THE IDEAL MODEL OF SOCIALIST MODERNISM

Gheorgheni Housing Estate in Cluj

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ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the Gheorgheni housing estate in Cluj (1964-1969) as a remarkably well-preserved example, representative of a particular phase in the evolution of socialist housing in Romania. It argues, in the context of the present debates on the notion of postwar Modernism, that Gheorgheni is a proper modernist example and that this specific period in the history of Romanian socialist housing can be defined as the modernist period. This was a time when the state set up a housing production system adapted to mass scale at the national level and when the first large housing estates emerged. A young generation of architects working in the newly created regional design institutes eagerly embraced modern architecture in both its aesthetic and social dimensions. Through an analysis based on interviews with architects, photographic archival material, publications of the time, and references to contemporary debates on postwar Modernism, the paper identifies the sources that informed the Gheorgheni project and shows how it embodied the model of modernist housing in its "ideal" form–i.e., close to the classical functionalist model of modern architecture and urbanism. It demonstrates the consistency of its modernist project and claims that the coherent urban and architectural design, together with the social mixing of its residents, account for its success over time. Unlike other estates from the same period, it has suffered only minimal later interventions and is still a desirable residential area today. Ultimately, the objective is to make a case for listing the estate as a modern architectural and urban heritage monument that deserves preservation, despite the negative undifferentiating perception of postwar housing that persists in Romania today.

KEYWORDS: Modernism, functionalist city, socialist housing, 1960s, Romania

INTRODUCTION: "Modernism" is a problematic notion when used in relation to socialist mass housing. Its perspective seems too aesthetic, reductionist, and trivial faced with the complex realities these housing projects implied. Historian Jean-Louis Cohen, for instance, repeatedly declared his "hostility" towards the use of the term in relation to postwar mass developments and claimed it should be given up because it denoted style and superficial aspects, obscuring deeper implications, better expressed by the notions of modernity and modernization, the terms he preferred instead (Cohen, 2009, 2021). "Moving away from the narrative of the Modern Movement" in postwar housing developments for letting "broader architectural networks and forms of production" to come out instead (Can and Maxim, 2022, 9) is a kind of zero-sum game rationale that is often encountered today.

On the other hand, the term modernism has been rather overused in relation to socialist architecture by being extended over the entire post-Stalin socialist period–for instance, in the exhibition "Soviet Modernism 1955-1991" at the Architekturzentrum Wien in 2012. Architectural guides seem particularly attracted to this all-embracing Modernism, which includes brutalism and even the spectacular-iconic kitsch of late socialism–like Anna Bronovitskaya's *Moscow: A Guide to Soviet Modernist Architecture 1955-1991* (2019) or the guides published by the group BACU, promoted on their platform[1], such as the one for Romania and Moldova (Rusu, 2018).

This paper challenges both these views. It considers Modernism relevant to a certain stage in the evolution of socialist housing and to a particular moment of socialist urbanization. Modernism is a useful notion if used

01 Gheorgheni housing estate, Cluj, microraion 1 (1964-1965). © N. Kulin, March 1969, DSAPC Cluj.

with precision in specific situations, for cases of housing architecture in which canonic references and modernistic image were indeed an issue, and when these were also addressed beyond mere aesthetics. The problem with the notion of Modernism is its misuse rather than uselessness. This paper does not deny it remains problematic in principle and addresses it with a precise question: what exactly in the housing estates produced in 1960s Romania cannot be fully understood unless a "modernist" interpretative component is involved? This question will be answered and illustrated by the historical analysis of a representative case: the Gheorgheni housing estate in Cluj [FIGURE 01].

Cluj is a secondary city in Romania, and Gheorgheni is the secondly built large housing estate in the city. Analyzed today, it appears like a precise demonstration of the interwar CIAM's "durable legacy" (Mumford, 2019, 293): *existenzminimum* apartments, scientifically based urban design, sunlight and ventilation in every unit, walkable neighborhoods, and the four functions of the city. But Romania never had a member in the CIAM, and Modernism was a word avoided at the time. Still, Gheorgheni looks like a perfect illustration of modernist functionalist urbanism. How did that happen?

Based on photographic archival material, interviews with architects, publications of the time, and references to present-day debates on postwar Modernism, the paper investigates how Gheorgheni became, in the words of one of its architects, "a model of urbanism for the entire country" (Buzuloiu, 2023). It shows that the term Modernism makes sense when used in relation to a certain phase in the evolution of socialist housing in Romania. It also shows that Gheorgheni is an important witness of this historical phase, a rarely well-preserved—and properly modernistic—housing architecture of the 1960s and that its historical value and quality of habitation environment make it worth considering for heritage designation and protection.

MODERNISM

The notion of Modernism was applied to architecture more often from the outside and in hindsight. For instance, the 1932 *Modern Architecture* exhibition at the MOMA (the Museum of Modern Art in New York), which looked back to the 1920s European architecture from an American perspective, explicitly identified modern architecture as a new style. In its catalogue, Philip Johnson stated that it was Le Corbusier who announced it as such (Johnson, 1932, 20), Henry-Russell Hitchcock remarked the importance of ideal projects as means of architectural exploration (Hitchchock, 1932, 160), while Lewis Mumford saw "the laying down of a new basis for housing" to be one of modern architecture's "chief triumphs" (Mumford, 1932, 179). However, the early "modernists" did not call themselves so because stylistic mannerism was exactly what they fought against and also because housing, through which many of the ideals of the early modern architecture were defined, was primarily concerned with more urgent non-aesthetic issues, such as hygienic habitation and accessible mass production.

Historian Anthony Vidler remarked that it was the first generation of modern architecture historians who accomplished "the historicizing of modernism," although still not using the term for naming it; they gave modern architecture its "canon" and "its place in the history of 'styles,'" exactly "what the modernist architects themselves feared the most" (Vidler, 2008, 7). The second generation of

modern architecture historians went even further, "inventing modernism" as a postwar architectural concept–as Vidler wrote, also remarking the "inevitable collusion" between history and contemporary design with this new concept of Modernism (Vidler, 2008, 15). In other words, historical discourse and professional practice converged in defining the architectural Modernism of the postwar years.

The relationship between modernist practice and its conceptualization was highlighted by historian Adrian Forty, who remarked that language had its role in the aestheticization of modern architecture, with non-aesthetic terms of function and technique becoming, rather early on, "aesthetic terms with social denotations" (Forty, 2000, 107-108). He showed that Modernism was not just "a new style of building" but also "a new way of talking about architecture." "Modernist discourse was indeed a system," with a distinctive vocabulary of specific terms like 'form,' 'space,' 'design,' 'order' and "the tendency to render what is concrete abstract" (Forty, 2000, 19-22). Even if modern architects mistrusted language, denied aestheticism, and didn't use the term, "the world of modernist discourse" (Forty, 2000, 19) paved the way for Modernism as an aesthetic practice, legitimating the term itself.

The use of the label "Modernism" is commonplace in historical discourse today, not only in reference to interwar modern architecture, but also to the postwar period. In his history of architecture during the (long) 20th century, Cohen writes about the "global diffusion of modernism" and its diversification after WWII, remarking that even behind the Iron Curtain "the eclipse of modernism was brief" (Cohen, 2012, 310). What was called "Socialist Modernism"—again, in hindsight—is part of this diffusion and diversification.

However, in Eastern Europe, postwar architecture has been mostly described as the result of a technical-bureaucratic system, which strongly limited architects' agency and architectural expression. In Romania, for instance, the state system of design production regimented the architectural profession, as historian Ana Maria Zahariade has shown (Zahariade, 2012). This is particularly evident in housing production. Emily Pugh remarks that large housing estates in the GDR were "the product of an assembly line process" and "barely designed at all" because of the "marginalization of architects" (Pugh, 2015, 99). But despite all this, as historian Susan Reid remarked, even if, in principle, Khrushchev's turn was focused on increased production efficiency, it eventually also brought about "a new aesthetic of socialist modernism" (Reid, 2006, 268). In Romania, aesthetics became such a subject of interest by the mid-1960s that the journal *Arhitectura* dedicated two successive issues to it in 1967 (no. 2 and 3). This coincides with the time when the first modernist large housing estates became visible on the ground and started being assessed in hindsight.

Modernist aesthetics was in no contradiction to socialist architecture's ideology. If anything, Modernism was the most appropriate expression for an architecture that was strongly ideological. As Vidler explains, "architecture's role as an ideology," defined by Tafuri, referred to "something above and beyond mere building" (Vidler, 2008, 179). Although post-Stalinist housing developments were a matter-of-fact efficient architecture, they were also about something "above and beyond," namely modernity and modernization in communist terms. They needed Modernism precisely because, as Vidler explains in relation to Tafuri's concept, Modernism is "more ideological" than modernity, and it is also "its representation" (Vidler, 2008, 169, 184). Modernism in socialist housing gave expression to the ideology of communist modernity—for a while.

In socialist countries, Modernism was more like a universal ideal abstraction rather than a return to an early modern avant-garde experience. In Romania, local interwar Modernism had very few social concerns and could not become a valid model. Architects turned instead towards an "ahistorical architecture of functionalism," which reflected the "deeply universalizing aspirations for architecture worldwide," exactly like Virág Molnár writes for Hungary, where architects "institutionalized" Modernism as a "cultural link" to Western European professional discourses (Molnár, 2005, 111, 116). Or similar to what Marija Dremaite remarks about Lithuania, architects "simply wished to belong to the international community of modernist architecture" (Dremaite, 2017, 315). Throughout the socialist world, Khrushchev's Thaw unchained architects' repressed desire to be part of the free world with which Modernism was associated.

GHEORGHENI HOUSING ESTATE IN CLUJ (1964-1969)

Gheorgheni was designed by the Systematization Studio of the DSAPC–Direction for Systematization, Architecture and Construction Projects, as the regional state design institute in Cluj was called at the time—systematization being the term for urban planning in socialist Romania (Vais, 2022). The architects in charge were all young: Augustin Presecan (1933-1978), head of the project team, Vasile Mitrea (b.1935), and Aurelian Buzuloiu (b.1937). Presecan had been trained in architecture and urbanism in Moscow between 1954 and 1959; Mitrea and Buzuloiu graduated from the Institute of Architecture in Bucharest in 1960 and 1962, respectively. The fact that inexperienced architects dealt with the most important investment in the city was not uncommon at the time, as regional design institutes—created in 1957 with the mission to implement

the program of large housing estates all over the country—were populated mostly with fresh graduates.

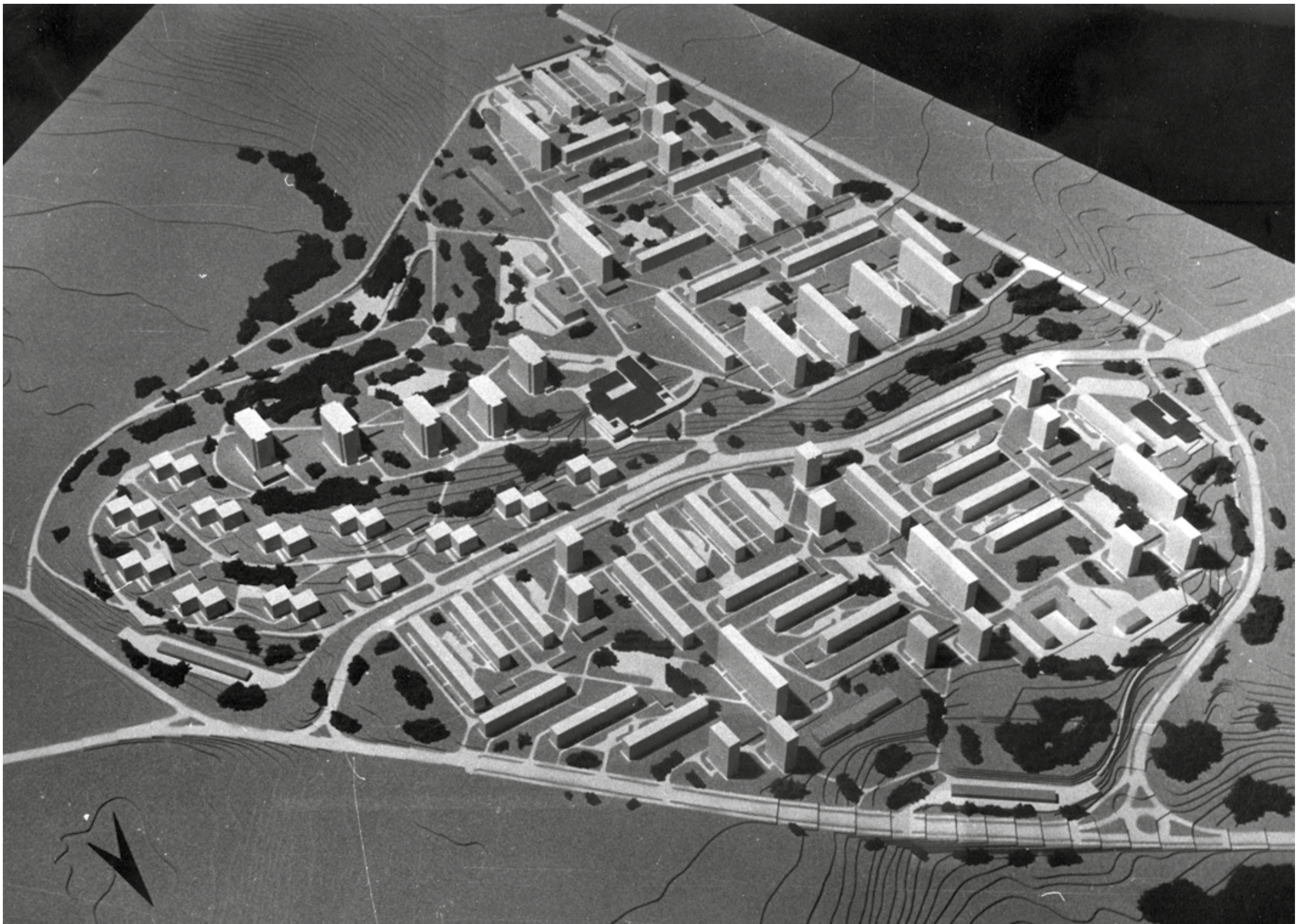
The systematization plan for Cluj was designed in Bucharest by ISCAS (the Institute for Studies in Constructions, Architecture and Systematization) and introduced in 1960. It immediately needed adjustments, and it was Presecan who was in charge of the so-called "systematization sketches" for the actual developments of the two large housing estates planned in the city, Grigorescu and Gheorgheni (Marian and Mitrea, 2021). Grigorescu estate (1961-1964) was designed by Presecan and Mitrea, and it was mostly a "pioneering design" (Mitrea, 2011, 162), given that documentation was scarce at the time and Romanian instances were still very few. But Grigorescu was set on land occupied by houses, and its design was applied partially and much altered. Nevertheless, its experience served Gheorgheni, the second large housing estate in the city but the first to be raised on almost empty land at the periphery [FIGURE 02]. Its two microraions (residential micro-districts) were designed together and built exactly as designed (microraion 1 in 1964-1965 and microraion 2 in 1966-1969). Buzuloiu joined Presecan and Mitrea, and he remembers they formed a team of one mind, controlling all aspects of the project at all scales (Buzuloiu, 2023), which accounts for the coherence of the project. Gheorgheni rigorously respected the new housing design norms introduced in 1960, local party leaders' ambition to provide a large number of new apartments in a showcase project, and the current knowledge in the field that the young architects were still absorbing.

Not much of what they had learned in the architecture school in Bucharest prepared them for this experience. Presecan received some notions of this new kind of urbanism during his training in Moscow, but they mostly learned by doing. By then, the restriction of foreign models ended due to Khrushchev's Thaw. The library of the design institute started receiving foreign architecture journals; subscriptions were made notably to *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* soon after 1960—at the institute's library, but also personal subscriptions, and Mitrea had one of his own; "and this is how I found out about the neighborhood unit," he remembers. "We were much influenced by French practice" (Mitrea, 2023).

The official term for the neighborhood unit was the Russian *microraion*. But the notion was at the intersection of Western and Eastern European mass housing practice, and it meant quite the same: a walkable large urban block surrounded by streets and crossed by pedestrian alleys, including buildings for services of frequent use, along with residential buildings. An article in *Arhitectura RPR* in 1962 about the design of microraions, comparing Romanian examples to ones throughout Europe, applied the same term microraion to all of them, even to those from Switzerland, Sweden, and France (Sebestyen, 1962).

Architects intended Gheorgheni to embody the functionalist urbanism of the Athens Charter (Mitrea, 2023).

02 Gheorgheni housing estate, Cluj, microraion 1 in construction. © N. Kulin, 1965, DSAPC Cluj.

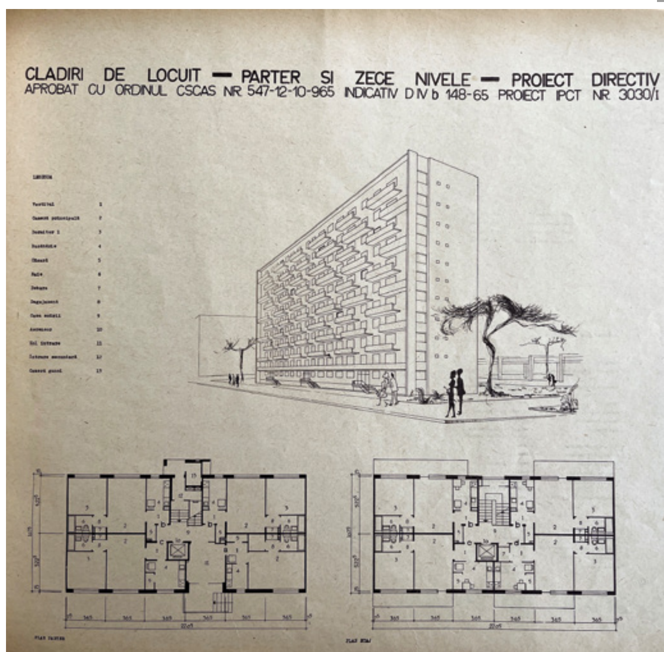


03 Gheorgheni housing estate, Cluj, microraions 1 (North) and 2 (South), model. Three housing groups are legible as subcomponents of microraion 1 (at the bottom right of the picture). © N. Kulin, 1964, DSAPC Cluj.

However, the Soviet practice was also a reference, not only through Presecan's training but also through their use of the Romanian *Architects' Handbook*, mostly reproducing the Soviet Architects' Handbook and Soviet design principles. The *Handbook* promoted scientific control over urban space organization on all scales. It defined the microraion as the second level in a systemic hierarchy: *cvartal, microraion, cartier, raion* (Chițulescu, 1958); only larger cities had *raioane*, so in Cluj, with its 185,663 inhabitants (1966), large housing estates remained at the scale of *cartiere*. *Cartierul* Gheorgheni was (at this phase) made of two microraions for about 17,000 inhabitants, living in a total of 5194 apartments in 77 buildings (Ansamblul, 1967). The smallest urban cell in Gheorgheni was not the microraion but the "housing group"– equivalent to the former *cvartal* (block), but with a free abstract form (for instance, three housing groups can be easily recognized as sub-components in the spatial organization of microraion 1) [FIGURE 03]. A housing group was composed of residential buildings, but was defined abstractly by the number of apartments that could be heated by one heating plant: up to 700 units (Mitrea, 2011, 162). Basic shared facilities–garbage collection points and children's playgrounds—were provided at the group level. In fact, the passage from *cvartal* to microraion (that is, from block to superblock), as the turn to modernist planning in socialist countries is often perceived by historians today, was a leap in scale: the merger of former *cvartal*s into the higher form of integration which was the microraion. At the level of the microraion, shared education, health, and commercial services were provided. The entire *cartier* was endowed with a commercial complex (which should have also had a cinema, not built eventually).

These shared services compensated for the smallness of the minimal-existence apartments. Gheorgheni, like all housing estates in Romania at the time, used extensively one standard type-designed apartment produced by the IPCT (the Design Institute for Type Constructions) in Bucharest. However, the type-designed building modules (called "sections") were of the "directive designs" category [FIGURE 04]. which left a certain margin of intervention to local architects who adapted them on site [FIGURE 05]; in Gheorgheni, architects Cristian Iacobi, Domnica Litvin and Alexandru Nemeș were involved in the design of the apartment buildings (Ansamblul, 1967; Gonos, 1973). The minimalist object quality of the buildings, the use of color, details, "entrances, alleys, playgrounds, putting habitation in relation to the ground"—were all carefully studied. "We searched a spatial quietness. We let the buildings breathe" (Buzuloiu, 2023).

The most characteristic feature of Gheorgheni, distinguishing it from later housing projects, is its generous



04 Directive type design, designed by IPCT (Institutul de Proiectare pentru Construcții Tip [The Design Institute for Type Constructions] in 1965. From ISART Catalogue, Album no. 3 (January 1971), project no. 3030, plate 13. © IPCT/ISART – Institutul de Studii și Proiecte pentru Sistematizare, Arhitectură și Tipizare [The Institute for Studies and Projects for Systematization, Architecture and Typification].

05 Block of flats (slab) in microraion 2, with a heating plant attached; Gheorgheni housing estate, Cluj. © N. Kulin, March 1969, DSAPC Cluj.

open space. Existing health norms concerning sunlight and ventilation allowed architects a comfortable relationship between buildings [FIGURE 06]. They took the sun path diagram method from the *Architect's Handbook*, which assured the scientific base for the distancing and orientation of the buildings. Buildings were planned together with landscaping, which was considered an integral part of the urban design and addressed in each housing group; the plant species were decided with horticulture engineer Ana Micu. Besides these green areas, a garden was part of the facilities provided at the *cartier* level as a rule; the one in Gheorgheni was designed in collaboration with architect Natalia Mănduc (Mitrea 2023).

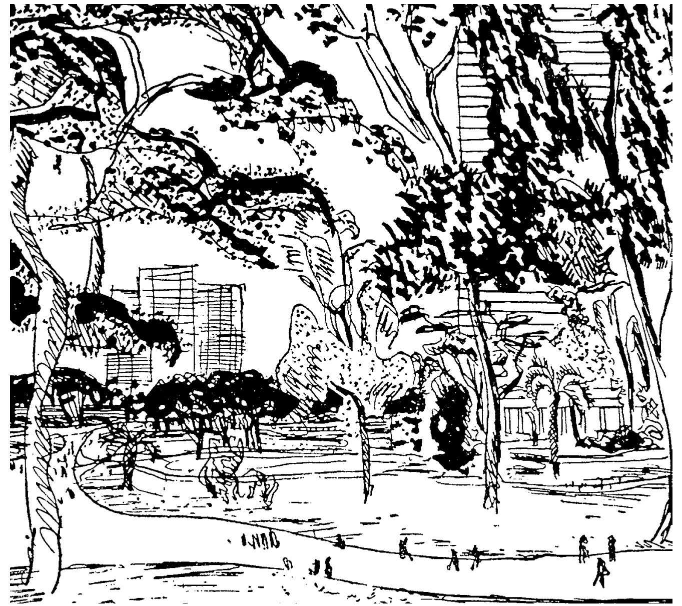
Green space, along with the sun and good orientation, was considered the essence of "hygienic habitation" since the first CIAM (Das Erste, 1979 [1928], 12-13). In the socialist city, it was also ideologically charged. The official discourse in the early years of socialism presented green space as a class element of distinction in capitalist cities: rich residential areas were full of green, while workers' habitations were deprived of it; it was the task of the socialist city's generous green areas to restore working-class dignity (Laurian, 1954, 17). With the adoption of the functionalist city model, it also connoted leisure–another sign of social progress. Green spaces became a definitory mark of the large housing estates in 1960s Romania. Their image was disseminated on postcards, which looked like they were sent from vacation at the popular seaside resorts. Indeed, the Black Sea projects, the first examples of postwar Modernism in the country, developed after 1955 and extensively presented by the journal *Arhitectura* at the time, influenced the modernist design of

06 Distancing and green space between residential buildings (slabs) in microraion 2, Gheorgheni housing estate, Cluj. © Dana Vais, 2023.

these early large housing estates in the country. But most importantly, the generous green spaces show that mass housing was addressed, at this stage, not only in terms of economic efficiency but also as an enjoyable environment. They conveyed optimism and a compelling image of urban modernity. "We designed the happy city; the socialist city was considered the happy city," and the inspiration was Le Corbusier's Radiant City (Mitrea, 2023).

Indeed, the 50-year-old vegetation at Gheorgheni displays this image even better today [FIGURE 07, FIGURE 08]. This is Le Corbusier's "expanse" between buildings, which allows the "flow of light" and "pure air" in the Radiant City (1935, 36). And this is also the "daily leisure" as a "direct function of habitation"–"active oeuvre, optimistic, human, bearer of 'essential joys,'" as Le Corbusier reported at the fifth CIAM on *Housing and Leisure* (Le Corbusier, 1979 [1937], 182).

07 Present-day vegetation in microraion 2, Gheorgheni housing estate, Cluj. © Dana Vais, 2023.



08 Drawing illustrating Le Corbusier's Radiant City. © Le Corbusier (1935), p.221.

It is this kind of claim that Cohen dissents. It would be confusing, he says, to think that "modernism as an experimental practice" has anything to do with the state-sponsored modernization and the process of massive production of collective housing, with buildings that might look similar to the *Unité d'Habitation* of Marseille, a "luxury high-end apartment block" inhabited by professionals, doctors, university professors, but are actually a vulgarization of these building types and a "cynical deployment of the working class outside the cities." Le Corbusier and the likes, Cohen says, insisted on "urban qualities, on a particular attention to landscape, on the individual study of the buildings"—considerations that have been "totally put aside" by the massive housing production, which "industrialized this initially innovative model" (Cohen, 2009).

In fact, professionals, who were state employees and "working people," too, inhabited Gheorgheni. Social mixture was part of the socialist city, where class identity was replaced with professional categories. Gheorgheni was built at the city margins and was an instrument of social progress for the recently urbanized dwellers, but it was not a social ghetto. It was an egalitarian environment, physically and socially. Apartments were allocated by workplace, based on waiting lists and selection criteria, such as giving priority to families with children [FIGURE 09] (and also "merits" of political compliance, such as Party membership). One enterprise or institution disposed of a certain number of apartments scattered all over the *cartier*. The process of housing distribution made it so that a university professor, or an architect for that matter, would live in the same building with a simple worker. So, it is not only rhetoric when Buzuloiu says that "we put ourselves in the user's place and designed a space just like we have liked to live in; we tried to observe the rules of living together, with respect to the human that we accommodated" (Buzuloiu, 2023).

For the architects of Gheorgheni, this "humanist" project was an experimental practice, both aesthetic and functional. They did not use the word Modernism, but they used other terms of design abstraction–e.g., space, balance, hierarchy—from "the modernist discourse" that Forty describes. As design norms after 1960 let architects "intervene in the spatial organization," they organized the abstract volumes of the residential buildings in well-studied spatial compositions. Elevators became allowed after 1960, and architects could use high-rise buildings: towers to create accents, mark centralities or let the green space

09 Inhabitants of microraion 1, Gheorgheni housing estate, Cluj. © N. Kulin, 1965, DSAPC Cluj.

10 Construction site, microraion 1, Gheorgheni housing estate, Cluj. © N. Kulin, April 1965, DSAPC Cluj.

flow, and slabs to individualize housing groups and relating to topography (Mitrea, 2023). "For us, the profession was art, urbanistic art" (Buzuloiu, 2023).

The one element of modernity that was almost entirely lacking in Gheorgheni, however, was industrialized construction. The techniques used were mostly traditional, with few prefabricated elements [FIGURE 10]. Prefabricated panels would start being applied in Gheorgheni only with the third "microraion" (by then named "housing complex unit") built between 1969 and 1972. But this extension marked the next phase in the evolution of Romanian socialist housing, with increased densities and cheaper mass production, as Cohen describes. The Systematization Law of 1974 terminated Romania's modernist model of open urbanism.

History's recuperation of Modernism came only after its recuperation in professional practice. Architect and historian Marcel Melicson has been presenting episodes of modern architecture history in *Arhitectura* since Le Corbusier's death in 1965 and edited an anthology of texts by Le Corbusier in Romanian (Le Corbusier, 1971). In his book *Modern Architecture* (1975), the only survey history of classic interwar Modernism published in socialist Romania–which did not use the term "modernism" either—Melicson presented the Modern Movement as "the main trends and ideas that built the theoretical edifice of contemporary architecture." Modern architects "anticipated the future and created the forms of which present-day architectural reality has gradually emerged" (Melicson, 1975, 8). History and contemporary architecture "collided" eventually, just like Vidler remarked. However, Melicson's book was not a source of inspiration but a sign of ending, a conclusion to the modernist credo of architectural practice in postwar Romania.

CONCLUSION

The urban design of Gheorgheni emerged at a particular moment of socialist housing evolution, and its sources were determined by that moment. Although it reflected Khrushchev's turn towards efficient building and followed the new Soviet design principles, it also took advantage of the relative liberalization after Khrushchev's Thaw and turned away from the exclusivity of Soviet models. It took its inspiration from beyond the Iron Curtain, notably from the *grandes ensembles* experience in France. But it aspired to be a universal ideal Modernism, which could transcend both camps and could fuse the socialist city with the modernist city. Gheorgheni captures this very moment in time when the Soviet-style microraion merged with Athens Charter functionalism and Radiant City imagery.

For the architects of Gheorgheni, this ideal reference was more than just the means of gaining useful knowledge for practical reasons. It was an exercise of professional freedom. What the case of Gheorgheni shows is that, despite the prevailing historical narrative about socialist housing being the product of an anonymous bureaucratic system and the architectural profession being completely marginalized, architects' agency was important at the time. The architects of Gheorgheni had the self-awareness of their pioneering mission of changing the fundaments of housing and urban design in Romania, and with the professional conscience of determining a radically new kind of environment and a new lifestyle for the people who would live there.

The Modernism that resulted developed a specific temporality. Gheorgheni is representative of a rather precise limited period in the evolution of mass housing in socialist Romania: the time of the first generation of large housing estates, a period that started with the local political sanctioning of the move away from Stalinist architecture in 1958 and ended with the 1974 Law of Systematization. This was, more generally, a period of relative prosperity and genuine economic and social progress, of which housing was the most visible accomplishment. Modernism remains associated with this optimistic period of the (long) 1960s and can be considered its marker. This is the proper period of socialist Modernism in Romania.

Unlike the housing projects of the following periods, which would become indeed more and more the product of a bureaucratic system, restrictive norms, and collapsing economy, Gheorgheni enjoyed a good balance between economic restraints and the positive value of a quality urban space. It could thus escape the densification campaigns from the 1970s on, which altered other similar estates of this period. Due to its social mix, it avoided post-socialist ghettoization. It escaped even the neoliberal interventions of the post-socialist years, preserving its artful spatial composition and generous green environment almost unscathed. Gheorgheni remains a witness to a special moment in the history of socialist housing, deserving to be recognized as a landmark of postwar modernist architecture in Romania.

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ENDNOTES

1 www.socialistmodernism.com