

On Difficulties in Writing the History of Romanian Architecture

Ana Maria Zahariade

"All [of these countries] seem to be governed by the same principle of the *identity crisis*, of the conflictive absorption of contradictory cultural waves, of a provincial model, low-keyed, but haunted by failure and lack of perspective. All seem to struggle between the majoritarian indifference and the elite's schizophrenia, all seem to have something in common, but none of them knows the others, as if they were under a common curse: resonating with distant and disdainful centres instead of relating to ignored brothers."

Sorin Alexandrescu, "Identitate în ruptură"¹

I am not the only one to be convinced that there is, in the CEE region, a transnational dimension still hidden and insufficiently explored, a dimension substantiating in a particular way what we generally and restrictively call "national" architectural developments. In many respects and in parallel moments, countries in Central and Eastern Europe had comparable evolutions "at the crossroad of cultures"; they behaved in accordance with a similar ethos, analogous influences and common constraints. They are still in this position, lamenting separately their "provincialism". In these circumstances, I do believe that only in a comparative context can the historian bring to the fore the specific meanings and do justice to the negotiation between the local and the transnational, which could stimulate a more accurate and richer questioning of the countries' respective architectural developments.

With this in mind, I decided to skim through the Romanian "histories of architecture", offering some snapshots meant to call into question our historiographical tradition, its manner of relating to the past and the present, and the way we could geometrise and problematise meaningfully our modern development. The last twelve years witnessed a growing interest of a new generation of researchers in the history of modern architecture, materialised in a meaningful number of remarkable studies, published volumes or doctoral theses. They encompass a number of original approaches, and a significant amount of novel material and information whose importance trespasses the arbitrariness of the political frontiers. Please consider this paper as an invitation to the much-needed "comparative context," the lack of which we felt painfully in our research. That is why I am here, trying to break the frustrating isolation that has been a dimension of our historiographical tradition.

Isolation as historiographical tradition

The systematic recording of the architectural past is a recent discipline in Romania; it was born in the first half of the 20th century, fostered by the ethos of the eruptive modernisation of the late 1800s. The whole process was administrated by a particular ideology, in which a strong "idea of modernisation" was meant to bridge the gap between the new national entity and Europe; it was pragmatically, but also imaginarily, oriented towards a future symbolised by Western civilisation, and, consequently, it rejected anything that might have

evoked the Ottoman past. When this sort of "European awareness" collided with the deeply rooted order of the Byzantine, Orthodox and medieval traditions, it provoked an anxious frame of mind, a specific state of modernity, that would underlie the Romanian modern culture as a basic (and contradictory) dimension.

Consequently, the historians who set the bases of the discipline (Nicolae Ghica-Budești, Gheorghe Balș, Griogore Ionescu²) conveyed inherently in their narratives the particularities, inconsistencies and fluctuations of this substratum, such as: (1) a keen, even compulsive, search for national identity (which is problematic to assess in the context of three historically separated provinces³); (2) a timorous acceptance of idealised Western models (that Sorin Alexandrescu put daringly in terms of *hierarchy of power* historically settled⁴); (3) a paradoxical "rejection-adherence" binomial, concerning both circumferent cultural transfers and Western influences (following the dynamics of the modern identity construction and of the reference points it used).

With such dilemmatic premises (difficult to resolve), and busy with the recording of the architectural heritage (a ground-breaking endeavour seen as a "patriotic duty" in itself), the architectural historiography of the first generation remained basically self-centred, but in an ambiguous way: its self-centrism was adulterous, discriminatory and idiosyncratic. Here are some indications:

(1) The Herderian idea that drove the national discourse was contradicted by the very aim of "becoming European" (to be read "West European"), by the eagerness to assimilate the Western models as signs of modernisation, and in historiography, by the attempt to insert the old architectural tradition into the Western stylistic patterns.

(2) In order to apply a proper geometry to a heritage that did not fit the Western patterns of architectural evolution, authors like Gr. Ionescu (whose 1982 edition is still the most complete history of architecture in Romania) tried to find its evolutionary key and its roots in the "national" vernacular tradition. We are in full ambiguity: the "national roots" were mainly looked for only in the *Old Kingdom* (Moldavia and Wallachia). Transylvanian architecture was not present at all in his 1937 history, in spite of the national identity of *Greater Romania* that was at stake; it appeared for the first time in 1959, in a history of feudal art⁵.

(3) The neighbouring cultural areas were generally neglected, while an idealised (at least at the beginning) Western Europe remained “the” term of reference. However, its status was also unstable: this “European awareness” varied following various ideological shifts.

In any case, Romanian historiographical interest in the neighbouring cultural areas was largely absent: some of them were rejected as contaminated with the Ottoman past (the Balkans); others were viewed with indifference (part of *Mitteleuropa*); others were feared (the Soviet Union). The only well-known exception to the rule was the historian Gheorghe Balș, the first and only author to have placed Romanian architecture in the context of its nearby influences⁶. His contextual approach has been resumed quite recently as a research method (Gh. & Victor Sebestyen, *Arhitectura Renașterii în Transilvania*, Bucharest, Ed. Academiei RSR, 1963, 251p.), and especially since 1989. The recent examples are generally “micro-histories”; still they are meaningful (Brătuleanu, Anca, *Portraits of Romanian Princes in Foreign Collections*, Bucharest, ICR, 2010, 80p.).

As a general rule, the isolationist drive, the “autochthonist” state of mind, remained a persistent dimension of Romanian historiography, furthered by the various politically triggered *nationalisms*, recurrently resurfacing until today and biasing historical interpretations⁷. Neither the adherence to modernism, which was almost concomitant throughout the whole region, nor the existence of the CIAM East sections induced historians to look attentively over the frontiers. Furthermore, Romania’s entrance into the USSR orbit together with seven other CEE countries⁸ should have favoured a cross-border dialogue. Paradoxically, it deepened the self-centrism. In my opinion, these are matters to be substantiated through future studies in order to penetrate their inner reasons and their “chemistry”; obviously, these are topics to be investigated cooperatively.

The stylistic approach

This introverted approach encountered a specific problem that drove the architectural historiography towards a descriptive narrative, called on to solve or to avoid (according to the author) what I termed the “stylistic predicament”. It is an avatar of the aforementioned “project of modernisation” and of the massive architectural acculturation it triggered. Almost concomitant imports of Renaissance, post-Renaissance, Enlightenment and 19th

century architectural models and forms were eagerly and unselectively imitated and amalgamated with juvenile, frivolous freedom, in the absence of the classical tradition’s rigors; their synthesis in certain particular (if not original) approaches occurred later. This resulted in a puzzling formal syncretism (especially in the Old Kingdom, again), denying any accepted chronological or stylistic geometry. Historians’ attempts to place this syncretism in Western patterns of artistic evolution were pitiful failures⁹. One consequence of this hardly solvable misfit was an overrated attention to architectural forms and to stylistic and aesthetic matters; eventually it favoured a prevalent descriptive approach.

On the other hand, the stylistic imports were conjoined with the loss of their original meanings; they acquired new, ideologically convenient significations through less-than-innocent negotiations between the local and the “faraway trans-national” – a bargaining process from which the neighbouring countries were absent. This semantic game has remained a constant feature of Romanian modern development, since, with different nuances and orientations, it continued under Communism and still prevails today. Yet architectural history did not notice it, and this indifference (or misunderstanding) was transmitted to the histories of the next generation. The construction of specific meanings was approached only after 1989, marking a turning point in our historiography. Hand in hand with the increasing volume of novel information recently uncovered, numbers of studies and publications have tried to interrogate and to characterise the “atypical” by spotlighting the connotations architectural development acquired in the local context (political, ideological, social and cultural), thus overstepping the inherited interpretative limits. *Centenar Horia Creangă 1892-1992*, (Nicolae Lascu, AM. Zahariade, Anca Bocăneț, Bucharest, Simetria, 1992, 219 p.), *Marcel Janco Centennial 1895-1995* (collective volume, Bucharest, Simetria, 1992, 148 p.), *Le style national roumain. Construire une Nation à travers l’Architecture 1881-1945*, (Carmen Popescu, Presses Universitaires de Rennes & Simetria, 2004, 370p.), *The space of Romanian modernity* (Carmen Popescu, Fundatia Arhitect Design, 2011, 183p.); *Art Deco or well-tempered modernism* (Mihaela Criticos, Simetria, 2011), Horia Moldovan, *Architecture in Wallachia, 1831-1866. Johann Schlatter’s activity* (UAUIM doctoral thesis, 2008) are only some examples (mentioned in chronological order).

Theoretical weakness

According to Sorin Alexandrescu, theoretical elaboration seems to be negligible or condemned to banality in the “peripheral cultures”, despite having always played a decisive role in the culture of “the centre”¹⁰. I cannot really recognise the full worth of this idea for the other CEE countries, as I have found original discursive approaches (an interesting matter to be studied comparatively), but this appreciation is certainly pertinent to the Romanian case, and constitutes a problematic feature of our historiographical tradition; it is a matter of theoretical fragility.

Most of our architectural historians were architects (with a few exceptions, they still are); some of them were even successful practitioners. Or, in the 19th century, when the modern architect (as he was born in the Renaissance) entered Romanian society replacing the traditional “master mason”, he generally came from Paris – frequently as DPLG (“diplômé par le gouvernement”). He was indebted to the theoretical background of the Ecole des Beaux Arts eclecticism, which has never pretended to have settled on a generalising theory. On the contrary, this background fostered a certain formal relativism and permissiveness, which was all the more effective in Romania due to the absence of a classical tradition. In the new national School of Architecture, theory was taught by translating or directly reading Gaudet, as the intellectual society was largely francophone. Even if one can say that this relativism catalysed to exuberance the formal syncretism and local creative freedom, it certainly did not stimulate theoretical reflection. A more or less “original” theory – the first form of an articulated local deliberation – emerged a little later, in connection with the search for a “national architecture”. Though the discourse took rather essayistic forms, it grew as a vivid ideological debate (“national” vs. “imported”), and was sharpened between the two World Wars when it was confronted with the Modern Movement’s ideas and forms, which were seen as a new stylistic import. Thus, the ideological core of the deliberation remained confined almost exclusively within the limits of the architectural aesthetics. Generally, forms/styles were supposed to play a crucial, innovative role; endowed with all worthy meanings, they obnubilated other dimensions of the modern architectural ethos. Even the most intellectual and original group, centred around the *Simetria* magazine¹¹, proffered no substantial exception.

Meanwhile, born in close proximity to the policies of modernisation, the urban thinking firmly matured under the pressure of city development, evolving from its earlier form of urban regulations to remarkably articulated theoretical and historical writings. In fact, here we can find a critical modern theory, where the local development was analysed and appreciated in a larger European context.¹² This helpful guideline for the interpretation of our modern architectural advances did not contaminate the architectural historiography, which was concerned with objects and their aesthetics¹³.

The recuperation of the urban theory and of the city is another recent historiographical endeavour, which has been given a remarkable start: Lascu, Nicolae, *Urban Regulations and development, Bucharest 1831-1952* (UAUIM doctoral thesis, 1997) and *Bucharest boulevards till the 1st WW*, Bucharest, Simetria 2012; Popescu, Toader, *The Romanian railway project. Spatial and cultural faces of modernity within the planning and functioning of the railway system. 1842 – 1916* (UAUIM doctoral thesis, 2012); Sebestyen, Monica *The Public Monument and The Public Space. Bucharest 1831-1948* (UAUIM doctoral thesis, 2012).

Pre-war urban thinking gradually surrendered under Communist pressure, as did architectural theory (which was weaker, and thus easier to defeat). With rare and enciphered exceptions, we can hardly speak about theory during that period, and even less of criticism. Thus, theory failed to confer a reflective, critical dimension to the historical discourse, while its unilateral inclination towards aesthetics justified the descriptive approaches and the concentration on the surface of forms.

Communist biases: the history of modern architecture

Up to the 2nd WW, the main historiographical concern was the recording and the interpretation of the disturbing variety within the ancient architectural heritage; the 19th century was too close and all Western stylistic imports were endowed with a modernising dimension. These semantic transfers made more problematic the interpretation of what exactly “modern architecture” was in Romania and when it started. In a way, the dilemma was partially simplified after WWI, once modernism entered the architectural scene; the new formal import was seen as a Western “foreign body” in stylistic (and ideological) conflict with the national style, even if the genuineness of the latter was equally disputable. Yet, this did not simplify the problem of the 19th century, which could explain why Gr. Ionescu ended his 1937 history with the 18th century¹⁴; certainly the time was too short, also. Modern architecture had to wait until after the 2nd WW, when the history of architecture

was resumed in a new context – that proved to be less favourable to its development.

The history of modern architecture started in 1965 with Gr. Ionescu’s second history¹⁵, and added its own problematic issues, against the background of new ideological constraints. Though claiming *internationalism*, the new regime paradoxically enhanced the historiographical self-centrism, as I already mentioned. At the same time, this new instance of modernisation, which bore the standard of a resentful “new”, forced the separation of the Communist architectural development from its pre-war precedents; no continuity was allowed. History was thus split into two distinct narratives, each condemned to its own isolation.

The first, the 19th century and the interwar period, became, to say the least, a highly unfashionable topic. Modernist development and its relation to the “bourgeois” avant-garde were especially unwelcome. Gr. Ionescu, as he was a remarkable modernist architect, daringly introduced it in his second history in 1965; yet, from the same personal perspective, he missed the meanings of the 19th century. He resumed the topic in 1982, in his third edition¹⁶, and followed it by a review of the communist developments, in which he avoided soberly any evaluation in ideological terms. Published a year earlier, Gh. Curinschi-Vorona’s history¹⁷ is an example of a purely Stalinist approach to the same period, using the Stalinist rhetoric.

After 1989, the interwar modernism resurfaced vigorously; highly overrated, it underwent a transfiguration, up to considering it *unique* in the CEE context. A simple visit to the neighbouring countries would have re-settled the balance. Though a number of new volumes (starting with the aforementioned catalogues of the two centennial exhibitions *Horia Creangă*, 1992, and *Marcel Janco*, 1996, and continuing with Machedon, Luminita, Scoffham, Ernie, *Romanian modernism*, 1999, MIT Press, and Popescu, Carmen, 2011 op.cit.), exhibitions, and international colloquia tried to establish a more objective viewpoint, the necessary comparative perspective is still waiting to be studied.

The second period, that of the Communist development – decently glorified by Gr. Ionescu, who introduced it in his 1982 final history, and encomiastically recorded by Curinschi-Vorona in the same year – was not only shunned after 1989, but also blamed: all of Communism’s sins were indiscriminately wrapped around the architecture of that period, thus distorting its perception, as well as attracting its unselective destruction.

The first historical approaches to this recent but quantitatively dominant heritage focused passionately on the exoticism of the *House of the People* or

on the dictator's psychological abyss; they were followed by more objective readings in light of the universal dimensions of totalitarianism (Ioan, Augustin, *Modern Architecture and the Totalitarian Project. The Romanian case*, Bucharest, ICR, 2009, 198 p.).

Without denying the validity of this interpretation, but rather by nuancing and enriching the understanding of local architectural development during Communism, serious archival explorations have, in recent years, surpassed this approach. Today, the number of such inquiries is growing. The history of architecture under Communism has turned out to be extremely provocative, yet it is interspersed with new difficulties: from biased and unreliable records to questions on how to write the history of an epoch which is ideologically suspect to such an extent.

Communist biases: intimacy with the political ideology

In 1968, Manfredo Tafuri wrote that the architectural historian has to be "part and parcel of the profession of political theorist"¹⁸. I did not understand how true this dictum is until I started my own research. In a context where the whole system of architecture was ideologically administrated and controlled, and where theory was replaced by political dogma, we have to ask how it was possible to have built an architecture presenting similarities with the development in the "free world". Such an interrogation requires the historian to take the measure of the amoebic and unstable space of professional freedom that infiltrated the framework of political constraints; eventually it is about a particular form of complicity between the profession and the establishment, or about a sort of subversion, hard to decipher and to geometrize. It seems impossible to establish a meaningful chronology of the period in any other way than by gauging the depths of this entangled and dramatic relationship, its dynamics and its specific outcomes. In my opinion, this is a key issue in geometrizing the history of that period (Zahariade, Ana Maria, *Architecture in the Communist Project. Romania 1944-1989*, Bucharest, Simetria, 2010, 144 p.). To this end, several remarkable doctoral theses have succeeded in bringing to the fore decisive political and architectural documents, most of them seen for the first time; they have thus cast new light on the specific background of this problematic development: Tulbure, Irina, *Architecture and Urbanism in Romania between 1944 -1960: Constraint and experiment* (2011, UAUIM); Miruna Stroe, *Miruna, Housing between Design and Political Decision. Romania 1954-1966* (2012, UAUIM); Irina Băncescu, Irina, *Waterfront Problematic Issues. Aspects of the Evolution of the Romanian Seaside during the Communist Period* (2012, UAUIM); Răută, Alexandru,

Negotiating the Civic Center. Architects and Politicians in 20th Century Romania (2012, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven); Simiraș, Mihnea *Recovering neighborhood in the districts of collective dwellings in Bucharest. Human activities, social relationships and space* (2012, UAUIM)¹⁹.

In this manner, what was a descriptive discourse has become a reflective narrative – a political history of architecture. It is still an incomplete mosaic of insights, waiting to be completed; it is waiting to be understood in a larger context as well.

How much richer would the interpretation of this new material be in the comparative context I mentioned at the beginning! Again reading Sorin Alexandrescu, the discourse can no longer be only about several "provincial" architectural cultures; it should be about a shared "culture of margins", about a cultural construction different from the cultural construction "in the centre"²⁰. It must be about a more encompassing interpretative perspective, which trespasses the narrowness of the national borders.

As I am still under the charm of the recent AzW Congress and the exhibition on *Soviet modernism*²¹, both of which have shown how many unexpected directions can be explored in a comparative context, my point is that our architectural history is still problematic because its issues are insufficiently problematised comparatively and transnationally. Since to a certain extent CEE countries share a common background and past, networking and starting common projects becomes essential for surpassing our ignorance of each other, for developing a critical apparatus, for gauging our distinctiveness, and for writing our architectural histories.

Do we ask the right questions? I shiver when I recall George Santayana's frequently quoted words: *Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it*²².

¹ Published in *Secolul XX* magazine, nr. 10-12, 1999 – 2000, București

² Nicolae Ghica-Budești, *Evoluția arhitecturii în Muntenia și Oltenia*, I-IV, „Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice” (BCMI), 1927, 1930, 1932, 1936; Gheorghe Balș: 1922, (with N. Iorga), 1925, 1928, see details infra; Grigore Ionescu, *Istoria arhitecturii Românești din cele mai vechi timpuri până la 1900*, 1937.

³ Present Romania is the result of two political unifications: the 1859 union of Moldavia and Wallachia that created the so called Old Kingdom (United Principalities, from 1859 to 1881, and the Kingdom of Romania, after 1881), and the 1918 union with Transylvania, Bessarabia and Bukovina (the so called Greater Romania).

⁴ Alexandrescu, Sorin, *Identitate în ruptură, Mentalități românești postbelice*, București, Ed. Univers, 2000, 320 p.

⁵ Virgil Vătășianu, *Istoria artei feudale în Țările Române*, I, București, Ed. Academiei, 1959, 1020 p. Before 1959, only some minor Transylvanian authors had written, starting with the beginning of the 20th century, on the wooden churches that were considered Romanian-Orthodox architectural works.

⁶ Gheorghe Balș: *Histoire de l'art Roumain ancien (XIV-XIX)*, Paris, E de Brocard, 1922 (with N. Iorga); *Bisericile lui Ștefan cel Mare*, with a summary in French, in BCMI, XVIII, 1925, fasc. 43-46, 331 p. și 1926, 330 p.; *Bisericile și mănăstirile moldovenești din veacul al XVI-lea*, with a summary in French, București, 1928, 397 p., 425 il. (in BCMI, XXI, 1928, fasc. 55 – 58). For details see Brătuleanu, Anca, *Quelques notes sur la modernité de la recherche architecturale de George Balș*, in *Series Byzantina X*, Warsaw, Neriton, under printing (by courtesy of the author). To some extent, Gr. Ionescu also understood these limits in his later works, which is noticeable in the title of his main opus: from *History of Romanian architecture*, in 1937 and 1967, to *History of architecture on the Romanian territory*, in 1982.

⁷ Constantin Joja, *Actualitatea tradiției arhitecturale Românești*, București, Ed Tehnică, 1984, or Silvia Păun's post 1989 chimeric writings are such examples.

⁸ The number of 7 satellite countries takes into account the political geography of the time.

⁹ O. Tafuri, *Istoria artelor*, Iași, s.n., 1922, (vol I-II) 419+592p., where the author summons all his science to make the architectural evolution in Wallachia and Moldavia fit the Western stylistic epochs.

¹⁰ Sorin Alexandrescu, op.cit.

¹¹ The *Simetria-Caiete de arta și critică* magazine, founded and directed by G.M. Cantacuzino, published between 1939-1946 (with the collaboration of O. Doicescu, Matila Ghyka, Tudor Vianu, P.E. Miculescu, Marica Cotescu, Haralamb Georgescu)

¹² Cincinat Sfințescu (1887-1955), *Urbanistica generală: evoluția, igiena, economia și circulația, estetica, legislația*, Bucovina”, I.E. Toroutiu, 1933, 803 p.

¹³ Maybe, this aspect is to be linked in future studies with the professional education of the authors, since both the urban theorist Cincinat Sfințescu and the architectural historian Gh. Bals were educated as engineers in Charlottenburg and Zurich.

¹⁴ Ionescu, Grigore, *Istoria arhitecturii Românești din cele mai vechi timpuri până la 1900*, 1934-1937, Cartea Românească, 498 p.

¹⁵ Ionescu, Grigore: *Istoria arhitecturii în România*, 2nd volume: *De la sfârșitul veacului al XVI-lea până la începutul celui de al cincilea deceniu al veacului al XX-lea*, București, Ed. Academiei RPR, 1965, 543 p. (the 1st volume was published in 1962)

¹⁶ Ionescu, Grigore, 1982, *Arhitectura pe teritoriul Romaniei de-a lungul veacurilor*, București, Academiei RSR, 1982, 712 p.

¹⁷ Curinschi-Vorova, Gheorghe, *Istoria arhitecturii în România*, București, Ed. Tehnică, 1981, 390 p.

¹⁸ Tafuri, Manfredo, *Teorie e storia dell'architettura*, Bari, Laterza, 1968

¹⁹ All these doctoral theses have English abstracts. They can be consulted in the UAUIM Library and in the „Carol I” Central University Library of București (B.C.U.).

²⁰ Alexandrescu, Sorin, op.cit.

²¹ 19th Vienna Architecture Congress, 24-25.11.2012, *Soviet Modernism. 1955-1991. Unknown Stories*, Az W

²² George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 1st volume: *Reason in Common Sense* (1905-06), Dover Publications, Inc., 1980, [eBook #15000] Release Date: February 14, 2005; Available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15000/15000-h/15000-h.htm>; Accessed 14 January 2013.