

Two Churches and a Hat: The National Bucharest Theatre or the Mythology of Post-War Romanian Architecture

ABSTRACT

The National Bucharest Theatre is in its third architectural reiteration. All three have been gestures of political and cultural appropriation, but also of selective erasure and reconfiguration of the past, dictated by desired shifts of identity in political as well as cultural and architectural discourse. In socialist Romania, reiterations in cultural production often illustrated the recalibration of the relationship matrix between the local socialist system, Moscow and the West, as well as between cultural milieus and the political, social and economic spheres. Built during the 1960s, a time of politically-sanctioned cultural openness, the theatre epitomised the obsessive focus of Romanian cultural production: that of national specificity. During the 1980s, at the height of Ceauşescu's campaign to mould Bucharest to his aesthetic vision, the NBT was interred behind a neoclassical facade. Out of sight, but never out of mind, the NBT accrued a wealth of meanings and values, gradually becoming synonymous in architectural circles with resistance to mediocrity enforcing cultural policies. In time, the original NBT became a veritable architectural myth, whose 2014 disinterment cum updating generated a shocking disillusionment.

Using elements of self-analysis, interviews with Romanian architects, and theories examining collective/collected memories, this paper investigates reiterative myth construction in post-war Romanian architecture. The characteristics of collective professional memory thus revealed underpin the formulation of contemporary professional identity, with significant, but troublingly undiagnosed effects on current practice. In a professional climate of silent erasure of the recent architectural past, it is vital to examine these mechanisms in order to better reconfigure contemporary praxis.

IOANA CRISTINA POPOVICI

Ioana Cristina Popovici trained as an architect at the Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism in Bucharest, and is currently a doctoral candidate at Plymouth University. Her research project investigates the evolution of architecture in socialist Romania as discursive interference between several fields—politics, architectural profession, economy, and socio-cultural practices. Broader research interests include architecture theory in totalitarian regimes, the urban development of modern Bucharest, industrial architecture, and intersections between architecture, philosophy, cultural theory and social sciences. Having taught at both universities, in Bucharest and Plymouth, she has developed teaching interests focused on the critical examination of architecture praxis—past, present, and future—in articulation with power, social, economic and cultural practices. From liminality, transgressive architecture, disaster-relief design, the architectural critique of neo-capitalism, to urbicide and housing homelessness, she supports her students in becoming critically aware of the complex network of factors impinging on contemporary architecture.

1. Introduction: Memories of the Unseen

The National Bucharest Theatre (NBT) is in its third architectural reiteration. All three have been gestures of political and cultural appropriation, but also of selective erasure and reconfiguration of the past, dictated by desired shifts of identity in political as well as cultural and architectural discourse, cast into built form. In socialist Romania, reiterations in cultural production often illustrated the recalibration of the relationship matrix between the local socialist system, Moscow and the West, as well as between cultural milieus and the political, social and economic spheres. Designed and built during the 1960s, a time of politically-sanctioned cultural openness, the original theatre epitomised the obsessive focus of Romanian cultural production: national specificity. During the 1980s—the height of Ceaușescu’s campaign to mould Bucharest to his aesthetic vision—the NBT was interred behind a neoclassic facade. Out of sight—but never out of mind—the original NBT accrued a wealth of meanings, values, and even post-factum memories, gradually becoming synonymous, for the architectural milieu, with resistance to mediocrity enforcing cultural policies. Each new generation of architects acquired, through the University apprenticeship system,¹ *memories of the unseen*, augmenting the visually inaccessible reality of the NBT to the status of architectural myth. In 2010, works began to unearth

the theatre from its concrete sarcophagus. Two years later, the grand unveiling brought professional and personal expectations to a heartbreaking crash.

Using elements of self-analysis, interviews with Romanian architects, and theories examining collective—and collected—memories, this paper investigates myth construction in post-war Romanian architecture, based on the case study of the NBT. The characteristics of collective professional memory thus revealed underpin the formulation of contemporary professional identity, with significant—but troublingly undiagnosed—effects on current architectural praxis. In a professional climate of silent erasure of the recent architectural past, it is vital to examine these mechanisms in order to better reconfigure contemporary praxis.



1. NBT, second iteration

1. The Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism (IMUAU), in Bucharest—Romania’s oldest and most reputable architecture university, established in 1892.

2. Psychology studies suggest that memory is a constructive phenomenon. According to Lynn et al., an absence of memory is compensated for by imaginative construction, narratively pieced together from the various sources available, based on commonly accepted plausibility and, in the specific case of architecture, I would argue, commonly shared judgements of (aesthetic) value. See Steven Jay Lynn et al. *Rendering the Implausible Plausible: Narrative, Construction, Suggestion, and Memory*. In *Believed-In Imaginings. The Narrative Construction of Reality*, Joseph Timothy de Rivera, and Theodore R. Sarbin, (eds). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. 1998. p. 133.

3. Architecture theorist Mircea Lupu coined the term in 1977 to define a school of thought and practice, which emerged during the 1960s, and produced some of the most appreciated works of Romanian architecture up until the first half of the 1970s. Lyrical functionalism is, essentially, the balanced tension between functionalist rigour and rationality and a poetic, creative approach to the design of space. The latter employs spatial, sculptural and decorative archetypes from traditional Romanian architecture and arts. Architecture historians consider lyrical functionalism as the third modern re-imagining of “national” architecture after Ion Mincu’s Neo-Romanian style and the interbellum modernism practised by Horia Creangă, Marcel Iancu, Henriette Delavrancea etc. See Lupu, Mircea. *Școli naționale în arhitectură* [National Schools of Architecture]. Bucharest: Editura Tehnică. 1977.

I have never seen the original NBT: by the time I entered architecture education in 2003, it had long been secreted away. An ambiguously proportioned succession of arches at odds with the concrete stage tower, the stone-filigreed annexes, and the silhouette of neighbouring Hotel Intercontinental—this is how the theatre featured in my mental landscape of Universităţii Square. The original configuration, however, is far from absent from my recollection. I am well aware of the building's initial message, of the meanings accrued during the later stages of Romanian communism, its collapse, and the first growing pains of Romanian democracy and capitalism. I have *memories* of its first iteration, and knowledge of the complex design and building processes, which coincided, from the point of view of cultural production, with the tipping point between Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's thaw and Ceaușescu's gradually increasing authoritarianism—a shift outlined below from the point of view of architecture's negotiations with power in the arena of national discourse.



Fig. 2. The original NBT

These are *acquired memories*² pertaining to a professional identity transmitted through architectural education, focusing on crucial stages in the development of architectural discourse during communism. Curiously enough, architecture history courses had little impact on the seedlings of acquired architectural memory, as they dealt rather summarily with contemporary, post-World-War-II history. Rather, it was through in-studio conversations with design tutors that I discovered the true NBT, which stood for lyrical functionalism, a pivotal moment when Romanian architecture unveiled the breadth, depth and subtlety

of its heritage—solid anchors into the local geo-cultural context—and its attunement to contemporary architecture trends.³ Most importantly, perhaps, it stood for a synthesis between past and present, home and abroad—an individuality-preserving architecture of belonging. Over the years, it had become a locus of collective professional memory, an instance of creative, autonomous architectural discourse to aspire towards. Finally, it embodied the ability of the profession to check-mate political intervention and reinstate architectural discourse as the primary underpinning of architecture practice, to the detriment of political critique. All things considered, a rather heroic feat.

I carried this image-concept of the NBT into professional and academic practice, looking back with nostalgia and fondness upon spaces mentally assembled from the original project, photographs, and enthusiastic stories. From 2012, I tracked the progression of on-site works, anticipating the



Fig. 3. The unveiling

grand unveiling and trying to discern, amidst the scaffolding, the features of a well-known—and much-loved—project. The shanty town of hastily thrown together annexes, masked by the misleading height of the blind arches, emerged first. Then, the broad, hovering overhang—a grave, subtly upturned concrete slab, reminiscent of the deep shadow of medieval church eaves and traditional abodes, of Le Corbusier's Ronchamp chapel, and even of entrances to ancient rock temples. But the final removal of the scaffolding came as a huge shock: the building unveiled was not the one I remembered...

2. History in the (Re)Making

Traversing most of the communist period, the NBT can indicate shifts in the articulation between political discourse, urban strategy and architectural agenda. Scholarship of communist Romanian architecture has fashioned a tentative chronology of architecture under the regime—a temporal geometry still under expansion with relevant anchoring points. For architecture theorist Ana Maria Zahariade, the chronology blends the logics of politics and architecture, and can be roughly segmented into: a post-war reconstruction period (up until the end of the 1940s); the “interlude of socialist realism” (until the mid-1950s); a stretch of cultural thaw and “relative re-synchronisation” with the Western architecture scene (until the early 1980s); and, finally, the decline of the mid- and late-1980s,⁴ during the totalitarian restrictions of the regime’s last decade.⁵

Although the design, construction and alteration of the NBT belong to the last two stages, the concept of a large-scale performance venue suited to Bucharest’s increasingly modernised city centre predates the communist takeover. Plans for the expansion of Universităţii Square spilled into socialist urban strategies, with interventions in Bucharest’s city centre remaining, *grosso modo*, in tune with the pre-war development direction.⁶ The Square had long been a place of privileged urban function, situated in the capital’s epicentre at the intersec-

tion of its North-South and East-West axes.⁷ Thus, it is a site of geographic as well as symbolic urban importance, potential recognised across the post-war change in political regime: the socialist planning agenda had it earmarked for an upscale in official (that is, political) status, to the detriment of the plurivalent cultural and commercial functions historically hosted by the square. The results of the 1956-1957 urbanism competition focusing on Universităţii Square yielded various architectural approaches, but one cohesive urban vision: the north-eastern section of the square would benefit from the juxtaposition of a dominant mass volume and a vertical accent, setting the precedent, at least in terms of layout, for future iterations.⁸ In his study of the Sacré Coeur basilica, David Harvey explains how the cross-purpose actions of antagonistic socio-political factions resulted in surprising unity: one site, one preferred architectural form to physically embody and visually enforce the urban domination of Paris.⁹ Similarly, the site genealogy of the NBT is marked by its potential for centralised control and symbolic dominance within the urban hierarchy. Architectural form, however, proved to be more volatile, suggesting—as will be explored below—changes in the regime’s agenda of visual representation.¹⁰

A brief sketch of the Romanian political landscape from the 1960s onwards will better contextualise the NBT’s architectural becoming. Through policies affecting both cultural production and architecture praxis, the figures of Gheorge Gheorghiu-Dej and

4. Zahariade, Ana Maria. *Arhitectura în proiectul comunist. România 1944-1989*. [Architecture in the Communist Project. Romania 1944-1989]. Bucharest: Simetria. 2011.

5. To repay Romania’s external debt in the 1980s, Ceaușescu channelled the vast majority of the country’s agricultural, industrial and consumer goods production into export, also introducing inhumane restrictions on food and basic amenities for the population, such as water, gas, heating and electricity. The standard of living plummeted to an unbearable degree towards the end of the decade, turning daily routine into a struggle for survival.

6. The work of Professor Nicolae Lascu on the topic of pre-war urbanism has also yielded some interesting insights into the continuity of urban design practice across the change in regime: in Bucharest, urban development followed the 1935 masterplan well into the 1960s, although a fictitious new plan for the city’s

socialist development was often cited in specialist media. Likewise, the core of urban legislation relied heavily on interbellum precedents. See Nicolae Lascu. *Legislație și dezvoltare urbană. București 1931-1952*, PhD diss. Bucharest: Ion Mincu Institute of Architecture. 1997.

7. Universităţii Square is one of Bucharest’s main multi-functional urban nuclei, fashioned in the Haussmannian planning tradition during the modern development of the capital during the late-nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Its pre-war configuration featured the country’s second modern university, administrative buildings, a monastery, a hospital, shops and restaurants, and even a circus.

8. Documented in *Arhitectura R.P.R.*, Romania’s sole specialist publication during the communist regime, no. 1, 1957, pp. 3-17.

Nicolae Ceaușescu¹¹ had significant impact on the evolution of architecture throughout the period. Dej's tenure as leader of the communist party between 1947 and 1965 was paradoxical: on the one hand, it initiated a political breakaway process from Moscow, affording Romania relative independence in devising economic, socio-cultural policies serving national, rather than USSR, interests.¹² On the other, the hyper-centralised state forged by this nation-centric strategy also meant increased resistance to the de-stalinisation process initiated in the USSR by Khrushchev, which reformed the system in other satellite countries.¹³ For Katherine Verdery, the cornerstone of this manoeuvre

was national discourse, hegemonic throughout Romania's history in both politics and cultural production,¹⁴ and often acting as the binding agent—or dialogue channel—between the two. The reintroduction of discourse on the nation did more than legitimise a Marxist-Leninist ideology with scant local adherence: it introduced a monolithic core of insular nationalism into the Romanian communist credo, displacing the Soviet discourse while facilitating the increasingly totalitarian streak of local communism.¹⁵

In architecture, this meant a dilution of the sudden, politically sanctioned resurgence of modernism

Fig. 4. Universității Square: plan and aerial views predating the NBT. Urbanism competition solution, 1956–1957]



9. Harvey, David. Monument and Myth. In *The Urban Experience*. Oxford: Blackwell. 1994. pp. 200–228.

10. In-field driven variation of architectural form did find areas more permissive of experiment and innovation—for instance, industry, tourism, and the privileged architecture designed for the nomenklatura. Unique, high-profile administrative or cultural building projects were also desired commissions, as they allowed the authors reprieve from economic restrictions and the strictures of typified production.

11. Successive leaders of the Romanian communist party—and, therefore, of the state. Dej was in power from 1947 to his death in 1965, and was immediately succeeded by Ceaușescu, until 1989.

12. The last stretch of Dej's regime (collectively remembered as a golden age of

Romanian communism) was marked by a more relaxed, tolerant rapport between state and citizens, manifest in lessened censorship and increased freedom of thought and creativity, alongside accessibility to information and western cultural and consumer goods.

13. Such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, or Hungary. For more details on the different paths taken by these satellite states within the general framework of Eastern-European socialism, see Staniszki, Jadwiga. *The Ontology of Socialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1992.

14. Verdery, Katherine. *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 1991. p. 303.

15. Verdery, p. 66.

operated by Khrushchev's 1954 speech.¹⁶ The green light to resurrect modernist discourse in Romania—couched in terms of rationality—only came in 1958.¹⁷ The shift was managed by the profession with caution, which generated surprising conceptual and formal variation: projects designed in a socialist realist aesthetic were completed after decorative stripping down, while the new rationalist direction began reshaping cities across the country with speed and efficiency.¹⁸ Interestingly, experimental attempts to fuse the socialist ethos of collective living with modernist principles and certain parameters of local architecture were perhaps more successful after the death of socialist realism than during its enforcement of “national form for socialist content”.¹⁹ In this atmosphere of discursive plurivalence, architects could pursue national specificity—later to become a central professional desideratum considered by the time's theorists as the catalyst of Romanian architecture's originality and maturity²⁰—although this direction would only be generalised and enforced across the board during Ceaușescu.

Coming to power in 1965, Ceaușescu strengthened Romania's autonomy within the Eastern bloc and, to some extent, the more tolerant social and cultural climate created under Dej.²¹ But this apparent freedom would be short-lived, as Ceaușescu's secure political position paved the way towards his own brand of increasingly authoritarian neo-Stalinism. During the 1970s and 1980s, the system's archi-

tectural directives were increasingly marked by retrograde arbitrariness, applying rudimentary urban regulations on a countrywide scale, and pursuing terra-formation and “large-scale social engineering” projects resulting in the extensive erasure of memory and local character. Nevertheless, as recent studies show, “the production of form retains some autonomy”,²² even under the most draconian of measures, producing buildings—like the NBT—which embody political *and* professional vision.

For a nationalised architecture system working, since 1952, solely for the state and according to the directives of planned economy, the pursuit of national specificity—a topic of genuine professional concern predating the change in regime, and recurrently rising to discursive pre-eminence throughout the communist period—represented an area of congruent interests and creative dialogue with power. By the mid-1980s, architecture of a national flair was required of mass, typified housing and privileged urban developments (civic centres, high-profile administrative or cultural buildings etc.), and had produced designs ranging from the most banal decorative pastiche to truly experimental forays into the modernist vernacular.²³ The ideal of “national specificity” fluctuated significantly throughout the period, hinging on overall political vision and the regime's need of representation, the idiosyncratic tastes of the members of project approval committees, and, not least, on the evolution

16. Nikita Khrushchev's speech on 7 December 1954 at the All-union Conference of Builders, Architects and Workers in the Building Materials Industry, delivered an oblique blow to the Stalinist political scaffolding through a scathing critique of socialist realism, while also redirecting Soviet architectural production towards rationalized design (of modernist filiation) and industrialised production. For an in-depth analysis of the speech and its consequences for architecture praxis, see Augustin Ioan. *Un discurs funebru la căpătâiul realismului socialist* [A funeral speech over a defunct socialist realism]. In *Arhitectura (supra)realismului socialist* [The architecture of socialist (sur)realism]. Bucharest: Paideia. 2012. pp. 184-218.

17. In a speech given at the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Romanian Worker's Party held in November 1958 by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. A temperate, cautious return to a subdued modernist aesthetic is discernible, however, as early as 1955-56, demonstrating the ability of the profession to sometimes

induce discursive changes before their official political espousal.

18. This is likely due to progress in industrialised, prefabricated construction, as well as the economic boost experienced by Romania towards the end of the 1950s. The switch to “rationalist” architecture and planning also benefited, unlike socialist realism, from a very solid theoretical basis and the working experience of architects well-versed in modernist architecture.

19. The 1957-58 works of Tiberiu Niga (Cățelu cvartal) and Octav Doicescu (Băneasa housing estate) evidence this hybrid transition, documented in *Arhitectura R.P.R.* no. 2, 1957 and no. 6, 1959. For a detailed discussion, see Ioana Popovici. Architecture competitions—a space for political contention. Socialist Romania, 1950-1956. *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 38. no.1. pp. 24-38.

20. Lupu, p. 174.

of the concept in the field, which integrated repeated attempts to connect to international architecture discourse. Still, it represented a powerful legitimising force, both professionally and politically. As Harvey notes, the manipulation of urban space represents a vital source of social power for the state and the holders of specialist knowledge.²⁴ The reiterative practice of updating architectural specificity to suit modern circumstances—and (re)definitions of “the national”—resulted in urban landscapes inscribed with official narratives of national specificity.

The destiny of the NBT officially began in 1962 via a competition for a new, large-scale theatre, recycling to some extent the brief of the 1946 competition for the National Opera (on the same site) with reiterative effect on the theatre layout proposals, which observed the late 1950s consensus on optimum scale and silhouette. If in 1946 the two joint winners were genuinely innovative,²⁵ the 1962 submissions cautiously toed the line of avant-garde expression. Aesthetically, there had been a prudent switch from

emphatic socialist realism to a modern expression reminiscent of the austerity of fascist Italian architecture (Stile Littorio); the concept of the theatre hall and its connection with the urban context, however, seemed to revert to a classical theatre scheme.

Theorist Alexandru Iotzu noted the architectural prudence of the designs, vying to secure the official commission by adhering strictly to the brief.²⁶ Anton and Margareta Dâmboianu’s solution—an elegant, almost ironic overlay of svelte arches with no immediately discernible functional or structural role, and a fairly minimal rectangular volume—was perhaps the most forward-thinking, readable as oblique satire of the meaningless architectural heroics of socialist realism. At the time, it garnered approval for updating theatre architecture to an inspiring, monumental, mass-friendly socialist grandeur. G. Filipeanu and L. Strulovici authored the second project illustrated below, preferring a clean and modern, but sedate aesthetic. Iotzu also remarks, perhaps rhetorically, on the odd lack of



Fig. 5. Competition entries Dâmboianu (left) and Filipeanu/Strulovici (right)

21. Comisia Prezidențială Pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste Din România. Raport Final [The Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania. *Final Report*]. Vladimir Tismăneanu et al. Bucharest: 2006. p. 33.

22. Zahariade, p. 135.

23. Vernacular modernism is a concept denoting various “modes of dialogical engagement with the natural and human environment”, seeking to enrich the modernist discourse through reconnections with the geo-cultural and social context. For details, see Maiken Umbach and Bernd Hüppauf (eds). *Vernacular Modernism. Heimat, Globalization and the Built Environment*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 2005. p. 11. It is however debatable whether these experiments were coincidental or actually influenced by the design direction stemming from the self-critical movement surrounding modernism in the 1960s

and 1970s, which Zahariade suggest was not very well known to Romanian architects. See Ana Maria Zahariade et al. *Themes of Romanian Architecture in the 20th Century*. Bucharest: Editura Institutului Cultural Român. 2003. p. 24.

24. Harvey. pp. 194-195.

25. An aluminium egg housing the foyer and auditorium, projected against the blank prism of the stage and annexes (Virgil Nițulescu), and a modernist merger of performance and public space through a raised platform sweeping over the boulevard (Nicolae Porumbescu).

26. Iotzu, Alexandru. *Teatrul. Act de creație arhitecturală* [The Theatre. Act of Architectural Creation]. Bucharest: Editura Tehnică. 1981. pp. 100-101.

coverage of such a major competition in *Arhitectura* magazine.²⁷

Given the depth of political involvement in such a representative project and the strictness of brief specifications, this absence is both understandable and expected. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, *Arhitectura* had once again begun reporting on the international architecture scene. With regular features on British, American, German, Italian, and even Brazilian architecture,²⁸ the magazine had undergone a volte-face from censorship to unsanctioned wishful thinking, circumventing the prefabricated dreariness of mass construction with updates on Western architectural discourse. Moreover, in

the last 1962 issue, an avant-garde study on theatre architecture did make it into print: Liviu Ciulei and Paul Bortnovski's "Study for a contemporary theatre concept",²⁹ which Iotzu deemed innovative for theatre architecture, from thespian and theatrical requirements to a genuine reflection of the users' socio-cultural need.³⁰ The solution aimed for maximum adaptability, reshaping the stage and annexes into a streamlined machine whose ruled surface volume was derived from an intersection of visibility and audibility curves with the spatial requirements of cutting-edge stage engineering.

In an almost traditional follow-up of architecture competitions in communist Romania, none

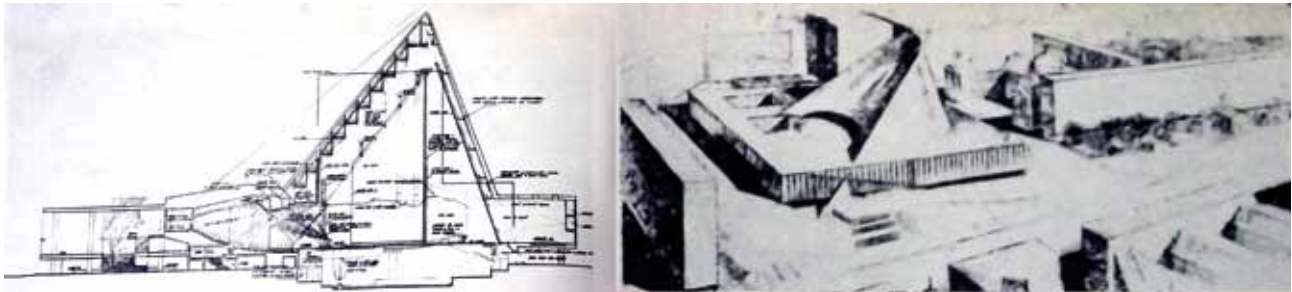


Fig. 6. Top – Study for a contemporary theatre concept—Ciulei/Bortnovski

Fig. 7. Bottom – The NBT—original project perspective

of the winning or participant projects secured the commission. The NBT was designed in 1963 by a team led by Horia Maicu and Romeo Belea, under the professional patronage of the Bucharest Design Institute (BDI).³¹ Another team of BDI architects, headed by Dinu Hariton and Gheorghe Nădrag, developed the NBT's compositional counterweight, the 22-storey Hotel Intercontinental, inaugurated in 1971. Unlike the theatre, whose design, construction, appearance and urban presence prompted radical reconfiguration during the 1980s, the hotel's modern, clean minimalist presence withstood the test of time, earthquakes and professional criticism.³² Partially finished by 1969, and functional by late 1973, the NBT was more revolutionary in terms of aesthetics than programme. Horia Maicu, Bucharest's chief architect at the time, and Romeo Belea, unofficially credited with the conceptual and visual authorship of the project, prepared for their commission by touring contemporary theatre venues in Japan, the US and Germany.³³ Paradoxically, after such an extensive documentary trip abroad, the theatre's design was simultaneously a surprising regression to traditional theatre space, a welcomed—though tentative—attempt to participate in international architectural discussion (Kenzo Tange's tradition-suffused, robust architecture was very much en vogue in Romania), and a long-awaited merger between modernism with brutalist nuances and vernacular Romanian architecture. The following

section examines how these threads combined into the theatre's peculiar aesthetic.

3. Reiterative Innovation: the National Bent of Romanian Architecture

Although the NBT project was finalised in 1963, it eluded print until 1969, when *Arhitectura* devoted fourteen pages and the cover image to the theatre, after an unexpectedly lengthy but telling period of press obscurity. The reasons behind the commission attribution to Maicu (rather than the winners of the 1962 competition) remain unclear, but co-author Belea concedes the team was assembled by Maicu the very same year.³⁴ The obscurity of commission attribution once again highlights the political importance of the project. As the future epicentre of the capital's theatrical culture—but also a site of *en masse* cultural and ideological conditioning—the NBT's appearance had to deliver a strong message of innate cultural belonging, even if that meant a radical departure from the previous aesthetic of public cultural investments.

Nevertheless, the resulting project was conceived with the highest standards of professionalism and quality, later betrayed by a *mise en oeuvre* a couple of decades behind the design. At the time, the NBT was the first Romanian theatre to enjoy the benefits

27. Why *Arhitectura* did not advertise, nor cover such an important competition, remains subject to speculation. Images of the two ex-aequo prizes can be found in Iotzu. pp. 103-105.

28. For reference, see issue nos. 11-12, 1955 (Netherlands, Germany), no. 3, 1956 (Poland, US), nos. 4, 8, 11, 1956 (France, UK, US, Italy), no. 2, 1957 (Sweden), nos. 3, 1963 (Brazil and Oscar Niemeyer), no. 3, 1964 (Richard Neutra) etc.

29. Ciulei, Liviu, and Bortnovski, Paul. Studiu pentru o rezolvare contemporană a teatrului [Study for a contemporary theatre design]. *Arhitectura R.P.R.* no. 5, 1962. pp. 41-46.

30. Iotzu. p. 101.

31. Romania's most prominent State design institute, based in Bucharest but tasked with the development of projects throughout the country.

32. Including the 7.2 Richter earthquake that hit Bucharest in 1977, causing nearly 1,500 deaths and damaging 35,000 buildings. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1977_Vrancea_earthquake (Accessed 2015-08-03).

33. Maicu, Horia, and Belea, Romeo. Proiectul Teatrului Național din București [The project of the Romanian National Theatre in Bucharest]. *Arhitectura*. no. 2, 1969. pp. 42-53.

34. According to a recent interview with Romeo Belea, published online by *Arhitectura*. Pamfil, Françoise. 2013. TNB 2012—Un edificiu-loc public [NBT 2012. A public place-building]. <http://arhitectura-1906.ro/2013/02/tnb-2012-un-edificiu-loc-public/> (Accessed 2014-10-03).

of a sizable, central urban site adequate for the scale and complexity of the programme.³⁵ Pre- and post-design consultations with specialists from the US, Germany and Austria (Marcel Breuer, Ben Schlager, Walter Munruh, Newman and de Gaetano), contributed to shaping the project, and Belea even reported that, after completion, the theatre rose to international attention, with many architects travelling from abroad to study the originality, complexity and ingenuity of the functional and technical solutions.³⁶ If for the public and theatre professionals the NBT's image was congruent with the artistic and cultural acts performed within, for architects the building's outer shell was far more significant. To track the evolution of the design, I will first build a sketch of the authors' conceptual agenda with regards to the building's exterior appearance, using the article penned in *Arhitectura* 2/1969, and recent interviews conducted with Romeo Belea by contemporary architecture publications since 2005, which fully reflect his position on the subject. Design intent will then be weighed up against the overarching economic and political strategies of the time. Similarly, the end result will be seen through the lens of the time's limitations in construction practice and technological capabilities.

For the authors, the theatre's layout, capacity and technological endowment stemmed from extensive research into experimental, flexible theatre design, focused on the individual and collective experience of the performance and explorations of theatre-going as an act of cultural participation and social presence.³⁷

35. The NBT was designed to contain three performance halls (the biggest designed for 920 spectators), annexes fitted with cutting edge technology, ample facilities and recreation spaces for actors and staff, as well as multiple foyers, exhibition and services areas.

36. See <http://www.revistaconstructiilor.eu/index.php/2014/01/31/despre-teatrul-national-i-l-caragiale-bucuresti-cu-prof-dr-arh-romeo-stefan-belea/> (Accessed 2014-10-03).

37. Maicu and Belea, pp. 43-46.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

But if these desiderata were contemporary and generally valid for modern theatre architecture, the outward appearance of the building had to do justice to the idea of a "national" theatre, the capital and country's biggest, most awe-inspiring performance venue. Maicu and Belea's article constantly stressed the contribution of carefully selected instances of traditional Romanian architecture (erudite and vernacular) informing the NBT's design, drawing on "traditions deeply rooted into the culture and consciousness of us all, in the consciousness of a people for whom tradition was and always is a point of departure for the future."³⁸ The theatre's main facade and foyer lent themselves best to modern re-imagining, using a syntax and vocabulary generally ascribed to "essential" Romanian architecture.

The result was a veranda at urban scale, a space of selective openness, visibility and sociability, bearing the specific supra-unitary wall/opening ratio attuned to the country's climate,³⁹ and—according to the time's philosophy infused discourse—the imprint of spatial archetypes stemming from a specifically Romanian cultural matrix. The exterior walls were to be decorated with polychrome mosaics and frescos reminiscent of "the painted exterior walls of monuments in Northern Moldova", known for their exceptional value.⁴⁰ Perhaps the most significant references were to the silhouette of medieval churches, with swooping eaves echoed in the veranda/urban portico synthesis, and svelte towers suggested by the slightly angled stage tower. The merger between vernacular and erudite traditional

39. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

40. That is, "shapes of an authentic and contemporary architectural expression, specific for our country and people through their spiritual link with the most valuable traditions of erudite and folk architecture". *Ibid.*, p. 53. For further references, see the works of Constantin Noica and Nicolae Iorga on Romanian culture and spirituality.

41. Ioan, Augustin. *Modern Architecture and the Totalitarian Project. A Romanian Case Study*. Bucharest: Institutul Cultural Român. 2009. P. 159.

42. An assemblage of archetypes sourced from architecture history. See Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter. *Collage City*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press. 1978.

architecture elements is significant. During socialist realism, folk architecture had been the politically preferred source of architectural precedent due to the historical subjection of Romanian peasants, while erudite architecture had been associated with past oppression.⁴¹ Bringing the two together in a modern retelling of national specificity suggests, beyond a professional incentive to recover the breadth of traditional architecture repertoire, a political striving towards general cultural acceptance on multiple societal levels.

The second reference pays homage to Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut, whose upturned concrete overhang the NBT was accused to have surreptitiously copied. With an aesthetic verging on

brutalism, or, as Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter see it, bricolage,⁴² Le Corbusier's chapel is a striking departure from the architect's earlier, "international" modernism, suggesting a return to the meaningful, symbolic dimension of built form. While Ronchamp is—inside and out—an experimental exercise in pure tectonics and refined religious symbolism, the NBT's reiteration of tradition is more of an overlay of updated vernacular imagery onto an otherwise functionalist building. Only the main facade and foyers follow the curvilinear, tectonic logic reminiscent of church verandas, with the collage most apparent in the foyer/amphitheatre connection and the section of the stage tower.

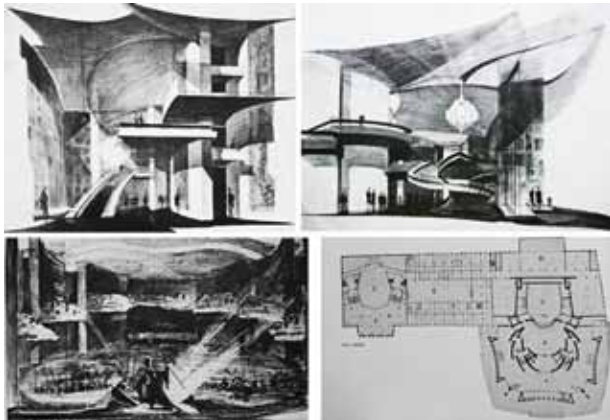


Fig. 8. Building plan and dynamic sketches of the NBT's foyers and main stage

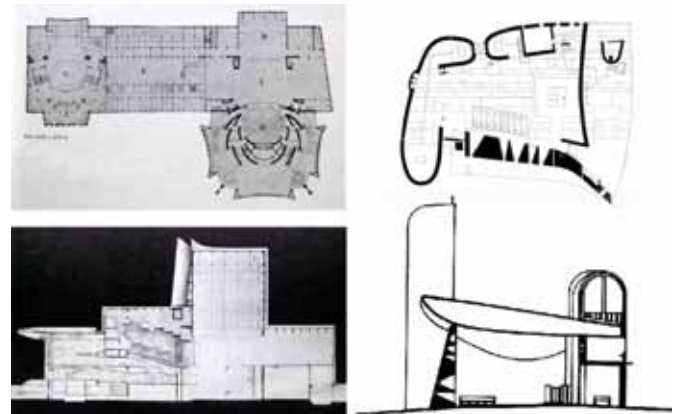


Fig. 9. NBT and Ronchamp: a comparison of conceptual cohesion



Fig. 10. Conceptual collage: Voroneț monastery (top left), Ronchamp (bottom left), and I.L. Caragiale's hat

The third visual reference of the theatre's collage aesthetics is dubious in origin, and probably arose from the multitude of similes produced by the non-professional viewers' reaction to the building: the curved, broad rim, topped with a squat, cylindrical volume housing services and annexes, bore resemblance to Ion Luca Caragiale's late-nineteenth-century hat.⁴³ Ironically, the public's humorous assessment predated professional critique in perceiving the NBT's aesthetics as less of a synthesis between the two conceptual mainlines espoused by the design team (a modern reinterpretation of traditional architecture and an attempt to enter international dialogue exploring alternative, local expressions of modernism) and more of an imagery collage blending two churches and a hat.

Undoubtedly, the most fascinating element of this design agenda is the dual claim to national representation and international connectivity. Since the late 1950s, Dej had launched socialist Romania on a gradually divergent political and economic orbit from Moscow, and by 1963, the effects of this policy had been considerable in terms of cultural

openness to western influences and access to information. At this time, modernism of the functionalist derivation and the negative effects of post-war urban reconstruction had been under criticism from without (anthropology, phenomenology) and within the profession (Team X) for its accentuated loss of the symbolic dimension of the built environment. In this respect, the NBT project was perfectly in line with contemporary attempts to arrive at a "vernacular modernism", an architecture at the same time shaped by the constant progress, improvement and modernisation for the greater social welfare that the regime drove forth, but also culture- and context-conscious.

In Romania, however, this appeal to local contextuality was mostly initiated by political and professional circles, rather than arising from popular discontent with the alienating characteristics of post-war urbanism and architectural developments. Rather than opening a line of dialogue with intellectual circles, the Party's reinstatement of "the national" was primarily meant to centralise power and build an impregnable, monolithic "Romanian-

Fig. 11. Junzo Sakakura's Hiraoka city hall (1964) and Kenzo Tange's Olympic Stadium (1963-1964), examples of Japan's modernised architectural tradition focused on essentialised spatial archetypes. Below, Romanian lyrical functionalism focused on sculptrality derived from folk art



43. Ion Luca Caragiale (1852-1912), one of Romania's greatest playwrights and literary figures.

44. My research has identified a triangulation between *Arhitectura* magazine, the staff of IMUUAU and the Romanian Architect's Union, due to a select handful of practitioners holding leadership and key roles in all three institutions at the same time, throughout their joint history. This privileged professional circle does secure a certain degree of discursive autonomy in relation to power, but it also increases the inertia of the architectural agenda and hermeticism of the field. For details, see Popovici, p. 26.

45. Ștefan, Dorin. Lungul drum al ambiguității către arhitectură [The long route of ambiguity towards architecture]. *Arhitectura*. nos. 1-2, 1982. pp. 68-71.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

47. As Ceaușescu had limited spatial perception, projects under his personal tutelage had to be presented through painstakingly detailed models, sometimes rendered in situ at a 1:1 scale, with expensive materials. Design Institutes had modelling departments working round the clock to produce—weekly—vast quantities of exquisite models of ongoing, high-profile projects for the ruling couple to peruse and modify. See Viorica Iuga-Curea (ed.) *Arhitecți în timpul dictaturii* [Architects during the dictatorship]. Bucharest: Simetria. 2005. pp. 176-177.

ness” (based on difference and uniqueness), justifying divergence from Moscow-dictated policies *and* garnering significant support from the masses. Since pre-war interdisciplinary exchanges hinged on the national, the change was welcome, but masked a transition to national discourse barred from free cultural negotiation, and rehashed by the Party to serve political strategies. The countless committees deciding the fate of architecture projects were strict in weeding out attempts at national cultural production lacking clarity, ease of perception and immediate (literal) reference to elements of local tradition. This cookie-cutter national filter made cultural production exploring fluidity, ambiguity and different nuances within a territory’s cultural system exceedingly difficult. Reactions to the NBT were, at the time, subdued, due to Horia Maicu’s position within architecture’s locus of professional and institutional power.⁴⁴ Interviews conducted with architects whose university education coincided with the NBT’s first iteration point at the reluctance of teaching staff to discuss the project, although their perception was indifferent verging on negative.

One clear stance on the subject came nine years after the NBT’s inauguration, from architect and academic Dorin Ștefan: “the immense concrete eaves projected in front of the NBT’s massive walls are nonsensical, as they do not create that uncertainty between interior space and the exterior world”.⁴⁵ This article on ambiguity in architecture featured in “Ideas in motion”, a marginal rubric which packed a considerable theoretical punch (often along divergent lines than mainstream Romanian architecture), running sporadically in *Arhitectura* between 1981 and 1989. Although the reference to the NBT is brief, Ștefan’s conclusion clearly delineated the deficiencies of Party-sanctioned (and profession-enabled) national architecture: simply collating or referencing traditional architecture syntax and vocabulary could never produce national specificity. Subtly implying that national specificity itself was a problematic concept, which in reality rang closer to the shared ontological interferences between many social groups inhabiting

the same territory, Ștefan argued that the archetypal spatial patterns ascribed to a certain geo-cultural space reside in the tensions, contradictions, ambiguities, and multitudes of marginal nuances of cultural creation.⁴⁶

Even for projects successful in tailoring these complex patterns to modern requirements and sneaking them past architecture committees, the limitations of socialist construction led to poor execution with quickly degrading materials, cut corners and lack of finesse in detailing. The NBT met the same fate. Weather deterioration and neglect transformed a building already morose without the planned polychrome mosaics and frescos into a drab life-sized model, animated solely by the fast-paced life of theatrical performance. Moreover, the raised platform housing the theatre and Hotel Intercontinental was equally deserted and uninspiring, failing to become a stage of public interaction and socialising. As the next section will explore, the area did have a presence in public and individual memory, but for wholly different reasons than the architectural shape, which sought to do so much and achieved so little.

By the time Ceaușescu had taken exception to the building’s divergent aesthetic, only the interior had been more or less completed, and the projecting eaves shadowed nothing but bare brickwork. After a fire damaged the main theatre venue in 1978, Ceaușescu seized the opportunity to have the offending imagery corrected according to his own tastes, and called for the design of façade variations. After many attempts, set-up in situ as 1:1 models,⁴⁷ no version was approved, but the idea that it would be more cost-effective and feasible to neo-classicise the theatre via application of a false façade had taken root. The theatre functioned in its grim, bare concrete and morose brickwork appearance until 1983, when Cezar Lăzărescu, a powerhouse of modern Romanian architecture who had shaped most of Romania’s littoral resorts under Dej, was once again in the system’s good graces, and took responsibility for reimagining the theatre. According to professional consensus, Lăzărescu acted



Fig. 12. The NBT at the end of the 1970s, and during interment

as no more than technical facilitator of Ceaușescu's vision, and the repeated stress and disappointments of the project ultimately led to his death.⁴⁸ After several attempts to give some sort of architectural coherence to the project, Lăzărescu folded in front of Ceaușescu's vision, and executed a mock-façade consisting of two levels of arches wrapped around the original building, topped above overhang level with a third, disguising the stage tower.

What does such a radical change in aesthetics signify for the NBT, and does it still qualify as a reiteration? Beyond Ceaușescu's personal preferences in terms of architecture, the creative-destructive nature of the theatre's interment—a gesture of spatial manipulation and inscription of a message of symbolic dominance through culture—lends strength to the initial meaning of the building. While useful in charting the negotiation between state and profession, appearances pale in comparison to the actual reiteration: an overt display of power, appropriating and redefining a central node in Bucharest's urban hierarchy and cultural production.

4. From Memory to Myth: A Sketch of Architectural Mythology

The study of memory is a complex field at the intersection of many disciplines: cultural theory,

sociology, psychology, neuro-science, philosophy etc. Investigating the case of the NBT as repository of professional memory—a peculiar kind of “museum” of architectural recollection and thought—is by no means an in-depth examination of professional memory. It does however lean on a set of interconnected theoretical arguments, adapted to reflect the peculiarities of memory construction in Romanian architecture. Debates on the nature and existence of collective memory are far from settled: it is both the process and the result of complex interferences between multiple sites, perspectives and voices.⁴⁹ Some are the preferred domain of historical studies, tending to favour temporal unity and factual logic; Nora's memory is a “polyreferential entity that can draw on a multiplicity of cultural myths that are appropriated for different ideological or political purposes”,⁵⁰ with the focus of agency placed on top-down, elite, hierarchising forces. Some spring from the margins—the voices and experiences of disenfranchised communities, gradually brought to the forefront by anthropology and sociology.

Collective memory produces material artefacts—from memorials and monuments to the simple artefacts of daily existence. “Museal sensibility” ties the first two with efforts to preserve our connection to the past, which paradoxically manage to sever this tenuous link.⁵¹ David Lowenthal's remark on the almost spatial foreignness of the past and the

present obsession to re-possess it through the manipulation of material artefacts highlights a twentieth-century paradox, questioning the validity of collective memory reconstructing “ways of being and believing incommensurable with our own.” Conjured up in this manner, the past is “an artefact of the present”, stable, segregated, and frozen in one single aspect snatched out of the morass of its evolution.⁵²

Collective memory is often co-opted (and produced) by political agendas, especially those centred on national identity—a concept constructed in the present based on contemporary imaginings of a cohesive and homogeneous past and people. In this instance, built artefacts of collective memory are “mnemonic devices”,⁵³ indicative of power’s official interpretation of the past, rather than items of actual recollection. Individual memory and the shared memories of social groups find themselves in a disputed relationship with a collective memory prone to disregard their existence. James Young’s construct of “collected memory” bridges this gap, as “an aggregate collection of its members’ many, often competing memories,” acquiring significance in common memorial spaces.⁵⁴ Thus, individual experiences are accounted for, with common denominators falling into patterns informing tradition and commonly shared values. Memory makers, memory users and historically established cultural traditions interact, in Wulf Kansteiner’s view, to create this repository of shared recollection and meanings.⁵⁵ But how does this process of memory construction and reiteration of the past function for professional milieus

primarily defined, as was the case of architecture in communist Romania, by internal dynamics and negotiations with the political sphere? With the NBT serving as tracker, I will attempt a sketch of memory construction in architecture, and explore its post-communist effects.⁵⁶ Cross-generation oral histories from within and without the profession are vital in understanding this process, as they capture gradual shifts in meaning over time, as well as highlight the difference in the perception of architectural iterations by architects and other social milieus.

Professor architect Constantin Enache remembers the ambiguity of opinion elicited by the NBT’s construction. Lacking a critical dimension, it indicated, nevertheless, a dissonance between design intent and professional reception, judging the theatre inconsistent with the desired “nationally specific modernity”, and unsettlingly similar to Ronchamp. Keenly felt, a need to synchronise with the Western architectural scene favoured aesthetic emulation over sustained discursive cross-pollination. Involved in the theatre’s second iteration under Ceaușescu, Enache witnessed Cezar Lăzărescu’s struggle to mediate between professional standards and the political dictum, pushing the new façade to logic-defying, neo-classicist monumentality. Ceaușescu’s gargantuan, resource-depleting urban projects led, he writes, to increasing animosity towards the system and built icons of power abuse, like the NBT. Then, “the façade which had disappeared became idealized, and *transformed into a veritable myth*”. For Enache, the unveiling of the old facade was enthu-

48. Lăzărescu, Ileana, and Gabrea, Georgeta. *Vise în piatră. În memoria Prof. Dr. Arb. Cezar Lăzărescu* [Dreams in stone. In memory Of Prof. Dr. Arch. Cezar Lăzărescu]. Bucharest: Capitel. 2003. pp. 13-14.

49. Green, Anna. *Cultural History*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. 2008. p. 99.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

51. Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York, NY: Routledge. 1995. p. 251.

52. Lowenthal, David. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1985. pp. XV-XVI.

53. Green, pp. 104-105.

54. Young, James. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. New Haven, CT : Yale University Press. 1993. p. XI.

55. Kansteiner, Wulf. Finding meaning in memory. A methodological critique of collective memory studies. *History and Theory*. no. 41. 2002. p. 180.

56. I will use “collective memory” instead of “collected memories” to signify the top-down directionality of memory formation in architecture, based on judgements of value and perceptions formulated within the profession’s circle of power. The contention of this article is that professional recollection would be better served by relying on collected memories to inform current professional identity and practice.

siastically received in intellectual circles because it represents “requit, a gesture of final separation from years of discretionarily-imposed bad taste”. In addition, he recognises the merit of younger generations, less traumatised by the communist experience, who question the benefits of this revival, especially weighed against the loss of many of their preferred sites of cultural and social interaction.⁵⁷

Professor and theorist Ana Maria Zahariade subtly remarks on the ambivalence of cross-generational reactions following in the wake of the NBT’s restoration.

*I share your disappointment with the NBT. It’s a strange case of “restoration”, nullifying the chances of a possible international competition for a redefined national theatre... which, in all probability, wouldn’t have happened. Paradoxically, I am revolted and glad: glad that Cezar’s horrendous façade is gone, but not at all happy with what I see in its place—or rather, **in both their places**... There is no way out of this dilemma,*

she concludes, also noting the loss of the initial spirit of the project.⁵⁸



Fig. 13. NBT—urban presence

For architects educated in the 1970s, the NBT urban ensemble—deserted and anodyne—is more present in memory than the insipid architectural presence of the theatre. Their tentatively emergent space in professional critique by university staff and students, A.V. and R.M. recall, was increasingly negative and controversial, especially with regards to the second iteration. Paradoxically, despite the negative reception, Lăzărescu’s design brought incipient critique to a close, likely due to the architect’s privileged professional position as IMUAU rector and more or less official architect of the system. “I remember much more vividly what the area was like before the theatre, with stores, services, a circus”, writes M.B., who recollects “a ground floor shop in an old building, with a continuous water-flow in the window display”, rather than the characterless theatre. M.P. and C.S. attribute this lack of public appeal to the NBT’s placement on a raised platform, too far removed from pedestrian and automotive traffic, a strategy that worked against initial design attempts to create a social and cultural open-air hub in the city centre. Moreover, they express frustration at the half-heartedly critical in-studio discussions on both design versions, and report preferring Le Corbusier’s chapel over

57. Enache, Constantin: Professor, Urbanism and Landscape Design Department, Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism. Email communication. Emphasis mine. 2014-03-13.

58. Zahariade, Ana Maria: Professor, History & Theory of Architecture and Heritage Conservation Department, Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism. Email communication. Emphasis mine. 2014-02-24.

59. A.V., R.M., M.B., M.P. and C.S.: architects whose recollections were shared in a group interview conducted on my behalf by M.P. 2014-03-01.

60. A.D.: journalist. Personal interview via email. 2014-02-23.

61. A.I.: ballet dancer (retired). Interview conducted by M.P. on my behalf, shared via email. 2014-03-01.

62. Enache, Maria: Senior Lecturer, Head of the Urbanism and Landscape Design Department, Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism. Email communication. 2014-03-01.

63. Stroe, Miruna: Associate Lecturer, History & Theory of Architecture and Heritage Conservation Department, Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism. Email communication. Emphasis mine. 2014-03-04.

a poorly-executed local version failing to deliver a genuinely modern take on traditional architecture.⁵⁹

Journalist A.D. remembers the hopeful excitement for a cultural awakening incited by the first NBT, divergent in meaning and appearance from typified mass construction. “It represented an unprecedented note of modernity... and an affirmation of the national spirit, a reflection of an ideology which, during those years, seemed to us a breath of fresh air”, signalling Romania’s maverick stance within the Eastern bloc. She associates the 1980s transformation of the building with Ceaușescu’s unexpectedly intense, destructive involvement: “a retelling of the legend of master builder Manole, with the role of wall-crumbling hazard featuring not chance or divinity, but a simple man.” For A.D., these irrational, unpredictable decisions foretold, “with wounds and scars deeply tattooed into *the memory of us all, and each one of us individually*, that these were just the first symptoms of the destructive madness of a man self-styled—what semantic irony—Romania’s ktitor.”⁶⁰ A.I., a former ballet dancer, stresses the lack of emotional reaction prompted by the theatre among his social circle, and classifies it as a lacklustre “stage of architectural adventure” lacking

modernity, exacerbated in scale and monumentality by the second iteration. At present, he welcomes the return to the initial façade, since “it is now a multi-functional building, as well as a part of our cultural patrimony, comparable to other spiritual values.”⁶¹

After the NBT’s interment, time gradually operated a shift in architectural perception, identifiably starting with the 1980s student generation: rejecting the anodyne urban ensemble and unfamiliar with the initial building, they shaped their memories around the activities housed within. For Maria Enache, this was “a cultural refuge, where you could see spectacularly staged plays, open to parallel interpretations.” Her dislike of the second façade equals her disappointment in the lack of a public architecture competition apt to deliver better solutions preserving the plurivalent cultural nucleus affixed to the NBT: “that spirituality is now lost.”⁶² Over the early 1990s, the old NBT once again reconnected with the ethos behind the project, even entering university courses on Romanian architecture as an instance of lyrical functionalism, retrospectively certifying the project’s genuine aim towards national specificity. Miruna Stroe sees the NBT as “an architectural object *representative* of a certain period”, despite not being “the most original”. While the supplementary façade afforded scant aesthetic improvement, she does deplore the loss of cultural spaces, such as Enache’s Milk Bar and Motors, whose existence on the roof of the NBT was made possible by Lăzărescu’s intervention. “Tearing it down”, she writes, “seems to me a retrograde gesture”, and recent design choices of colour, detailing and furnishings “make it resemble a sad, provincial mall... a mere update of the initial image, lacking interrogation and interpretation.”⁶³

As demonstrated by the oral histories above, professional recollection seems to differ significantly from public perception and the individual memories of members of other cultural circles not privy to the insights—or victim to the prejudices—prevalent in the architectural milieu. Claims to national



Fig. 14. Ceaușescu’s architectural playground

symbolism embodied in the theatre's first iteration and the brutal shift in aesthetics of the second had more impact in those circles, where collected memories coalesce without a filter of architectural value dependent on the profession's self-perception and agenda. Moreover, the performativity of architectural objects has far more poignancy than their appearance. Thus, many intellectuals equate the NBT with the cultural freedom and diversity of its highly professional artistic repertoire.

Through these accounts, the process of the NBT's gradual transition from disputed project to architectural myth begins to emerge. First, the critically inarticulate dissonance between design agenda and resulting image was dispelled by the construction of the second façade, which, conflated with Ceaușescu's abuse of power, transformed the first iteration of the NBT into an idealised instance of professional agency from a more culturally permissive age. Subsequently, the fervid cultural diversity fostered by the theatre displaced both architectural iterations from public and professional recollection, until the recovery of the original design ethos restored the NBT as a key moment in Romanian architecture. This shift highlights traits of professional collective memory, which, unheeded, underpin the formulation of contemporary professional identity, affecting current architectural praxis.

Professional recollection is prone to imparting memories through mentorship, making individual repositories of architectural recollection heavily dependent on general professional consensus on value, reinforced through reiteration. According to Garry Stevens, the field of architecture suffers from endemic self-deception about its own elitism and contribution, through architectural production, to inequitable, class-based social stratification.⁶⁴ Education plays a vital role in this distorted self-perception, as it propagates, through institutional practices and master-pupil chains, hierarchies of value focused on the perpetuation of symbolic capital. The elitist internal structuring of archi-

itecture is thus masked by the pursuit of "pure discourse", which also derails social engagement into aesthetic pursuits, and neutralises architecture as a political actor.⁶⁵ However, professional recollection also comprises an undeniable element of criticality: knowledge of the design process, of the context and meanings behind each architectural gesture, allows critical thought to seep into the act of remembering. In this light, the personal memories brought together into collected memory are edited from a professional point of view, although this acuity seems somewhat diminished in the collective formulation of professional memory.

Interestingly, the type of architecture deemed valuable enough to be actively remembered is distilled and hierarchized in the profession's locus of power, whose interpretation is then irradiated throughout the field and internalised by younger generations with little critical resistance. Whether this is due to the strong creative identification between memory makers and memory users or the educational dynamics of the Beaux Arts model, is beside the scope of this paper. What should be noted, however, especially in conjunction with the previous section's mapping of the links between power and architecture in the arena of national discourse, is that architectural value tends to equate, in this case, perceived professional agency and social influence (narrowly self-defined in relation to power), regardless of the actual social impact of these key moments of architectural evolution. Moreover, the value-dependent chronology thus shaped enables the selective reiteration of the past, pushing certain moments to the forefront of professional recollection, while others linger on the edges of obscurity.⁶⁶ Coupled with the post-1989 reluctance to explore the recent past, this selective professional recollection creates a tacit mythology of idealised professional agency—enabled through the reiterative practices of education—to be restored in the present, which diverts much of contemporary discursive concerns and energy from issues of actual social concern.⁶⁷

5. From Myth to Museum: NBT 3.0

During the late-1990s and early-2000s, Romanian architecture was falling out of love with capitalist freedom. The strictures of the free market, even before the economic crisis, had supplanted one authoritarian vision with a myriad of finance-backed others, equally impervious to professional argument or desire for a synchronisation with the international architecture scene transcending mere aesthetics. This reignited the search for “an architecture of our own”, specific and recognisable. In the age of global connectivity, cultural contextuality preventing local erasure was the new “national”. The NBT thus ascended from historical significance to architectural mythology, embodying originality, difference, and subversive professional victory over political and economic hardship—an ethos hardly generated by the theatre’s first iteration. But when the old NBT finally emerged from the scaffolding, it became evident that its allure stemmed from an

idealised framework of imagery, meaning, values and memories acquired through education, projected onto a visually inaccessible object, whose reality could not contradict it.

With this final exposure of both disappointing past reality and the mechanisms which had mythologised an object of architectural and historical relevance, the NBT became a selective reiteration of the past, fashioned today in the name of wider professional recollection. Present-day “museification” dispels the dense patchwork of meanings constructed around the objects it seeks to update into contemporaneity. It bluntly reveals images, which, veiled from sight for extensive periods of time, lent themselves to the development of mental landscapes suffused in meanings transgressing professional generation boundaries. As a museum *of* and *to* memory, the current NBT nullifies myth, reduces meaning, and erases a significant aspect of recent architectural history: the alterations, destruction and transformations operated on architectural objects divergent, with or without intent, from the rapidly shifting aesthetic requirements of political institutions and personalities. Perhaps most alarmingly, it destroys long-standing social and cultural practices formed on the fringes of institutionalised culture. Like limpets on the empty hull of the NBT, galleries, independent studios, live music and theatre clubs



Fig. 15. NBT 3.0

64. Stevens, Garry. *The Favored Circle. The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2002. pp. 86-87.

65. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-223, p. 96.

66. For instance, Ion Mincu’s Neo-Romanian style and 1920s modernism are remembered vividly and with great attachment, although their actual architectural production was far less extensive in volume and social scope than the standardised, prefabricated architecture of housing estates built during the communist era. Despite making up the majority of urban housing—a shaping experience for urban dwellers throughout the country—it tends to fall into wilful forgetting, garnering less theoretical discussion or research, and hardly featuring in contemporary attempts to reconnect with the architectural past.

67. Architect Ion Mircea Enescu reflects on signals the profession’s penchant for national discourse, monopolising the discussion to the detriment of other relevant issues. See Ion Mircea Enescu. *Architect sub comunism* [Architect under communism]. Bucharest: Paideia. 2006. pp. 416-417.

thrived until recently behind Lăzărescu's arches. These interstitial spaces, incubating art, thought, meanings and relationships, were infinitely more valuable for Bucharest's cultural scene than the ill-conceived taxidermy of the NBT's revival.

Yael Zerubavel highlights the alarming frequency with which formerly insignificant places and events are hijacked into legitimising present readings and rewritings of the past meant to support strategies for the future.⁶⁸ This phenomenon not only undergirds the construction of professional collective memory, but is also incredibly detrimental to a contemporary Romanian architecture looking for firm footing in the present. Reclaiming the NBT resuscitates a past rhetoric of specificity and originality brimming with nationalist zeal, but desperately struggling to fit into the bigger picture of international architecture. A lifeless re-staging of past meanings feebly updated through consumerist definitions of "multi-functionality" and "public space" nullifies the benefits of awakening to the reality behind the myth. If the removal of Lăzărescu's façade brought so many illusory claims to the alleged originality, quality and specificity of this particular instance of Romanian architecture crashing down, the theatre's third iteration is a missed opportunity to renounce the pursuit of a chimera: an architecture which is valuable, original *and* international *because* it is specifically, recognisably *Romanian*.

Moreover, the NBT's revival is a deplorable erasure of the multiplicity of voices coalescing into professional recollection, of the multi-layered complexity of recent lived history, materially embodied in a single building. Both instances of communist architecture—the curiously western-looking attempt to channel "the national" during Dej, and Ceaușescu's idiosyncratically neo-classic appropriation of the theatre—should have been preserved. Lăzărescu's facade could have been open in sections, left to mask the old volume in others, opening up a layer of interstitial space—of questioning, debate and interpretation, of remembering both theatres, the times and conditions leading to their construction, and *the shift between them*—something rarely illustrated in built form. This space could foster non-institutionalised cultural colonisation—by the public, artists, clubs, and/or small creativity- and trade-driven enterprises. Then, architectural reiteration can become multiple-voiced, meaningful on a social group and individual level, and conducive to necessary shifts in discursive direction attuned to current conditions. And I can only hope that, should there be a NBT 4.0, it will strive for an architecture which is radical because it is different, inclusive, un-regimentable, and socially relevant.

68. Zerubavel, Yael. *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of the Israeli National Tradition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 1995.



Fig. 16. NBT—quo vadis?