FILLING THE VOID, THE ROLE OF THE GARAGE IN THE POST-COMMUNIST URBAN SPACE

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.23740/TID220184>

ABSTRACT

How does a void manifest itself in the urban space? The economic and demographic crisis, triggered by the end of the communist regime, has generated processes of contraction in all those realities marked by a massive industrialization, following which they have rapidly widened their borders, thus leaving interstitial and widespread voids in the urban fabric. But the end of the regime has also left an ideological vacuum. The imposed idea of the public good was followed by that of private property, incentivized by an excessively liberalized housing market. The collective image of the urban space has therefore been replaced by its individual perception: the new hierarchies and identities firstly created in the individuals' minds have been then materialized and overlapped in the physical space, generating chaotic and not very permeable spaces, where an excessive spirit of appropriation seems to be evident. The garages are a clear example of this. Walking through the big blocks housing units that characterize the outskirts of the Romanian cities, it is not difficult to grasp their presence. Despite their formal simplicity, these particular structures (whose spatial and normative definition is not always very clear) reveal themselves as real extensions of the domestic environment excessively limited in its interior spaces. Therefore, they are an immediate response to a basic need, finding in the in-between spaces, the ideal place to manifest themselves: somehow, they are hybrid forms to re-imagine, even if individually, the collective urban space. Starting from the results of personal and multidisciplinary experiences in the contexts of the cities of Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest, this paper aims to highlight possible approaches to intervene in such contexts, suggesting ways for the mediated and collective appropriation of the urban space.

Keywords: everyday life, participatory actions, Communist legacy, culture of ownership, appropriation of public space, DIY (do it yourself) urbanism

Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating (Cage, 1961, p. 3)

INTRODUCTION

Already a key element in the music compositions of the Futuristic movement, the noise has acquired a new dimension with Cage: the one of uncertainty. In this way, then, the external environment becomes a means by which to compose. In *4'33"*, *tacet* (1952), Cage will break the limits between sounds and noises, between music and what is generally considered extramusical (Belgiojoso, 2009/2014, p. 26).

Except for its title and subtitle – *for any instrument or combination of instruments* – which only provide some general information (such as the time), the music piece *4'33"* does not contain

any predetermined sound information. The absence of what our ears have been used to expect (the playing of a music piece) and the perception of the silence itself, generated by this waiting, bring out all those sounds that were not written on the pentagram. These will appear as accidental noises in the environment and we will suddenly, find ourselves experimenting with the effects of an atypical composition, of which we ourselves are the performers. A lack of something that we acknowledge as familiar has in this way highlighted accidental elements, normally silent to a distracted audience, simply because of their irrelevance; but these elements compose the real sound environment.

Cage opens the music to the surrounding world, not to imitate a sound situation, but to allow us to listen to a series of non-pre-established relationships between the elements (Belgiojoso, 2009/2014, p. 27).

Although noise and silence are elements apparently unrelated to the architectural discipline – as practice beyond the formal exercise – by transcending their potential capacity of social inclusion and exclusion, have taught me new ways of listening and of observing without prejudice. As noise can be understood as depending on our ability (and openness) to listening, and silence can raise awareness of the sound context of a place, also architectural concepts like *void* and *mass* can similarly affect our way of observing the city and its spaces depending on how we choose to interpret them.

What is a void then and when are we able to recognize it? How does it manifest itself: as a perceptible and physical phenomenon or as a conceptual one? Is it a lack or a possibility?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

These issues arose as intuition in Cluj, in 2012, by participating at the *IP DEMOCHANGE CITIES, Demographic Change and European Cities*, international workshop. At that time, I knew very little about a country whose recent history shared the same political and ideological turbulences that had marked the lives and the urban spaces of an entire “block” of nations. The workshop (which, in 2012, was at its third edition) continued its investigation into the issues related to those great demographic changes that had affected several European cities since the beginning of the new millennium. By focusing on the sizeable migratory flows that have affected the city of Cluj since the end of the Communist regime in 1989, the laboratory experience would have analysed the causes and the effects that those had on the social context and on the urban space, and also tried to understand phenomena like the *shrinking* of the city and the *sprawl* of its suburb.

During the two weeks of the workshop, my working group and I have focused our attention on Mănăştur area, probably one of the most representative neighbourhoods when it comes to the impact that the regime had on the development of entire cities. The critical issues, as the peculiarities spotted everywhere around this massive urban cluster, highlighted different individuals’ perceptions of a common lived place. Then, in such context, any attempt to approach a design process by using only the tools of the consolidated architectural and urban practice would have been ineffective. In this sense, one of the most interesting aspects of the workshop was the multidisciplinary approach which characterized it. Architecture, Urban Planning, and Sociology students have tried to draw up a design hypothesis about the city and its spaces, starting with a deep understanding of its social fabric. From the analysis of the urban space, and the understanding of its elements, which played a fundamental role in the definition of public and private, we tried then to develop a catalogue of possible actions which included multiple and different actors’ involvement.

Once back home (i.e. in Italy), I began to deepen my understanding of all those aspects that could be perceived by observing the urban context, but could hardly be described with just a photograph. These were phenomena which, despite having profoundly marked collective history, still remained hidden in the daily context. Intangible symbols of imaginative force, like a silent dash between the words Cluj and Napoca.

Among the various analysed elements, what caught my attention was surely the garage. Although apparently being just simple boxes, these structures, due to their serial and disorganized repetition, drew an informal landscape that hardly could have come from a city planner's pen. But if on the one hand, these particular urban elements suggested the existence of a "shared will", on the other hand, they were one of the most evident degrading factors of urban space. As designers, how should we act in such contexts? How can we change our approach within the everyday urban space and becoming, at the same time, careful observers and "contrast mediators", enablers between the ones who suffer the limits of their space and those who are already able to re-imagine their own space?

My research then continued by seeking a way to intervene within what I felt as a growing gap between the daily experienced context and an architectural practice, seemingly more interested in modelling its void superficially, rather than in undertaking its conversion into a full identity. To the issues faced during my studies, such as the individuals' observed lack of involvement in the care of spaces outside of their own interest, I proposed then concrete ways to act: "gestures" with which to activate an involvement in the lived context. In this sense, the realization of an installation for an international "design & build" event in Bucharest, in 2016, was an opportunity to test some of the ideas developed during my Master's thesis work¹ and, at the same time, a chance to get my hands dirty.

This paper aims to stimulate the perception of the everyday, by telling how I lost myself while exploring an unfamiliar context, in which, what at first was perceived as background noise, turned out to be deafening. I will not provide "real" answers to the aforementioned questions but, rather, I will try to lead the reader to understand the importance of starting questioning ourselves about these issues when aiming to understand an unfamiliar context, its social and spatial identity.

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

At this point, I think it is useful to mention at least both the methodological approach that we followed in Cluj-Napoca in 2012, as well as the theoretical research path that I followed, once I was back home, which became the base for the project carried out in Bucharest, in 2016.

In 2012, the lack of a deep knowledge of the context, of its historical and cultural heritage, as well as of its physical and urban dimension, together with the limited time available, demanded to find ways to collect as much data as possible, in order to define quickly, those that would have been the main issues of our investigations and on which, then, we would have developed our ideas. In this sense, the different fields of study of each of the team members, accelerated this research process. So, the architectural and urban-planning methods, such as the direct observation or the cataloguing of spaces and its elements, met with those of sociological nature.

¹ To have a look to the data collected during my Master's thesis work (the photos and the interviews collected in 2012, as well as the charts presented and the projects developed), see: https://issuu.com/matteoverazzi/docs/verazzimatteo_magistrale-spazicomun

Indeed, the technical/descriptive survey practices complemented well that of the observation, understood as a social investigation practice, able to go beyond the mere “scale exercise”. Started with a strong desire to explore as many “scenarios” as possible, within the same urban context called Mănăştur, in Cluj-Napoca city, during the beginning reconnaissance phase, we conducted several interviews, through which we could confront ourselves with the locals, striving to reach that *image of the city* as proposed by Lynch (Lynch, 1964).

Figure 1: Can you draw the path you took from where you live to here? A mental map taken during an interview done in 2012

Source: Verazzi (2015, p. 151)

In a way, if on one hand, the initial exploration was a need, as probably it must have been to the *Situationists*, to get lost inside the dense topography of the analysed neighbourhood, on the other, the clear essentiality of the mental maps (Figure 1), drawn by those that participated to our “mnemonic” exercise (following the Lynch method) would have been an opportunity to grasp (quickly) the real perception of urban space directly, of those who walked in it daily. When we limited our field of action, we activated more targeted analysis strategies. Long-lasting observation sessions, of the same block (that could last for hours) allowed us to understand the real use of the public and semi-public spaces, of their elements and the way people moved within them throughout the course of a day. This was a small-scale exercise, in some ways very similar to the work that Whyte started around 1972 in New York, with *The Street Life Project*, whose aims were to find out what determined the quality of urban spaces, starting from the direct observation of human behaviour (Whyte, 1979).

But if during the observations we could rely on consolidated methodological approaches and practices, we had more difficulties to describe, in short time, that less tangible identity that characterized the city of Cluj in the Post-communist period. A key for the interpretation of the elements, such as the garages (the lack of an adequate bibliography about them, also made their

clarification more complex) was needed. In this sense, the ongoing talks with the tutors and the professors of the local *Faculty of Sociology and Social Work*, within Babeş-Bolyai University, as well as the talks with some local architects and urban planners, such as the *Planwerk* office, were decisive.

Back home, I began to develop the bibliography of my dissertation, starting from the collected data. These highlighted the peculiarities and the criticality of a fleeting reality, where the individual needs seemed to prevail over the collective one, preventing any form of shared appropriation. In short, what emerged, was an atypical *right to the city* issue, distorted if compared to that idea exposed by Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1976), in which the individuals themselves, through practices such as the illegal appropriation of the semi-public space, were excluding each other from the same urban reality. What would have been necessary then was to find out new ways to shift the locals' consciousness, not to merely occupy a common space, but as suggested by Harvey, to seek new models that will re-signify it in a collective way (Harvey, 2012).

Finally, I sought a mediation tool in art, able to activate and involve, without enforcement. Art as a means by which to intervene, suggesting a shared re-appropriation of the space. In this sense, the installation project realised in Bucharest, in 2016, was an expression of this idea. The references that led to its definition were so many that it would be extremely complex to condense them all into this paper. Suffice it that, while on one hand the radical utopias from the 1960s and 1970s, together with the philosophical thought about the city and the society developed during the same years, provided the theoretical basis, on the other hand, different public art installation works, as well as the experiments carried out by some contemporary collectives, would have suggested methods and processes through which to intervene and provided, at the same time, examples for a possible spatial definition.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cluj - Mănăştur; between identity and ethnicity

The complex and fascinating history of Cluj-Napoca, fragmented in the stories of the individuals inhabiting it, reassembles itself in those common problems which an entire country is reflected in. The end of the regime and the deindustrialization, together with the employment crisis that followed, have triggered a progressive economic and demographic crisis that boosted phenomena such as social exclusion and cleared the path for speculations of an excessively liberalized housing market, that, in short time, swallowed up the most attractive urban spaces and created new suburban neighbourhoods at the same time (Verazzi, 2017, p. 415). The perception of the lived urban space, then, has become uncertain and allowed the formation of individual hierarchies and identities based on the new concepts of property that quickly replaced what had been imposed previously.

[...] In a traditional city, there was a definite correlation between special hierarchy and social hierarchy [...] Communist architecture endeavoured to promote a change in the traditional relations between city centres and peripheries, in order to reflect the Communist doctrine. As such, different means of propaganda (books, journals, postcards, newspapers, reports) were used to present [...] the new happy life of families living in the Socialist Eden (Gordeeva et al., 2012, p. 6).

In 2012, together with a team composed of three architects/designers, one urban planner, and a sociologist, we developed a project named: *HIERARCHY AND IDENTITY in a Post-communist Mass Housing Neighbourhood in Cluj-Napoca* (Sartori et al., 2012). As aforementioned, it was an in-depth analysis of Mănăştur neighbourhood, its spaces, and urban elements. By understanding their uses and by cataloguing all those critical issues and peculiarities that we had observed, we also highlighted the main issues, among all, there was a clear difficulty of distinguishing between the public and private.

Figure 2: The urban expansion of Cluj-Napoca

Source: Vezzani (2015, pp. 46-47, based also on Cigolotti & Cimino, 2013; Pop, 2014; Stoian et al., 2013)

The physical voids, mostly interstitial and spread in the now contracted urban fabric, identified a non-permeable public space, where functions and needs, by blending up together until they overlapped, revealed a chaotic image in which, what emerged was an excessive spirit of appropriation (Verazzi, 2017, p. 415).

Information about the origin of this disorderly stratification, generated by the constant overlapping of multiple representations of the same commonplace, is given by the complex historical dynamic that those communities have shared. Indeed, if the different ethnic groups had created processes of identification projected on the territory at first (churches, squares, monuments, etc.), later on, the regime tried to cancel these differences by replacing them with its own ideological identity and thus altering the perception of the territory itself. The massive industrialization that started in the 1930s and the nationalization projects carried out subsequently through models, such as the *New Man*, and myths, such as the one of the working class, generated new needs, as the necessity of building quickly all those new oversized “dormitory districts” (Figure 2, from 1923 to 1990), where the “new citizens” would be located (i.e. between 1956 and 1977, almost 30.5% of the Romanian population moved from rural to urban areas; Cigolotti & Cimino, 2013, p. 138).

But with the collapse of the regime and its ideologies, the newfound idea of private property became the new source of identity (Figure 2, from 1990 to 2012). Indeed, the sudden absence of precise regulations, as well as the rapid ransom of the confiscated properties paved the way for a tangible manifestation of individualism. This is supported, only recently, by ideas of a search for a better quality of life away from the city, in those neighbourhoods that, in clear contrast with the big Communist housing blocks (Figure 3), are characterized by low density and high spreading (I refer to: Bună Ziua, Zorilor-South/Europa, Colonia Becaş, Colonia Sopor, Colonia Borhanci, and Colonia Făget, in Cluj-Napoca). All of this left signs not only in the physical context of the city, but also in many individuals’ consciousness.

So, as the peculiar historical heritage of the city and the “sense of ethnicity and belonging” were opposed processes of forced identity, so the long years of collectivism preceded a sudden encouragement to own private property: in this way, history has contributed to blurring the perception of urban space and its elements, making them exclusive places not only from a physical point of view or, as mentioned above, an ideological one, but also from a social one.

Is it still possible, in such a context, to talk of the common good?

Figure 3: Communist housing blocks (background) versus Post-communist (foreground) residential units in Mănăştur, view from east to west

Source: Verazzi (2015, pp. 62-63; picture taken by the author, in 2012)

Mănăştur: living issues

This question arose almost naturally as a result of the analysis done during the workshop. Built in the 1970s (over the former and homonymous demolished village) and designed to accommodate almost 110,000 “urbanized individuals” (mostly Romanian villagers), under the influence of the strong nationalization programme promoted by Ceauşescu’s government, Mănăştur (Figure 4), was an expression of the life ideals of the new Soviet reality and also a vain attempt to reduce that multi-ethnic perception that characterized the city before (see Bottoni, 2009, pp. 185-211).

Even today, the complete lack of sustainable planning (common to other similar settlements, built only on systematization plans instead of following an adequate urban plan) is evident and leaves little doubt regarding the priorities that must have been followed by the government at the time. Being a self-sufficient satellite city as planned, this huge housing complex (due to very impressive density ironically called by its own inhabitants “Satele Unite din Mănăştur” *United Villages of Mănăştur*: Bottoni, 2009, p. 207) was actually quite predictably characterized by a serious lack of services necessary for its proper functioning.

Also, the visible lack of an appropriate external thermal insulation is the clear demonstration of the past under-investments of resources by the previous communist government, and the general indifference of the successive ones.

Figure 4: Mănăştur today

Source: Verazzi (2015, pp. 58-59 based also on 2012-2015 CNES images for Google Maps, Google Inc.)

After the liberalization of the real estate market, all of these properties were sold by transferring, at the same time, their administrative responsibility, including the charges for their maintenance.

[...] the majority of public rented stock was in damaged condition when privatization started at the beginning of the 1990's. The new owners acquired their dwellings at a very low price directly from the state and most of them were able to pay off the debt quickly (otherwise high inflation would have washed it away). This was the immediate advantage of giveaway privatization, many people were practically housed free; they only had to pay their utility bills. This situation made the declining incomes more bearable and raised, at least theoretically, the possibility for renovation works (Budişteanu, 2000:6). As a consequence of privatization, the administration and servicing of flats became the responsibility of the new owners. But this is almost impossible - we would state. These blocks were not built according to this logic. Just to notice a peculiarity of Cluj/Kolozsvár. This city hosts the largest block of Eastern-Europe (it has 11 levels, 51 staircases, and 2,244 apartments). If we count with an average of three persons in a family we will state that this block has around 7,000 dwellers (The largest village in Romania has approximately the same number of people.) In the case of renovation works (after inundation, change of drain pipes, gas pipes) not less than 2,000 households (44 per staircase) should have to agree their interests. In the recent economic circumstances it is quite obvious that there would be persons and families who would not want to contribute. Of course the average size of the blocks is much lesser, but even this way in most of the cases the administration of the immovable would consider some hundreds of households [...] (Gyöngyi & Laszló, 2009, pp. 93-94).

When we immersed ourselves into its context, Mănăştur looked certainly less "isolated" than it should have been in the late of 1970s. Shopping centres, as well as the tertiary sector that had been spreading all around it – especially along the main roads – certainly contributed to reducing the perception of detachment from the city centre. But inside, the urban space was extremely disorganized and disconnected in its parts. The public space – where not absent – was incoherent and also presenting a serious lack in its hierarchies, as well as an evident lack of interest in taking care of it. Private and public seemed separated by a thin line and the spaces, mixed in uses, made it difficult to recognize what belonged to whom. Although phenomena such as the non-regulated appropriation/use of public space can be easily found in any urban reality (especially on the outskirts), it was because of their stressful repetition (together with the interviews we conducted) in the context of Mănăştur, which made us assume that a much more relevant aspect might be the possible lack of common sense, in favour of the ownership myth, where the uncertain became the excuse for individual claim.

The everyday can be defined [...] as the apparent familiarity by which the objects and the relations among which our existence moves in, its aspects even more necessary when less showy, dispense us from investigating on their genesis and understand their place within the social system, as a whole, and the critique of everyday life consists above all of the dissolution of the veil of this "familiarity". As Hegel said: "was ist bekannt ist nicht erkannt" ("the familiar is not necessarily the known").²

² Translated from its original language: Italian; from the introduction by Jedlowski to Lefebvre, 1979, p. 11.

Urban elements: the garage

But our *dérives* brought out into light more tangible signs: urban elements capable of revealing the peculiarity of a strategy that sought, in the existing space, a solution to all those critical issues, became widespread and reiterated in the whole neighbourhood (Figure 5).

High density housing blocks

Back/side roads, side/walkways and in-between urban spaces

Undefined "yards" (in-between greenery) and wide green spaces in the south (apparently not yet parcelled areas)

Garages

Figure 5: Mănăştur: urban elements

Source: Verazzi (2015, pp. 88-118)

(Based on the 2012 observations/pictures, various CAD/GIS data, the 2015 Cluj-Napoca PUG/PUZ, 2014, and 2012-2015 CNES images for Google Maps, Google Inc. and other services/apps)

The existing and tangled patchwork of roads and paths – often promiscuous in their uses – bring out (by contrast) all those areas hidden by the housing units, characterized by an indefinite spatial organization that makes them open to being modelled to individual needs. The so unfolded scenario shows an extremely chaotic reality where the collective dimension of public space appears to be distorted in favour of the private one (Figure 6).

Figure 6: The in-between urban spaces: public or private?

Source: Picture taken by the author during the 2012 observations

A clear example of this emerges directly from the green areas that outline the perimeter of the residential blocks. These can be found fenced or left open, but without a clear regulation (Figure 7); moreover, the fenced ones, even if on one side clearly define an exclusive area, on the other, they do not give any suggestion regarding their maintenance. In this sense, it was not unusual to see, inside the fenced areas, single maintained lots (sometimes even little greenhouses).

Figure 7: Green areas: public or private? Open or closed?

Source: Picture taken by the author during the 2012 observations

Figure 8: Garages in Mănăştur

Source: Verazzi (2015, p. 95; picture taken by the author in 2012)

But what in that urban cluster, has certainly drawn most of our attention, confused our perception, and made the definition of hierarchies more complicated, was certainly the garage. A recurrent image of the Soviet and post-Soviet periphery, these structures (mostly realized with simple metal frames, or using bricks/concrete structures) are not different to those we can easily spot in the suburbs of our cities, more or less concealed from prying eyes inside some private yard. However, the most interesting aspect was their massive presence inside the housing context, in which these structures were re-proposed repetitively: along a road (Figure 8), close to a green area or even in the form of disordered agglomerations among the housing units (Figure 9).

Figure 9: More garages in Mănăştur

Source: Verazzi (2015, p. 66; picture taken by the author in 2012)

I would like to stress that it was not so much their presence that impressed us during our research in 2012, but the impossibility to detect the resemblance of a real general spatial organization. Indeed, although these structures were built following obvious criteria of convenience, at the same time it was obvious that their spatial arrangement had followed different time phases (further highlighted by the clearly visible differences, as in the materials used for their construction, or unbalanced sizes, even between each other). In short, it was clear that there had been no real *top-down* planning. The garages had been inserted simply and gradually in the urban context, leaning on each other according to their owner's needs, and taking advantage of every free space available.

This special interest developed for the garage was suggested, in some way, by the actual difficulty to trace their normative dimension that, for sure, would have helped to shed light on their genesis – which remained vague and unclear – as well as on the obvious indifference with which they had been scattered in the urban space. Our investigations, which included the exploration and cataloguing of the neighbourhood spaces and elements, alternated with long observation sessions and interviews. All this allowed us to make some hypothesis about the role that these garages played in that particular context (Figure 10). The interviews showed that one of the most common and visible problems was the one of the lack of parking (particularly at night). The garages should and could have provided an answer to this problem. But unlike what is expected, many of these structures were mainly used for other purposes. One amongst them contained those belongings that could not be stored inside the under-sized housing units. Other times these structures were also used as warehouses for stores or grocery shops, or even as a place to carry out a craft. Soon, it was clear that rather than “conventional” garages, we were facing pure extensions of the private property outside the residential blocks; tangible representations of those needs that the housing policies perpetrated during the regime years had not been able to satisfy (in this sense, the recent movie *Garăžas* shows an interesting example on how an environment, by blending up with the personal space that these structures represent, can create fascinating and unexpected microcosms; see Neiburga, 2016).

Despite the fleeting nature of some of this evidence, even fabled sometimes (i.e. there was someone who could swear to have heard animal sounds coming from inside the garages in the past), if related to the historical background of the analysed context, they can highlight possible truths. During the years that followed the systematization plans, rural families who were thrown into these chaotic urban scenarios had to quickly rearrange their habits. Some (the *Hostât* and the former Mănăştur settlement are examples of this, see: Bottoni, 2009, pp. 203-207) did this, by acting directly in the confined spaces between the housing blocks and getting small allotments everywhere. Then there was also the issue of cars. If it is true that the garage was constructed to keep the owners' vehicles safe as a result of their increasing numbers, the present urban scenario of Mănăştur would have been almost free from any vehicles parked on the roadside (especially at night); which is not what is actually happening. Some might argue this is because today it is common for families to own at least two vehicles, but I wonder how those vehicles are actually parked. The minimum width of some roads together with the small size of many of these garages make any parking moves tricky.

Moreover, in 2012, the facilities dedicated to parking (e.g. multi-storey car parks, etc.) did not seem to be particularly used; here again, the reasons are many but we get a different “feeling” regarding the use of those garages. Indeed, the question of the under-sized flats remains. One or two-room apartments in which often large families have to live together; this probably was the first problem they had to deal with: entering these homes today, it is not difficult to perceive the discomfort that those families live in. In these circumstances, one can well imagine that using

these particular spaces, would have seemed at the time, the most promising option to an immediate problem. Such an effective solution was replicated (taking advantage of a moment in which the administrative control was clearly lacking) in the urbanscape in such an indiscriminate way until they have become one of the most characterizing elements of it.

Figure 10: What is the garage?

Source: Verazzi (2015, p. 251)

During our research, we asked the inhabitants, and those who had lived in those contexts during the years before the end of the regime, to provide us with some clarifications. Although we could not find a common memory regarding the time they appeared (sometimes it was before, during, or only after the Soviet and communist regimes succeeded), those who remember having owned one, remember also to have seen the garages used for different purposes. Also, although it is true that no one liked those structures, at the same time, many still recognized their social and utilitarian function.

Is there no quality in the buildings of the Communist city that may deserve to be documented or even preserved? Before destroying something, or everything, is it really not worth opening this chapter of the Communist legacy (Stoian & Calciu, 2012, p. 33).

However, as aforementioned, using the garages as storage spaces solved only a part of the problem. Indeed, the parking problem was left almost unresolved and, at present, it has clearly increased. Today, the widespread accumulation of cars, combined with the need to find a place where to park them, manifests itself with all its problems, especially in the area in front of the entrance of garages (since those are already filled with other stuff). The lack of an appropriate administrative control over the regulation of these structures, together with their general poor maintenance, have led quickly to a progressive degradation of the urbanscape, a problem that only recently seems to have been taken into consideration by the local administrations.

Anyway, what we shall see in the future will most likely be a proposal for their quick removal (Mureşan, 2018). These actions can effectively reduce the physical degradation of the public space, as in the project for the revitalization of the Canalul Morii in the Libertăţii neighbourhood in Reghin (Milăşan & Birthler, 2010), where, through a landscape-integrated project, the public space close to a residential block, mostly occupied by a dense presence of garages, was been set free through their removal, allowing the creation of new areas of relationship and opening access to a narrow water canal. However, I am not sure about their capacity to produce a real impact on the ways of perceiving it. In fact, where the removal of these urban elements is getting promoted as an answer to their congestion or to the parking problem, then the operation of “liberation” may be configuring as a missed opportunity to find a real new meaning to those public spaces, preferring to act instead through aseptic projects, capable only of confusing them further; in this way then, the construction of new parking lots may be proposed (Muresan, 2018; Actual de Cluj.ro, 2015-2017).

However, regardless of their content, I find it extremely complex to carry on forced removing processes of such entities without opening conflicts for compensations or the claim by the actual owners to the occupied area, also because of the garage’s unclear legal status. Also, these solutions manifest the limits of a design that relies on top-down models and which aims to solve only an apparently physical problem in a context where the presence of an ideological one, related to the misunderstanding about the sense of the public space, is also evident. It is a question of approach.

A strong commitment is necessary to go further this distance between the design practice on one side and the individuals who will live its results on the other. The proposed solutions will have to seek a more pedagogical value, by triggering social relationships capable of re-signifying the space through its elements and not through their replacement.

Most of the world’s buildings were not the result of the work of the professional architect. Everywhere, people built for themselves, using such locally available materials as were available to them. A decade ago Bernard Rudofsky’s exhibition of *Architecture Without Architects* dazzled the visitor with its demonstration of the sheer perfection of the many forms that vernacular building had developed all round the globe, yet he told me last year that in the United States [...] the teaching of architecture leaves no room for the study of unpedigrees, undated buildings. The monstrous growths, from Babylon to Brasilia, as Rudofsky put it, are all documented, what is left out is the ordinary, which is like restricting the science of botany to lilies and roses. Vernacular architecture has never been homogenised, it

can never be an international language, for it is rooted in places and their indigenous materials and patterns of life. Its most disturbing feature for the businessman is its longevity, and its builders, Rudofsky emphasised, never thought of themselves as professional problem-solvers.

But it would be a mistake to suppose that it was produced by people who were naively unaware of the elements of design (from a lecture given at Sheffield University Architectural Society on 11th February 1976 in Ward, 1996, pp. 11-12).

Tips for an informal regeneration

What has emerged so far, is a social reality unprepared to experience the urban space as a community. However, the spontaneous, informal and sometimes even illegal uses detected manifest a strong will to negotiate within the public space, right from those who daily live its limits. How can we encourage these “self-designing” practices by reconverting, at the same time, the progressive degradation that characterizes these areas in the post-communist era, within processes aimed to rebuild a common sense? (Verazzi, 2017, p. 416)

It is clear that any design approach should understand and mediate the strong sense of individuality perceived, and represented also by the multiple roles of the garages detected, by stimulating the expression of those undisciplined forces towards a newfound community idea and through what Sennet calls an “open-system” (Sennet, 2013), turning them into more innovative practices able to involve an increasing group of residents. A new interest in the issues of management of the common good has led more recently to the ever more widespread idea of a possible regeneration through *bottom-up* actions, intended as real opportunities of participation to the creation of the public space and where everyone should be given the opportunity to choose how to re-design their spaces. It is interesting in this sense to analyse some of those experiences that propose themselves as specific moments of reflection/action inside the Romanian public space. It is not about invitations to decorate the space, but rather occasions for individual and collective growth through its transformation, starting from its full understanding.

The architectural studio and a public space practice *studioBASAR* operates in Bucharest since 2006. Their projects arouse in me a particular interest due to their ability to reverse the perception of the abandoned and neglected urban space, through solutions which, due to their hybrid and undefined nature, are also able to trigger the formation of new possible meanings. Projects such as *The Letter Bench* (*studioBAZAR*, 2009-2010) and *Roadside Stage* (*studioBAZAR*, 2014) use common objects to expose the unresolved conflicts in the urban space, generated by its physical and use limits. These urban elements are then turned into devices for re-thinking and re-appropriating the public and semi-public space in the community.

Our strategy consisted in a “performative” take on things: we did not make any presumptions about what would follow and anticipated the dynamic of the conflict through an intervention. Surprise: due to the non-conflictual nature of the area in which we placed the bench (it was not a street or a square or a sidewalk), the two irreconcilable states have peacefully co-existed since June 2009. Thus, the object led to a temporary armistice, a tacit understanding (about the project *The Letter Bench*, *studioBAZAR*, 2010, p. 230).

These projects highlight a peculiarity: that of being able to provide alternatives to all those marginal urban environments which, in absence of a clear physical and functional definition,

remain exposed to the individual use (very often improper), when not simply abandoned. Acting in these “urban islands” means it is necessary to intervene in their “in-between” dimension, with actions capable of developing, through hybridisation, solutions halfway between those informal and formal meanings, at the same time. These are processes, whose effectiveness, entrusted the time and not expressible only through technical data, will have a more significant impact as they will be recognized by the communities involved during their performing.

La Terenuri-Spațiu Comun în Mănăștur provides another example in this sense. Active since 2013, this multidisciplinary reality brings together architects, anthropologists, sociologists, designers, artists and the residents of Mănăștur neighbourhood in order to “re-appropriate” a common space that can serve an entire community. The main area of intervention is set inside the green space located in the south of Mănăștur district and next to Făget forest; it is a particularly large but also a marginal public green zone, which, for these reasons, makes it difficult to perceive its administrative dimension as well as organizing its maintenance. Starting from its uncertainties, critical issues, but also peculiarities, the working group takes action on this area, through a situationist approach, starting by its claim and by redefining then its spaces and functions. Through the involvement of the communities of residents in the care of their daily spaces, the aim is, once again, to transform a meaningless physical void, by promoting its development and rediscovering, through collective actions that include performative activities, and moments dedicated to self-build/design (Medeșan & Panait, 2016).

We are facing a particular political context in Cluj, an environment lately marked by the cultural workers and social activists. [...] the entire experience (both in research and in practice) from the last two years in the community of La Terenuri could be considered and debated as a new way of identifying and applying new tactics in Romanian urban spaces. Designing an urban laboratory in this area both for participatory methods, research and action means also a set of process-tools for understanding and dealing with the present and future of the common and public spaces in Romania (Panait, 2014).

These experiences also highlight another kind of necessity: that is to fill the evident void inside a too strictly established architecture practice. During my studies, indeed, I felt the lack of a “designer-facilitator” role: a mediator, among those who suffer the limits of their space, an active citizen, able to reimagine their place and a local administration that struggles to make its way into a complex urban-social fabric (Verazzi, 2017, p. 417).

Over time, I found out the roots of this feeling within the sixties spirit of the right to the city and the design radical experiences of the seventies, as the Global Tools one. Their short activity (from 1973 to 1975), oriented to liberate the individual creativity through a multidisciplinary experimentation programme, has opened new ways of experimenting through a design practice that aimed also to the creation of objects as “behavioural transformation opportunities” (Petroni, 2016, p. 67). In short, they were more like self-therapy opportunities than real prototypes (Borgonuovo & Franceschini, 2012). Their experience strove to free the design practice from any superstructures. By doing this, they allowed its opening to be understood both as a “critical existential practice” and as a “school without teachers”, where learning is achieved by doing and by getting our hands dirty (Petroni, 2016, p. 67). It is not surprising, in this sense, that ideas about the necessity of an enabling actor, of the lived space, can be regained right inside the work of its former members. I am talking about Riccardo Dalisi and its “architecture of animation” idea conceived in the same period and developed through a series of laboratories done with children from the underclass of the Rione Traiano (Naples). The whole idea behind

was to exercise the participatory creativity forms, in order to carry out social transformations by stimulating processes of collaboration and a sense of belonging to the community.

Today, this interdisciplinary entity could have the features of an educator understood both as “enabler in the relations between (public) institutions and citizens” (Pace, 2011, p. 103) on one side, and as animator (as Dalisi) between the latter on the other, and capable, because of being part of their own lived urban context, to encourage new opportunities for participation “outside the design administrative framework and with an educational value” (Pioselli, 2015, p. 47). By alternating observation – necessary to understand the dynamics through which the inhabitants are identified and identify themselves in the lived space – with participatory planning moments, this polarizing figure could have the opportunity to trace the complex and fragmented collective image, and also the chance to put in place solutions by testing directly their effectiveness at the same time. These, being halfway between the urban regeneration project and collective action of re-appropriation of the public space and its elements, will seek to stimulate the individuals’ consciousness within a process of creative growth, aimed to the production of a new need: that of a sense of wellbeing, that is also shared (Verazzi, 2017, p. 417).

We have to change the role of the administration from providers to enablers. We have to change the role of the citizens from the recipients to participants, so that they too have an active part to play in what Lethaby called the great game of town building [...] (from a lecture given at Garden Cities/New Towns Forum at Welwyn Garden City on October 22nd 1975 and at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, on the 19th of February 1976, in Ward, 1990, p. 35).

What I have reported so far summarizes a long personal journey, originated as intuition in Cluj, in 2012, and developed later through a thesis work. But it is important for me to make the real purpose of these work clear. Neither the data collected in 2012, nor the design proposals that have followed within the thesis served to elaborate concrete solutions to the “physical” issues emerged in Mănăştur district (as the evident degradation detected). Rather, both works helped me to reconsider what acting on a perceived degradation means. This was the cornerstone of my research in which the garage, in spite of everything, was still manifesting a common thought. Regenerating space then would mean hypothesizing a more ideological than physical re-signification of it, starting from these elements which (due to their obvious spontaneity) were a more realistic representation of itself, and not by their (forced) meaningless removal. The idea that I proposed after was focused on developing an in-progress project realized in a participatory way, and where everyone could provide their very own definition of the garage, based on the real or visionary use of it.

Bucharest, 2016: “What else can the garage be for you?”

A block yard should not be analysed, but quickly conquered for a brief moment (Jurgiu, 2012, p. 129).

An opportunity to test what I had developed so far, came from the participation in the international “design & build” event called *MEDS* (Meetings of Design Students) held in the summer of 2016 in Bucharest. Its premises were outlined effectively in its theme headline: *CITY OF CONTRASTS*, which summed up all of those aspects analysed in Cluj.

[...] Bucharest’s urban landscape is defined by contrasts, through its inappropriate juxtapositions, lack of rules and striking differences. Throughout time, palaces and mansions have been built amid slums. Then, residential blocks appeared in the villas

neighbourhoods. Old churches were hidden by blocks during Communist times. One of the largest buildings in the world, named “The People’s Palace”, was built over and after an entire inhabited neighbourhood was demolished. In Bucharest, contrasts can be found everywhere, in architecture, people, attitudes, and public spaces, all of these contributing to its identity. The challenge is to analyse, study and interact with these contrasting aspects of Bucharest. This way your designs will either become solutions to different urban problems or, if you get inspired by them, the challenge is to approach your designs from an artistic point of view (MEDS Bucharest Organizing Team, 2016).

The team, which included three tutors and 14 participants proposed the realization of a device of clear practicability, inspired by the garages observed in Cluj-Napoca (also present in Bucharest), but realized with the use of a scaffolding structure. By showing itself without any facing, “our” garage would have remained open to interpretation and use. The project called *Parcare Publică (Public Parking)* (Verazzi et al., 2016; Verazzi, 2016, 2017) proposed the creation of a public space of just 6 square meters, partially covered: a large enough area, to be used both as an ideal storage and a place where simply to “stop and stay” at the same time (Figure 11). An improvised exterior staircase then allowed the use of the roof surface. In this way, while the ground floor could be used both as a warehouse and parking lot (figuratively represented by a big old blue carpet we found in the trash), the second level then would have provided a space for any use (a green area, a meeting or sunbathing place, a playground ...).

Figure 11: The 2016 workshop poster: “*Parcare publică, nu doar un garaj obisnuit ...*”
(Public Parking, not only an ordinary garage ...)

The entire operation was an intervention halfway between the site-specific installation and the design prototype open to multiple combinations: a sort of game, to suggest approaches and methods, with which to act directly in the context that, starting from its daily shared appropriation, would have led to its full recognition.

After a brief introduction to the idea of the garage analysed in Cluj, the workshop continued with a specific question to the participants: “What else can the garage be for you?”

Before starting the construction of the structure, the participants were asked to explore the area in which we were, to identify the critical issues and also the potentials of the space and its elements, in order to grasp the actual needs of the inhabitants: mostly students. Indeed, the event took place inside the *University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine (USAMV)* in Bucharest, one of the oldest educational institutions in Romania. But despite the “isolated” nature of the place (a sort of protected oasis inside the city), actually because of its large dimensions and the functional mix generated by the academic needs of the university complex, there were some clear unresolved conflicts regarding its spaces and their uses. The relationship spaces outside the dorms were lacking in equipment and benches, sun shelter, trash cans, etc. were poorly distributed. In the same way, the large green areas among the buildings (that could provide a shelter from the sun) were mostly unused and undefined in access. Through a simple “observational” exercise (which resumed the *dérives*/ “awareness/analysis” work experienced in Cluj) and through the continuous debate between participants, we defined together the site where to build the structure: an intimate space between two dorms, along a strip of green and next to a road; an in-between space, half public and half private, open to different social relationships (Figure 12).

Figure 12: The chosen space

Source: Picture taken by the author during the 2016 workshop

During the next step, the participants designed and built the objects that would have characterized the public space of our garage (Figure 13 and 15). In this way, the device would have acted as a landmark in the campus space, while the other objects, by providing answers to the previously identified needs, would have the task to activate it. However, the limited duration of the workshop (just a couple of weeks), together with the reduced presence of students inside

the campus (due to the summer period), did not offer us the opportunity to enable participatory actions with its residents. Indeed, if in the experiences analysed in the previous pages, the peculiarity has been that of being able to re-design and re-appropriate the space and its elements, together with a “community of residents”, we, under those circumstances, would have to somehow reverse that process. So the participants gathered in what we could call a “temporary community of residents”, and began to design the space depending on their daily needs. The necessity to stay out of the heat led to the realization of a shelter made with some tents; similarly, the necessity to have a sit, lie down or even to freely swing, led to the creation of different kind of chairs and of a swing.

Figure 13: The “garage” and its furniture

Source: Photo by Santiago Rubio (upper left) and Nuri-Şeker; VERAZZI et al., 2016; MEDS Workshop RO, 2016

Anyway, if during the day the garage was inhabited mostly by its designers, we soon discovered that when we left its space during the night time, some of the few remaining residents of the nearby dormitories took the opportunity to use it.

The cigarettes found here and there, and the empty bottles left (Figure 14), brought out the need to provide for the creation of an ashtray or a trash can. In short, a sort of invisible dialogue was established between the two communities of residents, which, during the following days, would have acquired greater tangibility and led to some exchange of opinions, from curiosity to sceptical criticism. The possibility of using the roof would also have allowed, at one point, the simultaneous use of the structure by both groups. In this way, the “garage” became a public space to appropriate in a shared way.

Figure 14: Empty bottles and cigarettes

Source: Picture taken by the author during the 2016 workshop

Two months after the end of the workshop, the structure had to be disassembled. A new issue emerged: “what would have the garage become?” Although the main structure was lost, the remaining objects would have maintained their function as aggregation devices. These “untied” from an evident physical place, were “replaced” in the surrounding space, becoming its elements (Figure 16). In this sense, the campus residents had a new opportunity: that of being able to choose how to use them.

Although this possibility has always existed, since no limits have ever been imposed on their use, the loss of that “landmark” (it must be said, that the “garage” had been well accepted by the campus residents that even considered it as a useful and missing element inside its spaces) would somehow have amplified and extended that acknowledged identity to the objects contained inside it and that then, for some of the residents, could have acquired a meaning. Many must have been lost, others destroyed, but some would have continued to be used inside the same space or in another more appropriate one. As facilitators, our work suggested, through a shared process, new ways through which to rediscover what the everyday life alienated.

What had started with the workshop with its ending became an opportunity for some residents to gain a role inside their lived space.

Once again, a silence (the loss of the scaffolding structure) would have re-opened the consciousness to those “noises” of the lived space: what was left after our experience could have awakened the awareness of those voids still present, providing an opportunity to fill and re-signify them once again together.

Figure 15: At the end of the workshop

Source: Photo by La Fantana; MEDS Workshop RO, 2016

Figure 16: After the workshop

Source: Picture taken a couple of months after the end of the 2016 workshop. Photo by Bogdan Popescu

CONCLUSIONS

With this paper I had the chance to go back once again, to the time and to those places in which my critical thinking began to develop. As I have already said, the main aim was not to demonstrate the effectiveness of specific design proposals (the Web is filled with good examples in this sense), but rather to stimulate an interest into the development of a perception toward what we have learned to call the “everyday”; but not only.

Indeed, if on one side, the experiences have been chosen due to their capacity to boost the individual’s consciousness into the construction of a real community interested in its lived space, rather than meaningless objects to place inside it, at the same time, these practices have attracted an interest that seems to go beyond mere opinion gathering.

In August 2016, the “Cluj-Napoca - European Capital of Culture” Association prepared the candidacy of the city’s 2021 title. Amongst the many proposed activities, the experimental project called Garage 2.0 struck me the most for obvious reasons (Cluj-Napoca 2021 European Capital of Culture Association, 2016, pp. 42-43). Indeed, the project’s aim was in some ways similar to the *Parcare Publică* intents. But the peculiar context of Cluj (as we have seen so far)

provide a great opportunity to take into more serious consideration these urban elements by understanding their meaning today and even what these might become tomorrow.

However, Timișoara got the title for 2021; I do not know what happened to the Garage 2.0 proposal, and I am quite afraid it may never come to reality.

This is not a criticism, but an encouragement to go further into the development of this kind of projects that could become real pilots for a more complex, long-term, re-generation.

One last reflection goes once more to *La Terenuri-Spațiu Comun în Mănăştur*. The collective has shown – through its work tirelessly pursued for more than 6 years – a real interest in changing the fate of an entire community, by acting almost only on a specific area. This is an extremely complex work, especially if we consider all those factors analysed so far, and that materializes within a general lack of interest: a result of a turbulent past as well as of a present characterized by significant migratory phenomena that make it difficult for “long-lasting” communities to form.

At a first reading, “La Terenuri” area seems to resign itself to a kind of perpetuated pro-visionality, in which nobody is determined to take a stance: the State does not intervene because the situation of the properties is complicated, the owners wait for their lands to be used for potential investments, and daily users are convinced that they cannot change the destiny of this green area and keep on enjoying it while they can still do it. Nobody thinks about a scenario in which this state of affairs will not be so balanced (Medeșan & Panait, 2016, pp. 97-98).

But it is through persistence, that these collectives demonstrate their most innovative aspect by which also they are succeeding in changing an entire “way of doing”. They are not occasional designers, but reference points within a lived territory, able to intervene directly where municipalities cannot arrive. In this way, they become a fundamental tool of involvement into the care of a common space that, precisely because it does not seem to belong to anyone, makes it possible to anyone to participate in its maintenance. By doing this, they are enabling also opportunities for its re-appropriation.

In this sense, I wish (and invite) them to extend these reflections from the “ground” to the close “road”, in order to activate a participatory process that aims to an extended regeneration for the entire neighbourhood, maybe starting by emphasizing the social function (that emerged so far) from those garages, instead of that (apparently) pressing and inevitable demolition.

Today, just like in 2012, I am convinced that the architectural practice should be taking more into consideration this kind of experiences, as opportunities to project itself fully into a new way of acting within contemporary urban spaces (Figure 17). The activated processes will not be short-term evaluated, but they will have to trigger lasting collaborations within the urban space, lived simultaneously by its designers themselves.

WE CANNOT GIVE RULES!! WE CAN SIMPLY TRY TO HELP PEOPLE TO BETTER IDENTIFY WITH THEIR EXISTING PUBLIC AREAS (From the *HIERARCHY AND IDENTITY in a Post-communist Mass Housing Neighbourhood in Cluj-Napoca*, final presentation, about improving the use of public space, 2012).

...and don't forget the doggies!!

Figure 17: Slogans from the 2012 final presentation project

Source: HIERARCHY AND IDENTITY in a Post-communist Mass Housing Neighbourhood in Cluj-Napoca final presentation (Sartori et al., 2012).

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