

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE ON 20th CENTURY HERITAGE

Socialist Modernist Heritage in the Republic of Moldova

The Socialist Modernism project was conceived in 2013, with the aim of protecting the built socialist heritage erected between the 1960s and 1980s in the countries of Eastern Europe. One important goal of the project is to identify relevant public buildings and public spaces within the mentioned area. The Eastern European Socialist Modernism has been excluded from the history of architecture. Also, in the Republic of Moldova this phenomenon has been ignored by fellow experts and local authorities alike. This type of architecture encountered a spectacular development which today could be improved and put to use in a new way. In this context, the next step towards classifying and restoring the historical heritage of the Republic of Moldova would be first to take a look at the buildings found in the most advanced state of decay. Together with BACU (Bureau for Art and Urban Research) we are currently advocating a group of four buildings in Chisinau, requesting that they become recognised as part of the heritage and listed as historic monuments.

The first phase of the project deals with the architecture of the Republic of Moldova and more specifically with four important buildings: the “Romanita” Collective Housing Tower, the Hotel National (former Intourist), the Cosmos Hotel, and the Circus in Chisinau.



The “Romanita” collective housing tower, Chisinau

The “Romanita” Collective Housing Tower, Chisinau

The building is situated at 29/2 Arheolog Ion Casian-Suruceanu Street, on the periphery of the Valea Trandafirilor Park, near the Republican Clinical Hospital. In the mid-1970s, due to the housing needs local authorities decided to build a block of flats for small family units. It was designed and built between 1978 and 1986 by the architect O. Vronski and the engineer A. Marian, in collaboration with O. Blogu, S. Crani, N. Rebenko and P. Feldman. In terms of structural engineering, the building is an important achievement of the 1970s-80s: all the dwelling units on all 16 residential levels are designed and built in console, thus enhancing the slender image of the building – a rare shape for that time.

After the 1990s, these social housings for small family units changed their status into “residential apartments” after being privatised by the owners. In the USSR, all architectural design was controlled by political authorities’ directives. For that reason, each person had an area of six square metres assigned in the concept phase of the project. The principle of the housing unit/housing cell was applied, consisting of two rooms assigned to two people, with a hall and a bathroom. Communal kitchens, recreation rooms and technical areas were provided on each residential floor. This type of compartmenting represents the reality of the socialist period, when experts had to comply with the imposed rules for living areas, without being able to make any changes without approval from the authorities. Here is one popular example of space division: eight units with two rooms on each residential level, connected by a circular corridor with common areas benefiting from natural light. All rooms have access to the terrace.

Approximately 77 metres high, the tower known as “Romanita” used to be the tallest building in Chisinau. The building consists of two basements, a ground floor and 22 storeys. Its main function is collective accommodation. The circular shape of the building and the long, vertical orientation were influenced by the proximity to Valea Trandafirilor Park. The architectural and spatial composition of the cylindrical building includes four floors for utilities (laundry and cleaning room, drying room and other household utility rooms) and 16 residential floors. The two underground levels are built for technical areas.

From a functional point of view, the upper part of the building would be suitable for a two-level coffee bar and an area destined to invite tourists to enjoy the panoramic view of Chisinau. From a legal point of view, the residential building is divided as follows: the ground floor and the following three floors (except for the stairs and utilities), as well as part of the housing units (16 residential floors) are privately owned, while the rest of the building (upper floors and technical facilities) is under the administration of the Municipal Enterprise of Housing Fund Management No. 9.



The "Romanita", detail of the facade

Current State

"Romanita" was supposed to be part of a larger compound consisting of a tower building, a cafeteria and a sports hall. Only part of this plan was followed through, while the adjacent buildings (the cafeteria and the sports hall), the connecting perimeter infrastructure (courtyard with parking space and passages) and the last two floors of "Romanita" were not constructed. At the moment, "Romanita" is experiencing a decline and is in a state of advanced decay. However, it is structurally stable and functional for at least one hundred years.

Another issue regarding the use of the space is represented by the small size of the apartments in relation to the density of tenants. Many tenants have expanded the surface of their apartments by building makeshift terraces/balconies (of brick, cement brick or board). This type of illegal intervention distorts the image of the building and creates a real threat to the safety of its users for several reasons: first of all, an increasing number of superstructure buildings adds to the structural load of the main building and since they were not authorised, we cannot predict their behaviour over time. Secondly, many additions are made of extremely cheap and low quality materials, which increases the crash risk.

The ground floor is divided into the reception and former commercial spaces, where access is both from inside and outside the building, but at the moment the entrances are out of use. Vertical access is made available through a central traffic node, which includes a spiral staircase and three elevators, two for passengers and one for freight. The building is provided with a fire escape staircase with access from the balconies to the residential floors.

Most of the commercial spaces (food store, barbershop, shoe repair shop) functioned during the 1980s and were once located on the ground floor, but the spaces where they used to be have been vandalized. The joinery, the windows and the exterior concrete platforms, as well as the finishes and the interior installations have been destroyed. The railings – where railings are still available – are made of minimal elements and don't actually secure the place as they should.

Although the construction has the function of a residential building, the housing typology of the socialist period no longer meets the current standards. Apart from this aspect, at first sight, the building presents itself as an unhealthy and unsuitable environment for the function for which it was designed, because of the current state of degradation in which the "Romanita" Tower is.

The State Circus of Chisinau

The original site of the State Circus (Circul de Stat Chisinau) is at 38 Renasterii Blvd. At present, the main entrance can be accessed via Grigore Vieru Blvd., which used to be a part of Renasterii Blvd. until 2010. The first building of the Chisinau Circus was built in the early 19th century in Alexandru Street, at the site of the present "Mihai Eminescu" theatre. The circus belonged to the famous circus impresario Vilhelm Suru, who worked between 1870 and 1874. In 1874, the circus building was reconstructed and re-purposed as a theatre. Towards the end of 1875 the theatre building burnt down. Before the present construction was built, the performances took place in temporary buildings.

The Chisinau Circus construction was built in 1981 by the architects Ala Kirichenko and Simion Shoyhet and the engineers A. Snipelishsky and T. Grryunov. The project was innovative and risky, considering that from the beginning conflicts erupted between the sponsors "Союзгосцирк" (the Circus Union of the USSR) from Moscow and the design team from Chisinau. Nevertheless, Chisinau State Circus was opened in 1982. The money required for the construction was allocated from the budget of the USSR as a gift for the celebration of 545 years since the first mention of Chisinau city. The authors of the project were awarded the State Prize of the MSSR.

The edifice represents a complex and technologically advanced construction. Tilted pillars on the facade, a large scale and an accurate pace represent a synthesis of Moldovan "Hora" dancing, these structural elements conveying an impression of celerity to the building. The Chisinau State Circus consists of two major parts: a cylindrical building intended mostly for the audience and an adjacent building with housing units for artists and animals. The circus also has approximately three acres of land. The building intended for the public includes the main hall where the performances revolve around the main arena. It has a diameter of 13 metres, the standard size for circus arenas. The floor which provides the access for the public has the main function of traffic distribution and representation. From the access area the visitors enter a circular foyer where the main access stairs to the seating areas are located. In the lobby is a catering area and there are also restrooms adjacent to this area. The auxiliary building houses all the spaces destined for artists (accommodation units and green rooms) and for animals (stables, manège). In this building there are three distinct areas, each with a separate entrance: that for the artists, the animals and the technical area. The spaces are located around the secondary arena, as in the case of the building for the public.

In 1988, a large sculpture group created by the sculptor Matvey Levinson was installed above the main entrance. The sculpture represents the image of two clowns – acrobats greeting the visitors with a smile. This sculptural work was included in the Register of Protected Monuments of the Republic of Moldova on 22 June 1999, as approved by the Parliament.

The Chisinau State Circus has hosted concerts and performances of both local and international artists (from Belarus, China,



The State Circus of Chisinau

Finland, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, etc). While the other circuses of the former Soviet bloc had up to 14 performances per year, the Chisinau Circus used to hold the record with up to 57 shows a year, with a staff of about 60 people. After the collapse of the USSR, the circus' activities continued at a slower rate. In 2004, the Chisinau Circus stopped its activity due to urgent renovations. In 2006, the Circus was listed on the stock market, following a decree of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. In 2008, a usufruct contract was signed for a period of 29 years involving the Cypriot company "Pesnex Developments Limited". The commercial operator was bound to take on the restoration and maintenance expenses, but failed to meet its contractual obligations. In March 2011, the 2008 contract was declared invalid by the Economic Court of Appeal; therefore the circus returned to Moldavian state ownership, but remains in an advanced state of deterioration.

Current State

For a long time, the small arena in the administrative area was the only place where performances were held. Recently, this small arena of the State Circus was restored through a public-private partnership, with the official opening on 30 May 2014. However, rehabilitation works of all adjacent areas are still needed in this building in order to function under appropriate conditions.

At present, the building of the Chisinau Circus is in an advanced state of decay. According to the experts' findings, the structural framework of the building is in good condition and does not require intervention, but there are areas where some of the decorative elements on the facade are likely to collapse (natural stone cladding, metal elements). A large glazed area of the

circular building is broken, covered with fiberboards or walled up. Some of the marble tiles on the facade have disappeared and the main entrance is about to collapse.

The main arena is destroyed, as well as the auxiliary rooms and most of the seats in the stalls are gone. Concerning the interior finishes, the degradations are greater than the exterior finishes: the interior decorations are shattered or have disappeared, the suspended ceilings are torn, the floors are broken with ceramic tiles missing, the interior paint is peeling, some doors have disappeared or their joinery is broken and a number of important metal elements from the interior installations have been stolen. Currently, part of the makeup booths as well as the automatic heating systems are still in good condition, but there is a risk that they will be stolen if no one interferes.

The metal relief (sculptural group created by the sculptor Matvey Levinson) represents an attraction for prowlers, who have damaged the building over the last years. Recently, the head of one of the clowns on the frontispiece was stolen. The same has happened with the metal elements of the cupola.

The technical condition of the building is quite good. However, it requires urgent intervention, the building being unusable at present.

The National Hotel, Chisinau

The National Hotel is situated in the centre of Chisinau, on one of the main thoroughfares, next to the United Nations Square (Piata Natiunilor Unite), at the upper end of Stefan cel Mare Blvd and in the proximity of some buildings of functional variety, such as the Chisinau Hotel, the National Academy of Science and Ciuflea Church. A small square with a number of fountains is located in front of the building. According to the local urban planning regulations of Chisinau, the building is placed in the Central Administrative District (Sectorul Administrativ Centru).

The National Hotel is the former Intourist Hotel, which was designed by the architects A. Gorbuntsov and V. Shalaginov and completed in 1974. The National Hotel was part of the "Intourist" Soviet hotel network until 1992, was then state property between 1992 and 2006, and afterwards privatised. As a functional characteristic, the ground floor and the mezzanine contain the reception areas, the main traffic areas and the areas for public catering. These spaces are treated differently from the floors planned for lodging: the void space is predominant, the mezzanine is raised on pillars and there is emphasis on horizontality through multiple sash windows and the use of oversized concrete parapets. All these features are specific to modernism. This hotel, consisting of the ground floor and 15 floors above, was one of the most iconic hotels in Chisinau.

The former Intourist Hotel hosted a Berezka shop on the ground floor. Berezka was the first network of trading stores, created in 1961 by order of the USSR Council of Ministers. In such shops one could find traditional souvenirs: vodka, caviar, folk art objects, etc. Trades were made in foreign currency and the clients were foreigners only. "Berezka" chain stores remained open until the late 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev declared the war against privileges, during the Perestroika period. During its best times, the Intourist Hotel also hosted a number of popular bars (the Lido Bar on the ground floor and another one on top of the building). The other landmark was the Intourist Restoran (restaurant), designed as part of the hotel compound. During the USSR period, the Intourist Restaurant was the most frequented place in



The National Hotel in Chisinau

town. It hosted lavish parties and weddings where popular artists from MSST used to entertain with their songs. The restaurant is located on the right side of the Stefan cel Mare Boulevard, as a continuation of the National Hotel. The former restaurant space was used in the aftermath of privatisation as a casino and as space for private parties.

Current State

Currently, the building is in an advanced state of decay. The walls inside the building are soiled, the plaster has been destroyed, the interior joinery has disappeared and a great part of the exterior windows are broken. The interior stair railings and the furniture in the accommodation units have either been destroyed or stolen.

The National Hotel is owned by the Alfa Engineering Company, which holds 83.25% of the shares. Alfa Engineering was bound by a signed contract to carry out reconstruction and modernisation works, so that the building would be converted into a five-star hotel. The project also includes the restoration of the square in front of the building. Although the company has not met its contractual obligations, the privatisation contract has been extended over the years and the restoration works have been constantly delayed. Today, the building sits intact, overlooking the passers-by like an empty concrete shell.

The new owner has been delaying the rehabilitation of the monument for seven years, without fulfilling his contractual obligations and now he has launched preparatory works towards demolition. Because today the security of the building is no longer ensured, the hotel has been seized by homeless people and the sanitary situation is in very poor condition. The National Hotel is an example of socialist modernist architecture and represents an edifice that should be rehabilitated and then reintroduced in the Moldavian tourist circuits.

The Cosmos Hotel, Chisinau

The Cosmos Hotel is situated in the city centre, where Constantin Negruzzi Boulevard and Dimitrie Cantemir Boulevard meet. By withdrawing from the alignment, a small square was created in front of the building, in which the equestrian statue of Kotovski is located. A controversial personality, the communist activist Grigory Ivanovich Kotovski (1881–1925) is for some a Bolshevik hero and for others a worthless man.

The construction work of the Cosmos Hotel lasted for nine years, from 1974 to 1983, when it was put into use. The labour unions of the Republic of Moldova, which owned two other smaller hotels, “Tourist” and “Doina”, at that time, funded what was to become the country’s largest hotel – the Cosmos Hotel. The building was designed by the architects B. Banykin and Irina Kolbayeva.

The hotel consists of the ground floor and 19 floors above; during the socialist period it was one of the largest hotels in Moldova. The materials used for its construction include reinforced concrete structures and prefabricated elements. The ground floor and the mezzanine are developed horizontally and include several annexes with different purposes, beside the accommodation facilities: catering spaces, a casino and a business centre with conference rooms.

The building site was intended to be a strategic location, since the hotel was built close to the only railway station, near the central square and next to the bus station, 11 km away from Chisinau International Airport. Due to the fact that vacation opportunities in the 1980s were often limited to the Soviet Union borders, Moldova was a very popular tourist destination. In this period, the hotel occupancy rate reached 90% during the summer season and often 100% from September to November.

With the political changes after 1990, the business status of the largest hotel in Moldova changed and the number of tourists decreased drastically. In order to use the hotel at its full potential,



The Cosmos Hotel in Chisinau, detail

considering the strategic location of the building, the administration decided to lease rooms as office spaces and the lobby as area for commercial purposes.

Between 1997 and 2004, a series of investments were made at the Cosmos Hotel, in order to increase the economic efficiency and the quality of the services provided. Following its modernisation, the hotel went from a two-star to a three-star classification. Some major investments were carried out during the renovation of the rooms, including carpentry changes, wall-finishing repairs, bathroom reconditioning and plumbing replacements.

Current State

Currently, the hotel is not operating at full capacity. The finishes are deteriorated in most of the rooms, the ceramic tiling and sanitary facilities in the bathrooms are degraded, while the public spaces on the ground floor and at the mezzanine level are in better condition. Next to the Cosmos Hotel building, a number of parasite constructions have been built (a Grand Hall Commercial complex, built in 2002, further extended in 2011; a Casino built in 2008, and other commercial spaces that replaced the Disco PEOPLE, which initially appeared in 2005). Those extensions are a negative example of commercialization of space, neglecting the initial function provided by the Cosmos complex. In addition to these considerations, there is also a stylistic inconsistency between the socialist modernist period and the latest additions.

Conclusions

Our conservation project (socialistmodernism.com) is focused on architectural complexes from the socialist modernist period. We believe the liberal policies promoted by the municipal authorities

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over the last few decades have neglected the historical heritage of the city with regard to that period. Therefore, a number of buildings of important architectural value are not found in the Register of Historical Monuments elaborated in 1993 by the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova.

The regeneration strategy will consist in preserving the buildings of heritage value, which had a major influence on defining the identity of the city, as well as on the urban modernization of these attractions.

Considering the above mentioned information and also the fact that the objects generally present a medium type of degradation (since interventions in the structural framework are not necessary), we propose the urgent listing of the "Romanita" Collective Housing Tower for small family units, the National Hotel, the Cosmos Hotel and the State Circus (Circul de Stat Chisinau) in the Register of Historical Monuments protected by the state.

Although in terms of time the objects have a low rating, the planimetric and structural coherence provides a high value to the buildings. Moreover, the buildings' construction highlights the ideology of the socialist period, being representative of the way collective housing, hotels or circuses were built and of the compliance of buildings with collective housing programmes or building regulations for circuses at that time. Given the uniqueness of the architectural objects in the Republic of Moldova, we propose the listing in the Register of Historical Monuments and the designation as a conservation area for the entire complex of proposed buildings related to socialist modernism.

Subsequently, by restoring the buildings, a significant contribution will be made to the tourist and socio-economic development of the community. From a social point of view, the sense of community can be enhanced by involving the civil society in restoring the State Circus. At the same time, by converting the Collective Housing Tower for small family units the society may gradually depart from the minimal housing typology. From an economic point of view, the society will benefit from the creation of new jobs (for health professionals and expatriate artists who no longer have anywhere to perform) and from the increase of the tourist potential of the city, by offering rooms and accommodation at contemporary standards.

By rehabilitating the four buildings, it is intended to initiate a dialogue between all parties involved in the development of the city, to define the priorities for action and the strategies for intervention, and finally, to create and implement programmes to restore the national heritage

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