

# Modern Heritage under Debate: Civic Centres in Romania, 1959–1989

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## Abstract:

Between 1959 and 1989, Romania's communist regime developed 'civic centres' as key public spaces integrating administrative, cultural, and commercial buildings. These ensembles, often imposed on historic urban areas, symbolised political control and modernisation, yet also reflected complex, locally adapted interpretations of global architectural trends. Notable examples include Iași, Pitești, Reșița, and especially Baia Mare and Satu Mare, designed by architect Nicolae Porumbescu during the 1970s and 1980s. Despite limited patrimonial acknowledgement, recent transformations have revived professional interest. In 2021, the Romanian Order of Architects criticised changes in Satu Mare's civic centre for compromising its design integrity. Using this case, the article explores tensions between architecture, planning, conservation, and politics, advocating for a reassessment of 'civic centres' as part of Romania's contested heritage and the need for better tools to address their preservation. Additionally, it advocates for re-examining 'civic centres' as key components within a larger national framework of contested and often challenging heritage sites. This debate raises questions about the various issues associated with the official heritage acknowledgement, particularly regarding the tools and approaches required to address it.

## Keywords:

Civic centres, Communist urban modernisation, Built legacy, Preservation tools, Romania.

## «The past is not to be beautified but to be critically examined in order to be understood»<sup>1</sup>

With this statement, one of the inaugural online posts of the recently established Docomomo Romania Chapter was launched in early 2021, addressing the profound transformations of the urban ensemble in Satu Mare, commonly known as the 'New Centre'. Designed in the mid-1970s by Romanian architect Nicolae Porumbescu (1919–1999)<sup>2</sup> and constructed throughout the 1980s, the 'New Centre' became, scarcely two decades after its completion, the object of a 'modernisation' initiative<sup>3</sup>. This project, financed through European funds, emphasized the expansion and enhancement of pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. Although such an intervention may be regarded as a conventional urban development measure aimed at improving the quality of urban life, it provoked significant discontent within the local community, among professionals in the field of architecture and urban planning as well as NGOs involved in the preservation of built environment<sup>4</sup>. The controversy arose from the radical alterations imposed through new urban materials and design that disrupted the coherence of the built ensemble. The ensemble itself had been conceived as a unified composition structured around a central public square, accommodating key administrative, social, and cultural programs such as the administrative building (*palatal administrativ*), the house of culture (*casa de cultură*), the universal store (*magazinul universal*), and mass-housing block-of-flats. This configuration reflected a comprehensive design approach, extending from urban and architectural scale down to interior detailing and design. Furthermore, as Dana Vais stated in *SOS Brutalism: A Global Survey* «the Satu Mare ensemble – with its

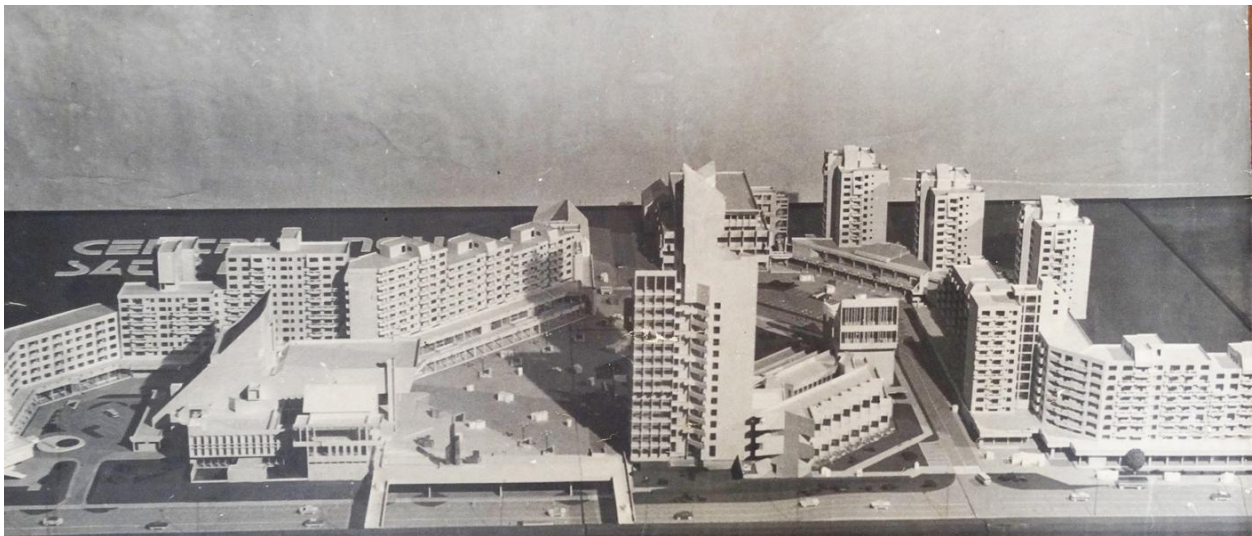


Fig. 1 Satu Mare 'New Centre' 3D model exposed in the local municipality headquarters (foto D. Vais, 2017).

overstated structural elements, raw heavy materiality, intricate spatial articulations, and pedestrian “streets in the sky” deserves the Brutalist label»<sup>5</sup>.

The Order of Romanian Architects (OAR), together with the Union of Romanian Architects (UAR), issued an official statement, declaring that the built ensemble of Satu Mare constitutes «one of the most significant urban planning and architectural achievements of the 1980s within the broader context of Eastern Europe»<sup>6</sup>. The statement further emphasized that «a major deficiency of the current legislative framework lies in the insufficient – or even complete absence of – protection and safeguarding against inappropriate and detrimental interventions affecting a series of works of unquestionable value from the contemporary period»<sup>7</sup>.

### **The «Civic Centre» as Urban Modernisation Tool in Socialist Romania**

The interventions in Satu Mare brought to public attention the issue of patrimonial acknowledgement and, eventually, safeguarding of the built environment linked with the urban transformations of the recent past, which continue to be regarded with reluctance as they intertwine with complex and often controversial political themes. These processes included urban modernisation which unfolded through what historian Dinu Giurescu famously described and denounced as the «razing of Romania's past»<sup>8</sup> – a *tabula rasa* of the historic built environment. Beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, this process frequently overlapped with the design and construction of so-called civic centres or new centres, terms widely employed in professional discourse. These ensembles embodied the architectural and spatial representation of socialist ideology as they became centres of political power representation and were implemented across a wide spectrum of settlements, ranging from county capital cities to rural ones and to the national capital itself<sup>9</sup>. These projects embodied far more than a mere expression of political will in shaping the built environment; they articulated



Fig. 2 Satu Mare 'New Centre' urban intervention in 2021 (foto I. Andriu, M. Condrea, published online on OAR site on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021).

the broader concept of socialist modernisation, pursued through territorial «systematization» grounded in industrialisation and urbanisation<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, they intersected with the challenges of preserving the existing historical fabric of cities, generating tensions and conflicts between the newly imposed urban forms and the inherited built environment. Furthermore, they draw attention to the architectural profession under communism, when such projects – designed within a centralised state-planned system – nonetheless, produced urban and architectural compositions deeply rooted in modernism, and at times brutalism, while also drawing inspiration from contemporary architectural developments in the West<sup>11</sup>.

As analysed by Alexandru Răuță, the professional and theoretical debate around the idea of a built centre within existing settlements, either rural or urban, had already emerged during the interwar period having its inspiration in the American «Beautiful City» movement and being already introduced as an urban modernisation tool<sup>12</sup>. During the 1930s, the civic centre, more specifically, was defined as a central public space composed of aesthetically coordinated public buildings, intended to elevate the civic life of towns and cities<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, discussions around the urban modernisation of existing settlements focused primarily on extra-Carpathian regions, triggering a certain historiographic distinction: while the historic centres of Transylvanian towns and settlements were acknowledged as possessing intrinsic value due to the presence of fortified medieval structures and, thus, a more defined historic built centre, the urban and rural settlements of Wallachia and Moldavia were often dismissed as lacking such qualities<sup>14</sup>. This perception of «poor quality of the built environment» within the extra-Carpathian regions persisted also during the socialist years, triggering wide urban interventions as tool of modernisation to correct the perceived backwardness<sup>15</sup>. Consequently, socialist planners framed these areas as requiring a new spatial nucleus, to be materialised through the principle of a built centre defined professionally in a variety of manners (e.g., civic centre, new centre, new built ensemble etc.)<sup>16</sup> and combining nonetheless political with administrative, cultural, and social functions. Post-1989 scholarship remains divided over whether the socialist project constituted a form of modernisation,

with debates centred on its tangible and intangible legacies. On the one hand, modernisation was rhetorically linked to the eradication of perceived deficiencies in the historic fabric – fragmentation, lack of order, scarcity of housing, and limited social infrastructure<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, industrialisation undeniably triggered processes of urban transformation: the establishment of industrial sites necessitated the development of workers' housing neighbourhoods, which in turn raised questions about how these disparate fragments – historic existing settlements, new industries, and residential districts – could be integrated. Within this framework, the civic centre was designed as an urban catalyst, intended to spatially organize and symbolically unify the socialist city. Illustrative examples can be found already during the early 1950s in Hunedoara and Onești, two mono-industrial towns, where the civic centre mediated between industrial facilities and new housing estates<sup>18</sup>. At a larger scale, the «systematization» of Galați in the late 1950s, with its focus on redefining the central public square, exemplified similar dynamics<sup>19</sup>. In Iași, the historic capital of Moldova, debates concerning the restructuring of Union Square foregrounded the tension between preserving the existing fabric and introducing socialist urban principles<sup>20</sup>. While successive proposals varied in architectural expression (1959, 1970, 1980s), they consistently sought to redefine the city's symbolic and functional core<sup>21</sup>.

Răuță identifies the civic centre of Pitești designed initially during mid-1960s by the architect Cezar Lăzărescu (1923-1986)<sup>22</sup>, as a pivotal precedent that set a model subsequently adopted in numerous Romanian towns, especially after the 1968 administrative reform, which established new county capitals<sup>23</sup>. These projects were ranging from demolitions and territorial «systematization» strategies to the design of complete and coherent urban and architectural ensembles, extended in some cases down to interior design, as exemplified by Satu Mare. Other relevant but less systematically documented case studies include Reșița, Brăila, Ploiești, Râmnicu Vâlcea, Zalău, Baia Mare, Deva, and Miercurea Ciuc, many of which were only partially addressed in contemporary publications such as *Arhitectura* magazine, while the attention was directed almost exclusively throughout the 1980s to the Bucharest's transformation through the construction of its own political and administrative centre<sup>24</sup>.

### **The «Civic Centres» Built Legacy**

Among the earliest architectural and urban studies produced in the aftermath of 1989 were those addressing the House of the People – today's Parliament Palace – an emblematic, yet profoundly controversial, intervention in Bucharest's urban landscape. Initiated in 1984 under the direct supervision of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, the project transformed the city through extensive demolitions that eradicated nearly one-fifth of its historic centre<sup>25</sup>. Conceived as the centre piece of a new political and administrative district, the building epitomized the hybrid architectural language of the 1980s, with monumental proportions that rendered it the second-largest administrative edifice in the world<sup>26</sup>. Interrupted by the political rupture of 1989, the project became the subject of some of the earliest post-communist debates – both professional and public – concerning its future<sup>27</sup>. For many, the House of the People/Parliament Palace persists as an unresolved scar: a tangible reminder of the socialist program of systematization and the large-scale demolitions of the historic urban fabric and historic monuments<sup>28</sup>.

The history of Romanian heritage legislation is directly linked with the ideological development of the concept of civic centre especially if considered emblematic case of Bucharest. The abolition of the Historic Monuments Directorate in 1977 is directly linked with the massive demolitions that followed to give space to the implementation of Ceausescu's ideal of a political and administrative centre<sup>29</sup>. Bucharest was not a singular case.

However, as in the case of Bucharest, other civic centre dating from the communist period continued to be used after 1989, with most undergoing an aggressive process of privatization – particularly buildings such as the universal shops (*magazinul universal*), houses of culture (*casa de cultură*), and residential complexes. Others experienced further modernisation processes that significantly impacted their urban and architectural composition and design, as exemplified by the case of Satu Mare.

As stated by OAR and UAR in 2021, Romania's post-1989 legislation framework lacks the proper tools for patrimonial acknowledgement of such complex-built ensembles especially if dated during the 1945-1989 period. Even though there could be safeguarded under the category of «urban ensembles» (*ansamblu urban*), buildings or areas developed after 1945 are not considered for listing, unless in exceptional cases as the State Circus designed by Nicolae Porumbescu in 1960, or most recent attempts in safeguarding the Black Sea architecture through urban planning tools such as «protected areas»<sup>30</sup>. The issue is exacerbated by the overall lack of research in the field. A comprehensive, comparative study of these civic centres – their dating, mechanisms of design and construction, and modes of negotiation with pre-existing urban structures – remains absent from both Romanian and international scholarship. Such an investigation would not only clarify the extent of socialist-era interventions but also clarify their complex role in the contested processes of modernisation and identity construction within Romania's recent urban history.

The civic centres constructed in Romania between 1959 and 1989 represent one of the most controversial yet essential components of the nation's modern urban and architectural heritage. Their ambivalent status – simultaneously dismissed as symbols of political repression and valued as notable architectural achievements – renders their preservation a particularly complex challenge in contemporary heritage practice. Addressing this challenge requires, first, the critical recognition of civic centres as heritage assets within both national and international frameworks, thereby overcoming current legislative restrictions that largely exclude post-1945 architecture from protection. Second, preservation strategies must embrace an integrated approach that considers the urban ensemble in its entirety – including public spaces, administrative and cultural buildings, and housing stock – rather than isolating individual monuments. Finally, these centres should not be regarded merely as discrete ensembles but as components of a broader territorial network shaped by state-led modernisation policies, while also attending to the specificities of each case.

<sup>1</sup> Docomomo Romania Chapter, official Facebook channel <<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100079745583129>> [13/9/1015]

<sup>2</sup> «Nicolae Porumbescu [...], Romanian architect, a prominent figure of functionalism in architecture and contemporary urbanism». In these terms the architect was introduced in the *Universal Dictionary of Architects/ Dicționar universal al arhitecților* published in 1986. A graduate of the Bucharest Faculty of Architecture (1947), he worked entirely under the communist regime, developing major urban 'systematization' projects from the 1950s to the 1970s. He contributed to the restructuring of towns such as Hunedoara, Botoșani, Suceava, and Satu Mare, where he also refined architectural ensembles and interiors. Among his main works are several 'houses of culture', reflecting his stylistic shift from the Socialist Realism of the 1950s (Hunedoara House of Culture) to Brutalism infused with local identity (Satu Mare House of Culture, 1980s). He also designed the State Circus in



Bucharest (1960s), one of the few monuments from that era officially preserved today. Paul Constantin, *Dicționar universal al arhitecților*, Bucharest, Ed. Științifică și enciclopedică, 1986, pp. 262-263

<sup>3</sup> *Modernizarea și extinderea traseului pietonal și velo în Centrul Nou din municipiul Satu Mare*, <<https://www.primariasm.ro/modernizarea-si-extinderea-traseului-pietonal-si-velo-centrul-nou-din-municipiul-satu-mare>>[10/9/2025]

<sup>4</sup> «We believe that what is currently happening in Satu Mare, through the redevelopment of the pedestrian area of 25 October Square, once again demonstrates that Romania's recent heritage is at risk due to irreversible transformations that threaten its material integrity. Without denying the need for modernisation, intervention, and renewal – and acknowledging the lack of meaningful public debate surrounding recent heritage sites in Romania – we affirm that today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, built elements and ensembles (regardless of their age) in which society has invested not only resources and effort, but also talent and craftsmanship, deserve careful attention, integrated treatment, and regulatory frameworks that allow them to age with dignity.» Docomomo Romania Chapter, online statement published in February 2021, <<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100079745583129>> [13/9/2015]

<sup>5</sup> OLIVER ELSE, PHILIP KURZ, PETER CACHOLA SCHMAL (a cura di), *SOS Brutalism: A Global Survey*, Catalog DAM – Wustenrot Foundation, Zurich, 2017; <<https://www.sosbrutalism.org/cms/16448325>>[9/9/2015]; DANA VAIS, *The Productive Role of Margins. Architectural Discourse in the Late 1960s Romania*, «SITA - studies in History and Theory of Architecture. Marginalia: Architectures of Uncertain Margins», IV, 2016, pp. 202-215

<sup>6</sup> «The “New Center” of Satu Mare is one of the most significant achievements of its kind in Romania, entrusted to a single author of notable importance and professional capability – architect Nicolae Porumbescu. The ensemble possesses undeniable qualities: exceptional urban composition and stylistic unity. The architectural elements stand out through the sculptural volumetry of the masses, the subtle execution of interior spaces, and the mastery in the modulation of light – hallmarks of Nicolae Porumbescu's unique and original architectural style». *OAR și UAR iau poziție publică față de lucrările din Centrul Civic – Satu Mare*, published online on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021 <<https://oar.archi/comunicate-de-presa/oar-si-uar-iau-pozitie-publica-fata-de-lucrările-din-centrul-civic-satu-mare/>>[11/9/2015]

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> DINU GIURESCU, *The Razing of Romania's Past*, Washington DC, US Committee, ICOMOS – World Monuments Fund, 1989; LILIANA IUGA, *Reshaping the Historic City Under Socialism: State Preservation, Urban Planning and the Politics of Scarcity in Romania (1945-1977)*, PhD Thesis, CEU Budapest, 2016, pp. 5 – 6.

<sup>9</sup> RADU-ALEXANDRU RĂUȚĂ, *Negocierea centrului civic. Arhitectii și politicienii în România secolului XX*, Bucharest, Ed. Universitară Ion Mincu, 2013

<sup>10</sup> Within the national panorama of wide territorial transformations driven by state-planned interventions, the urban modernisation was framed by the socialist propaganda as a direct outcome of industrialisation and territorial «systematization».

The term *sistematisare* - «systematisation» - was used in the 1930s Romanian urban planning context, first by Cincinat Sfințescu at a time when he tried to theorise various fields of planning, such as the rural planning defined as rururbanism, city planning defined as urbanism, and territorial large-scale planning defined as super-urbanism. During communism, urban planning became «systematisation» (urban or territorial planning) and was transformed into a political instrument of reorganisation of the national territory. Per Ronnas, *Urbanization in Romania. A Geography of Social and Economic Change Since Independence*, PhD Thesis, Stockholm, The Economic Research Institute - Stockholm School of Economics, 1984, p. 21; Luminita Machedon, Erin Scoffham, *Romanian Modernism. The Architecture of Bucharest, 1920-1940*, Cambridge-London, The MIT Press, 1999; Dana Vais, *Systematization: A Key Term in Twentieth-Century Romanian Urbanism*, «Urban Planning», VII, n. I-XVI, 2022

<sup>11</sup> <<https://www.sosbrutalism.org/cms/16448325>> [9/9/2025]

<sup>12</sup> RADU-ALEXANDRU RĂUȚĂ, *Civic Centres under Ceaușescu's Rule. The Failure to Articulate a Professional Discourse*, «SITA-studies in History and Theory of Architecture. Printed in Red: Architectural Writings during Communism», I, 2013, pp. 105-119

<sup>13</sup> RADU-ALEXANDRU RĂUȚĂ, *The Making of a Civic Centre. Three case studies: Braila, Pitești, Sibiu*, in Irina Vainovski-Mihai (a cura di), *NEC “Stefan Odobleja” Program Yearbook 2008-2009*, Bucharest, 2009, pp. 207 - 235

<sup>14</sup> LILIANA IUGA, *The old city and the rhetoric of urban modernization in Romania (1950s-1970s)*, in S. Adorno, G. Cristina, A. Rotondo (a cura di), *Visibile - Invisibile: percepire la città tra descrizioni e omissioni*, VI Congresso AISU (Catania, 12-14/9/2013), Catania, Scrimm Edizioni, pp. 161-175

<sup>15</sup> LILIANA IUGA, *Reshaping the Historic City Under Socialism ...*, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> RADU-ALEXANDRU RĂUȚĂ, *The Making of a Civic Centre ...*, op. cit. p. 207.

<sup>17</sup> AUGUSTIN STOICA, *Communism as a Project for Modernization: The Romanian Case*, «Polish Sociological Review», s. IV, n. CXX, 1997, pp. 313-331

<sup>18</sup> RADU MARCUS, *Sistematisarea orașului Hunedoara*, «Arhitectura RPR», VII, n. II, 1959, pp. 7 - 11

<sup>19</sup> V. SEBESTYEN, *Studii pentru sistematizarea centrului orașului Galați*, «Arhitectura RPR», VII, n. IV, 1959, pp. 33 – 39

<sup>20</sup> B. GRUNBERG, *Sistematisarea orașului Iași*, «Arhitectura RPR», VII, n. IV, 1959, pp. 40-44; Traian Chitulescu, *Concurs pentru sistematizarea Pieței Unirii din Iași*, «Arhitectura RPR», VII, n. IV, 1959, pp. 40-44; pp. 44-48

<sup>21</sup> LILIANA IUGA, *Reshaping the Historic City Under Socialism ...*, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> CEZAR LAZARESCU, VIRGIL BILCIURESCU, EUSEBIU LABIS, ANDREI VARNAY, *Sistematisarea zonelor centrale din orașele Pitești, Brașov, Sibiu, Sebeș-Alba, Târgoviște, Suceava și Tg. Mureș*, «Arhitectura», VI, 1966, pp. 51-67

<sup>23</sup> RADU-ALEXANDRU RĂUȚĂ, *The Making of a Civic Centre ...*, op. cit. pp. 207-235.

<sup>24</sup> Dinu Vernescu, *Centrul să cuprindă în primul rând dotări*, «Arhitectura», VI, 1966, pp. 70-71; L. T. Staadecker, *Concursul pentru sistematizarea zonei centrale a municipiului Râmnicu Vilcea*, «Arhitectura», II, 1974, pp. 73-76; DAN SLAVICI, ȘTEFAN DATCU, *CONCURSUL – sistematizarea centrului nou în orașul Bistrița*, «Arhitectura», I, 1975, pp. 65-67.

<sup>25</sup> DINU GIURESCU, *The Razing of Romania's Past ...*, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> AUGUSTIN IOAN, *Power, Play and National Identity. Politics of Modernization in Central and East-European Architecture. The Romanian File*, Bucharest, The Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, 1999; Ioana Iosa, *Bucarest. L'embleme d'une nation*, PU Rennes, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> SORIN GABREA, *Bucharest 2000 Competition: Thematic Dossier*, «Arhitectura», V-VI, 20119, Published online in 2020, <<https://arhitectura-1906.ro/en/2020/02/bucharest-2000/>> [9/9/2025]

<sup>28</sup> See *Uranus Acum/Conciliere*, a cultural project developed during 2022 and focused on Uranus neighbourhood that was demolished during the 1980s in Bucharest. The project focused on the trauma created by the demolitions and the community's displacement, while facing the built legacy of this intervention: House of the People/Parliament Palace <<https://uranusacum.ro/uranus-acum-conciliere-2022/>>[13/9/2025]

<sup>29</sup> LILIANA IUGA, *Reshaping the Historic City Under Socialism ...*, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Monuments Act (2001, republished 2006), accompanied by the *National Register of Historic Monuments* (1992, 2004, updated 2010 and 2015).