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## Unnoticeable architectures

In 2011 I was visiting Florence for the first time. It was a late discovery, but one that I had long intuited. I had one day and a small map at my disposal, but no set plan. Gmaps had not yet arrived on my phone screen, so I could not check in advance what I was going to see, and therefore the relationship with the city was direct and much more intense. The first place the city took me to was the Boboli Gardens, and what that day was to offer me was a founding wonder that has never left me since then and to this day. The great lesson was wright in front of me and it's awareness - direct: the world can be *put in order* with simple, few gestures and with what the place already has available. The wonder was before a simple beauty, without rest, in which nothing was new, although everything was novel. The meadow with columns and the cypress-lined path were written in my deep memory precisely because they rearranged what was already there: the humble plant material. Behind it, however, you could have seen the generosity of thought of those who had designed it. The experience of that day interposed a new lens between my eyes and the built world, a lens that I have chosen not to give up. I keep it with me to this day.



Figure 1 – Boboli Gardens, Florence; personal archive of the author, 2024

This question of *ordering the world* has long been in the architect's consciousness. According to the written records, it goes back at least two millennia, from Vitruvius onwards. In Latin he names it *Ordinatione*, with reference to the Greek *τάξις* (*táxis*), and attaches to it the meaning of the *proper arrangement* of both the parts and the whole, subject to the principle of symmetry - considered as harmonious proportion. This *Ordinatione* is the first attribute he mentions when defining architecture in Book I, Chapter II, Fundamental Principles of Architecture.<sup>1</sup> The phrases that explain it, in the various translations, all imply an active dimension, that is the intervention of the architect through a creative act. However, this *creative act* is constantly weighted by the attributes of common sense: *appropriate, just, moderate*.<sup>2</sup> Hence the Romans had this science of putting the world in proper order. It is what the Renaissance, starting with Brunelleschi, rediscovered, took up, refined, and passed on centuries later. During his Roman sojourn, after the competition for the baptistery doors (probably in 1402, when he was barely 25), Brunelleschi noticed in the ancient ruins „a certain order, very evident” that fascinated him.<sup>3</sup> We do not know whether he would have been in contact with the Vitruvian ideas beforehand<sup>4</sup> or whether his eye was ready to distinguish them directly, written in the reality before him. What is certain is that he noticed something „very different from what was being done in his time”<sup>5</sup> and this *something* has become a source of inspiration for all those who have followed him in Western architecture to this day. And the longevity of this fascination may have at its heart precisely this *moderation* associated with the deliberate act of ordering the world, done with *care*.

## The vanishing city

Bucharest is getting poorer by the day. This is nothing new for its architects. More recently, it is also becoming an acute reality for some of Bucharest's more environmentally aware citizens. Seen by one who visits it at irregular intervals, determined by great geographical distances, the city is visibly changing. It seems less each time, without realizing in a rush in what way. The change is, to be sure, a qualitative one, and the landmarks that disappear are subjective, on a personal affective map of the city. But they are undeniably objective and quantifiable losses:

<sup>1</sup> M. Vitruvii Pollionis. *De architectura. Libri decem, Liber primus, Caput II. Ex quibus rebus Architectura constat.* (1<sup>st</sup> Century, BC). Later vernacular translations have oscillated between *ordinatione* (the venetian edition of 1524), *Ordine* (Barbaro, 1584) or *Ordinazione* (Galvani, 1758; Amati, 1829), and those into English have translated it as *Ordination* (Newton, 1791) or *Order* (Morgan, 1914), but all circumscribe, in the explanatory paragraph, the original meaning.

<sup>2</sup> „moderata attitudine”, „conveniente effetto” (1584); „misurato comodo”, „rapporto”, „giusta distribuzione” (1758); „due measure”, „adjustment”, „proper places”, „the elegance of effect” (1791); „proper modification”, „suitable effect” (1914)

<sup>3</sup> A. Manetti. *Operette Istoriche Edite e Inedite di Antonio Manetti, Matematico ed Architetto Fiorentino del Secolo XV, Raccolte per la Prima Volta e al suo Vero Autore Restituite da Gaetano Milanesi. Vita di Filippo di Ser Brunellesco.* (Successori le Monnier, Firenze, 1887 [15<sup>th</sup> Century]), p.92

<sup>4</sup> Fragments of the ancient text, copied or rewritten, were already circulating in Italy at the time, but the official rediscovery of the complete ancient manuscript did not take place until 1415, when Brunelleschi was 38 years old, and the first official publication of the treatise was in 1486, 40 years after his death.

<sup>5</sup> Manetti, *Vita di Filippo di Ser Brunellesco*, p.92

materially for the city's architecture and psychologically for the visual well-being of those who perceive it at eye level.

A recent walk through Cotroceni made me aware of this reality once again. There could have been so many other areas of the city, but the (still) living coherence of this neighborhood, loved by its inhabitants, makes any loss all the more apparent. The house in my memory was a simple modernist terraced-roofed building, with few but neat details and an unusual proportion, that always made me look for it with great pleasure. The relationship between the fullness of the main facade and the number and size of the voids had a kind of tension, carefully designed by the architect, which gave it a unique personality on the small Mirinescu street. A decent restoration of the facade would have sufficed for its charm to survive and the street to retain its pleasant atmosphere. However, although on the known place there is a building, fresh from the building site, with the same brick walls and about the same size as the known one, the house in my memory no longer exists. Its place has been taken by a hip-roofed, perfectly surfaced, sanitary white house that cries out for attention with its many superficially designed details, inspired by historical periods foreign to its spirit. The difference was so great that my first thought was that perhaps I had the wrong street. So I decided to check the neighboring streets. And the frustration was all the greater, and the feeling of uprootedness all the stronger, because what had been there a year before had unjustifiably disappeared from an architectural point of view.

In a mirror, I recall a similar search experience, but in reverse. I was studying Radu Mihăilescu's projects in Timișoara and I was looking for one of the private houses he designed, less well known, but which I had seen published. I knew the name of the street, but not the number (a common request of beneficiaries to protect their privacy). So I took the street in question in my stride: long, winding, with domestic architecture, typical of the Banat region, low-slung, with short facades with two windows each, set on the street alignment and rhythmized by gardens. The first search gave me frustration of a similar intensity to the one I described earlier, and my first thought was also that perhaps I had taken the wrong street. The second, more careful and leisurely search, however, revealed, where I least expected, what I was looking for. The project fitted in perfectly. It was a good opportunity to see that authentic architecture is discreet and gradually seduces you; although it is barely perceptible at a quick glance, once it is *seen*, it identifies with the place, becomes evident and the built reality can no longer be imagined in the mind of the person who perceives it in any other way than with it. What is more, as you look at it, you discover new values, and the inside, hidden from the public eye, confirms the value that you had glimpsed outside, completes its coherence and reinforces its meaning.

The two aforementioned search experiences bring up the city's natural need to change. It is a living organism and pulses with the times and its users. But how much and in which way do you intervene? How much and in which way do you leave the place untouched? The questions seem trivial. And yet, they are the key to quality in the architect's profession.

In Bucharest there are street profiles that, from one year to the next, you don't recognize anymore because of greedy and hurried interventions, which do not fit in the atmosphere of the place where they were implanted. There are facades that, after rehabilitation, become alien to you by the industrial perfection of their surface; slum gardens, which you remember with small alleys, various herbs and fruit trees, which turn into paved courtyards, devoid of vegetation, but easy to maintain by owners with no spare time; wrought iron fences, through which the indiscreet eye of the passer-by could glimpse a detail of a building, but which become high opaque screens and refuse to allow architecture any dialog with the public space. There are also inter-war plasterworks that are a pleasure to look at, but which become inconvenient for their owners, as they require money, time and care to maintain, and are therefore left to fall down to give reason to replace them with cheaper and quicker to execute, but also more transient, materials. These are all unfair losses for the city, as they cannot be justified according to architectural rules - all the more so since, for most of them, there are professionals who have given their consent. In today's Bucharest, every real estate advertisement for the sale of an old house brings a heavy heart and puts a question mark over its future. Similarly, every building site panel set on the boundary of a property attracts you instinctively, and the first information you look for in a hurry is: the designed height, the architect and the investor, often in that order; then you check the contractor and afterwards you can predict whether there are the premises for a won site for the city or not. And then you wait, but without the guarantee of confirmation. Bucharest is under the sign of unpredictability.

This frustration is nothing new for our profession and the aforementioned thoughts are recurrent in the conscience of architects working in Bucharest for several decades now. The *Association for the Protection and Documentation of Monuments and Heritage in Romania* (pro.do.mo), through *Platform for Bucharest*, has signaled the vulnerable situation of heritage since the first decade of the 2000s.<sup>6</sup> The alarming radiography is still relevant today. „Disaster foretold”, „fragile defenses”, „monuments abandoned, ignored, assaulted”, „disappearance”, „speculation beats the law” or „conflicts of interest” are phrases that are still applicable today to Bucharest's heritage, but also to the city in its integrity. In a broader reading key, the local branch of the Order of Architects, through *The Bucharest Report* project, has been periodically signaling the city's state of health since 2018.<sup>7</sup> The issues are diverse and carefully structured, going beyond heritage. They include statistics, open questions, point out problems, but also successes and examples of good practice, point to public policies that have been successful in other cultural-geographical areas or propose solutions. The activity of the *National Heritage Institute*, the *Pro Patrimonio Foundation* and the *Heritage Working Group* of the Order of Architects, through concrete actions and projects, contributes to the transformation of attention to heritage into a healthy routine and seeks a permanent connection to the European context.

<sup>6</sup> <https://propatrimonio.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Raport-Patrimoniul-Bucuresti-2013.pdf>; accessed on 16.09.2024

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.oar-bucuresti.ro/documente/rb/>; accessed on 16.09.2024

# Beta Awards

A number of associations, foundations and non-governmental organizations are periodically adding to this long, slow, always detoured but *continuous* road of making the most of the built heritage and bringing people closer to their city through various cultural activities. Small architectural offices are beginning to devote time and energy to research projects, often on a voluntary basis, which take an integrated approach to the rehabilitation of the built heritage or the enhancement of the built environment, stimulating community interest and involvement in the process. Civic initiative groups (some stimulated by the architects themselves) are patiently building an extensive and resilient network that, through small daily actions, resist the degradation of community space.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of the projects that architects consider professional successes and that they choose, with the support of their beneficiaries, to exhibit publicly at architecture biennales, the situation seems encouraging. A simple reading of the number of projects that have participated in the National Biennale of Architecture in the last six editions<sup>9</sup> shows the interest of owners of existing buildings to work with a professional in order to achieve the best result under the given conditions. Also, the increasing number of interventions in and for public spaces proves that society wants a higher quality of life in urban spaces and that the connection between inhabitants and their city is stronger.

	2012	2014	2016	2018	2021	2023
the architecture of cultural heritage	18/ *4	14/ *3	20/ *8	16/ *7	32/ *7	21 / *3
restoration						30 / *3
the architecture of public space	9/ *2	12/ *4	18/ *5	17/ *6	11/ *1	42 / *9

*total number of projects participating in the competition section/ \* of which, realized in Bucharest*

Therefore, instruments exist and projects are being developed. However, the gap between the proactive attitude of a small group of interested people and the crushing effects of societal disinterest and the passing of time is wide. How can this gap be narrowed? The first responsibility in this respect lies with the architect, that is the one who is educated, and therefore has the highest level of training to understand the city and work with it, for its inhabitants. It is also the architect who has the clearest mental picture of the urban situation. The second responsibility, however, lies with society, which must support him, give him space to work and collaborate with him. Together they must realize that the city is *a team project* for the common good. Moreover, architecture is not a sum of exceptions, nor an addition of outstanding examples, and the city is not a system of artifacts, but a complex fabric and a continuous process of transformation. On the one hand, it

<sup>8</sup> <https://bucuresticivic.ro/>; accessed on 16.09.2024

<sup>9</sup> The 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2023 editions were checked. Two categories of projects were taken into account: (1) the sections that include interventions on the existing built stock in the urban environment; (2) the section of projects for public spaces and urban planning. It is encouraging that in the 2023 edition, the organizers have differentiated between restoration projects and projects that intervene freely on existing buildings, proposing two separate categories. Another notable development is that a separate competition section dedicated to interventions in the countryside has been introduced from 2018. The 2018 edition has 23 projects, 9 of which work on existing buildings; in 2021 there are 28, 13 of which on existing buildings; in 2023 there are 11, 5 of which on existing buildings.

demands the willingness of the architect to relate to what the place already has available; on the other hand, it demands the attention and moderation of its users.

The city cannot look after itself. Moreover, the urban engine has always been economic first and only then cultural. How can society understand that the welfare of the city depends on its attention? How can we (re?)learn to love *our* city? Why is it that in other cultural-geographical areas of Europe, common spaces and built heritage are the most valuable cultural asset and are protected?

Violette Rey, a specialist in the history of Central and Eastern Europe, places Romania in a wider area, defined by what she conceptualizes as „l’entre-deux géographique.” This is a particular cultural-geographical configuration, characterized by: „diversity/difference, fragmentation, oscillation, impermanence, tensions and lack of centrality.”<sup>10</sup> The location in an area with constantly changing political influences throughout history and radical events, results in „a looping memoir experience”, „lack of accumulation time” and recurring settling into an eternal beginning. You get the feeling that you are always starting from the beginning, without adding to the coherence of the whole. Seen from angle A, this seems to be an attribute of the place, historically consolidated; a constraint that relentlessly defines it. From angle B, however, it can also be seen as a given fact, that can be worked on and thus has its own potential for transformation: we can learn to consciously accumulate value.

## There it begins

We need the patience to move from a sense of perpetual beginning to a balance of center; the routine to move beyond perpetual ground zero; the constancy in the act of caring for the place. We can learn to love *our* city in baby steps. Perhaps Bucharest’s chance also lies in small, *carefully* made gestures on what it already has. The text is a plea for the modesty of seemingly unnoticeable gestures, but which heal the built environment and structure the world through this *layer of care*. It seeks to point to a simple and seemingly banal truth as a possible working tool. Whether this care takes the form of *regular maintenance* of what the city holds valuable or a creative act of *appropriate intervention*, it does the city good. „Architecture starts when you carefully put two bricks together. There it begins,” Mies tells us, and in so doing he indirectly refers to the *moderation* that emerges from Vitruvius’ text, closing the circle on a two millennia-old lesson that is still as valuable as ever. Unnoticeable architectures enrich the city.

<sup>10</sup> V. Rey. Concepts flous pour réalités ambiguës, comment lire la balkanisation avec «l’entre-deux». in *Anatoli. De l’Adriatique à la Caspienne. Territoires, Politique, Sociétés. 4/ 2013. Géopolitique des civilisations. Huntington, 20 ans après.* (CNRS éditions, 2013), p.96