discussion

The following discussion moves from the description of case studies toward a critical reflection on rearchitecture, revealing how architectural practice engages with political and economic forces shaping the city. Projects framed as renewal embody both the optimism of progress and the constraints of investment. Within this landscape, design becomes a visible act of negotiation, mediating between cultural aspiration and institutional control. Recent interventions in Cluj-Napoca illustrate how these dynamics unfold within a broader process of urban restructuring. Former industrial sites are redefined through strategies that merge heritage with productivity. These gestures express the city's ambition to project an image of creative growth while also reflecting the unequal conditions that accompany redevelopment.

These transformations presented as a language of inclusion and sustainability have become a collective necessity. The reuse of existing structures translates ethical ambition into spatial practice, shaping new forms of participation and visibility. Rearchitecture operates as a means of governance, turning social ideals into physical settings that frame what can be shared. This process unfolds through the conversion of former industrial sites into environments perceived as open and secure. The idea of a "safe city" strengthens the appeal of regeneration by combining accessibility with protection. Public spaces, offices and cultural venues are reshaped to support interaction while discreetly guiding movement and behavior. Safety evolves from a notion of shelter into one grounded in comfort, visibility and systems that maintain collective awareness, creating a continuous network of spatial legibility. In this context, safety becomes a spatial meaning that aligns protection with regulation, positioning rearchitecture as a subtle instrument for organising contemporary urban life. Following Michel Foucault's reflections on disciplinary space, rearchitecture extends the mechanisms through which modern society structures control. The transition from rigid industrial halls to adaptable environments resonates with the shift from visible punishment to continuous observation and normalisation. Authority becomes spatial, embedded in design and expressed through arrangements that orient perception, circulation and conduct. Through these frameworks, rearchitecture translates disciplinary principles into contemporary urban form, where transparency and safety operate as spatial tools that shape everyday experience.[27]

Henri Lefebvre's understanding of space as something that shapes social relations helps clarify how rearchitecture operates today. The transformation of former factories no longer concerns materials or functions alone but the renewal of their social role. Spaces once dedicated to production now generate exchanges, experiences, and forms of connection that influence the city's daily

27 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 144–195.

rhythm. Through this continuity, rearchitecture preserves the capacity of space to structure relationships and sustain collective life in new ways.[28]

This reflection extends to contemporary urban theories that rethink the relationship between space and time. Carlos Moreno's concept of the *15-Minute City* is grounded in the idea of proximity, where daily needs are met within a short distance. Although it promotes accessibility and ecological balance, its application often exposes persistent social and spatial inequalities. Critics have noted that, within this framework, the individual remains constantly visible, integrated into a network of observation and care. The model therefore combines inclusion with regulation, transforming collective well-being into a managed spatial condition.[29] At the same time, Byung-Chul Han's critique of the *society of self-exploitation* helps illuminate the rhetoric of flexibility embedded in these new architectures. Recreational areas, green courtyards and cafés appear as gestures of care, yet they ultimately serve productivity by ensuring that workers remain engaged and present.[30] Rearchitecture, in this sense, reproduces mechanisms of exploitation in a softened form, replacing mechanical coercion with the voluntary immersion of the subject in multifunctional environments.

"*Architecture is a temporary answer to a temporary need*"[31] functions as a statement that frames the act of building as a contingent cultural practice rather than a quest for permanence. Its value may lie in adaptability, understood as the capacity to test and reconfigure space as social, economic and environmental conditions shift. Just as language evolves to name new realities and to communicate emerging notions, architecture can revise its forms, materials and programs to support new ways of living.

Temporary or transformable structures thus operate as timely "utterances" within an architectural vocabulary, meaningful through use and interaction. Their impact can endure beyond material survival, persisting through social relations and the innovations they enable in a specific context. In this context, rearchitecture stands between necessity and trend, responding to current demands. The result is a form of architectural discourse where sustainability risks turning into a slogan, memory becomes a design tool and the principles of the circular economy are absorbed into new cycles of consumption. More recent perspectives on regenerative design propose an ethic of repair that seeks to restore balance between society and environment. This approach shifts

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28 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Blackwell, 1991).

29 Carlos Moreno, *The 15-Minute City* (NJ: Wiley, 2024), 74-84.

30 Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford University Press, 2015).

31 Sabine Oberhuber and Thomas Rau, *Material Matters: From Linear to Circular Economy*, Arts of the Working Class, Issue 120 (June 2038): 58–59.

attention from limiting damage to generating renewal and invites architecture to move beyond preservation toward a more active care for the future.[32]

Rearchitecture, therefore, must be understood as part of the contradictions of our time. It promises sustainability, but often reinforces market-driven redevelopment. It appeals to memory, but selectively preserves heritage to serve branding. It suggests autonomy but embeds individuals in spatial regimes of subtle control. Its importance lies in exposing these tensions: between sustainability and consumption, between collective memory and commodification, between authentic regeneration and rhetorical reuse. These contradictions are particularly visible in the case of Cluj-Napoca. As shown by Ioana Florea and Enikő Vincze's study about urban development, the city's transformation illustrates how deindustrialised areas have been reabsorbed into global financial circuits through processes of "de-risking," in which public authorities and urban planning frameworks reduce investment risks for private capital. Their study demonstrates that former industrial platforms were turned into real estate assets, supported by flexible zoning and a regeneration discourse that legitimised market-driven redevelopment. In this context, Cluj-Napoca's emergence as Romania's most expensive housing market reflects not only economic restructuring toward IT and services but also the subordination of urban regeneration to financialisation. The city's industrial heritage, though selectively referenced, became a vehicle for accumulation, exemplifying the ambivalence of rearchitecture as both renewal and commodification.[33]

Addressing these tensions involves clarifying how the term rearchitecture is understood within this research. It is approached as an interpretive notion that acquires meaning through practice and context, rather than as a definition with fixed boundaries. The tables that follow illustrate this interpretive process by translating principles of the circular economy into architectural reasoning and by showing how language shapes both conceptual understanding and design action. Seen through this perspective, rearchitecture functions as a conceptual framework and a working method that connects ideas with architectural form, reflecting on the social and cultural circumstances that accompany transformation.

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32 Wellington Regional Leadership Committee, co-written by WSP Urban Design Leaders, *Regenerative Design: Bringing Society and Environment Together to Better Care for Our Collective Future (2016)*, accessed December 2024. https://wrlc.org.nz/regenerative-design-much-less-bad-much-more-good.

33 Ioana Florea and Enikő Vincze, *Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization*, in Cities of Change: Urban Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, ed. Annegret Haase et al. (London: Routledge, 2024), accessed December 2024. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032631608-5.

SUSTAINABILITY PRINCIPLES	DESCRIPTION / INTERPRETATION
REUSE	using existing materials, structures or elements to extend their lifecycle
REDUCE	lowering resource consumption and waste production
RECYCLE	converting used materials into new resources
REPAIR	fixing what is broken to avoid replacement
REFUSE	rejecting products or practices that harm sustainability
RETHINK	reconsidering processes and systems in innovative ways
REIMAGINE	creating new visions for sustainable use and design
REPURPOSE	assigning a new role or function to something existing
RESPECT	acknowledging ethical responsibility toward nature and society
RESPONSIBILITY	accepting accountability for environmental and social impacts

Table 1. Sustainability principles as part of rearchitecture.

ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICES	DESCRIPTION / INTERPRETATION
REHABILITATE	improving functionality while maintaining the building's identity
REDESIGN	modifying layouts or concepts to meet current functional and environmental demands
RECONSTRUCT	reusing structural or material components in new configurations
RESTORE	recovering original integrity, authenticity and craftsmanship
REEVALUATE / REJECT	questioning overproduction, excess and nonessential interventions
REDEFINE / REFRAME	generating new perspectives and priorities for design and value

REINTERPRET/REINVENT	transforming existing forms through creative or symbolic reinterpretation
RECONVERT/ REPURPOSE	adapting existing buildings for different or hybrid functions
REINTEGRATE	reconnecting neglected sites with the contemporary urban and social fabric
REGENERATE	renewing place continuity through ecological, cultural and social resilience

Table 2. Architectural practices as part of rearchitecture.

ANALYTICAL DIMENSION	FOCUS	EXAMPLES OF INTERPRETATION IN ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE
ECONOMIC DIMENSION	Resource optimization Lifecycle extension Adaptive value generation	Extends the economic life of buildings through maintenance and adaptation; minimizes costs and material excess; generates value from reuse and creative transformation; encourages efficient management of existing assets and new market potential.
ECOLOGICAL DIMENSION	Environmental regeneration Energy efficiency Circular use of materials	Reduces waste by reactivating existing structures; reinserts materials into new building cycles; limits overbuilding; promotes regenerative design and adaptive reuse; protects ecosystems and embodied energy.
CULTURAL DIMENSION	Continuity Identity Reinterpretation of meaning	Preserves authenticity and craftsmanship; maintains architectural identity through transformation; reconnects neglected areas with collective memory; translates spatial heritage into contemporary meaning; strengthens community resilience.

Table 3. Analytical dimensions of rearchitecture and interpretation.

Through this systematisation, the vocabulary evolves into an analytical instrument that positions rearchitecture within a broader theoretical field and encourages reflection on its critical significance. It reveals how architectural thinking develops through the interaction of cultural meaning, economic purpose and ecological awareness, suggesting that transformation acts as a negotiation between inherited forms and new intentions. Overall, the discussion frames rearchitecture as a field of ongoing interpretation, where the pursuit of renewal intertwines with the realities of production and representation. Rather than resolving these tensions, it exposes them as integral to the contemporary condition of architecture. By tracing how meaning circulates between theory and practice, the study advances a critical understanding of transformation as both a cultural process and a professional stance. Within this horizon, rearchitecture becomes a way of thinking through change that connects past experience with future potential and situates architectural practice within the broader continuum of social and environmental responsibility.

Conclusions

This study examined rearchitecture as both a linguistic and architectural phenomenon, exploring how vocabulary shapes the interpretation of transformation within the built environment. The analysis began with a broad investigation of the prefix re-, whose morphological, semantic and pragmatic layers reveal a dynamic vocabulary of renewal. These linguistic mechanisms frame how architectural change is imagined and communicated, linking conceptual reflection with professional practice and outlining an interpretive field in which transformation becomes a continuous process of rewriting and reformulation.

Applied to the recent interventions in Cluj-Napoca, this framework revealed how language potential takes form through concrete architectural practice. The city's former industrial platforms and its central modernist landmark illustrate a spectrum of transformations through which structures evolve, gain new significance and integrate contemporary functions. These interventions operate within broader political and economic forces that shape the city, combining cultural aspiration with institutional, financial and regulatory conditions. The passage from conceptual breadth to situated architectural solutions thus becomes a defining aspect of rearchitecture and a clarification of how the concept operates in practice. Viewed through this lens, the case studies demonstrate that rearchitecture produces environmental improvements, reinforces collective memory and supports renewed patterns of community use. Through spatial reconfiguration, programmatic diversification and the activation of adjacent public areas, the projects create regenerative effects that strengthen both ecological and social layers. At the same time, their outcomes express the ambivalences characteristic of contemporary urban redevelopment, where sustainability, memory and cultural identity intersect with investment-driven agendas. This variability generates a differentiated landscape of regenerative

potential within the city and offers insight into the evolving character of rearchitecture. These observations also illuminate how language mediates the translation from intention to built form. Terms such as reuse, regeneration or repropose circulate across architects, local administration and civic debate, framing interventions in ways that intertwine inclusion and common good. Their presence shapes public expectations and guides the articulation of heritage and innovation, producing narratives that draw together care and efficiency. The discussion additionally clarified how these interventions participate in urban restructuring. Strategies associated with renewal also support agendas of competitiveness and controlled accessibility, combining mechanisms that guide behavior. Through this interplay, the concept of revitalisation carries a delicate form of risk and must be managed with discernment, since its transformative power can easily shift from inclusive renewal toward dynamics that consolidate control in public space.

Taken together, these insights position rearchitecture as a working notion shaped by the interaction between vocabulary and built form. The concept evolves through its movement from linguistic possibility to architectural expression, a trajectory marked by both conceptual openness and contextual grounding. This process brings forward not only the opportunities created by regenerative design but also the tensions that accompany contemporary approaches to participation and urban branding. Recognising this dynamic allows for a calibrated understanding of rearchitecture as a cultural and spatial mechanism that responds to present demands while navigating the contradictions of its time. Future research may further expand this line of inquiry by examining other post-industrial contexts and by comparing how linguistic and spatial strategies unfold across scales, refining the conceptual tools developed here and supporting their integration into maturing regenerative design practices.

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While for Le Corbusier to be modern is not a fashion, but a state, for Baudrillard fashion is the very emblem of modernity. Yet, despite these apparently contradictory insights, architecture's association with fashion is both readily recognised and, by that very token, dismissed or obscured. This book both acknowledges the profound affinities between architecture and dress – fashion's operation field par excellence, and attempts to unravel fashion's transactions with architecture beyond the clothing metaphor. Presented at the academic conference of the 2024 Festival for Architecture Schools of Tomorrow – FAST, the included papers explore the models mediating architectural modernities, the ethical and aesthetical implications of superficiality, the past and present interplays between 'the new' and 'the old,' or the consumption practices fashioning the built environment.

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