

Socialist Modernism in Central and Eastern Europe (1955–1991)

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Context

As a concept, socialist architecture or more precisely the modernist tendencies of the 1955–1991 period are becoming more and more popular in specialists' circles. In our case, "Socialist Modernism" is a research platform created by the B.A.C.U. Association, focusing on those modernist trends from Central and Eastern Europe which have been insufficiently explored in the broader context of global architecture.

Socialist modernism is an approach to architecture that was typical of the former socialist countries between 1955 and 1991. Most of it has been left uncovered by writers of architectural history. The modernist trend was officially adopted as a result of historical events. 1955 was the official moment when "useless stylistic elements"¹ in architecture were abandoned, by decision of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party. From then on, Stalinist (or realist-socialist) architecture was replaced throughout the socialist bloc.

This new stage must also be regarded from the perspective of the much-needed post-World-War-II rebuilding of the cities. Countries in the former socialist bloc suffered massive destruction of their built environment and city rebuilding was conducted in a precarious economic context, which required special economic, social and logistical strategies in order to be able to cover the necessary urban infrastructure, housing, industrial and public buildings.

To renew the urban tissue, a set of economic policies was adopted, expressed in architecture by design blueprints and

a completely different stylistic orientation. The new building design directions made it compulsory to get rid of "useless stylistic elements", but also to purge shapes and to adorn facades by "a truthful highlighting of wall parts and of large panel elements".²

The socialist ideological rule of creating identical blueprints was adapted locally, though projects followed the canonised political guidelines, while introducing certain elements to individualise buildings and to underline their modernist character. By officially renouncing "useless stylistic elements", as required by post-1955 urban policies, architects in the Eastern bloc found an opportunity to take architecture beyond the ideologically imposed limits. Key principles of modernism were adopted to architecture during this period: "form follows function", the use of mass-produced materials, industrial aesthetics, simplicity and clarity of shapes, rejection of unnecessary details, etc. In this way, post-Stalinist architecture became a way to recover modernism; hence our option to define this trend in architecture as "socialist modernism". Socialist modernism was a desire to go back to pre-World War Two modernism, with architecture attempting to fulfil both cultural and utilitarian and economic requirements – the latter having priority.

At the same time, the society resented this type of architecture because of the policies enforced by socialist authorities. Often, this heritage is not seen for what it is, a complex of architectural objects or urban ensembles, but as a result of bad policies.



Fig. 1: A vivid illustration of the situation of the built environment in Chisinau, Republic of Moldova (© Dumitru Rusu, B.A.C.U., PhotoDep., 2016)



Fig. 2: Memorial building of the Bulgarian Communist Party (*Buzhudzha Monument*), Shipka Pass, Bulgaria, built in 1981, architect Guéorguy Stoilov (© Dumitru Rusu, B.A.C.U., PhotoDep., 2016)

The socialist modernist heritage

Central and Eastern Europe boast a number of important architectural monuments that are representative of the post-World War Two identity of each country and express the aspirations of socialist-era architects, starting in 1955 and ending with the fall of Communism in 1991. Between 1955 and 1970, Central and Eastern Europe experienced a strong urban development, as a result of industrialisation, visible in all cities and districts. In large and medium cities (Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, Bratislava and others), collective living neighbourhoods (divided into micro-districts) built during that period covered large areas and included all complementary functions (health, education, culture, shopping, sports etc). Some of the most important buildings associated with modernist socialism were erected at that time. It was a time when the built environment increased considerably, explaining why these buildings form the large majority in many socialist cities. If these urban areas are not protected as a whole, the general image of the city will suffer (Fig. 2).

In the following we would like to introduce a few socialist modernist examples with a promising future:

Aeroporto Baneasa, Bucharest, Romania

The former Baneasa Airport, today renamed “Aurel Vlaicu”, was built in 1946 to replace the old airport. It has a floor plan shaped like a three-blade propeller whose nucleus is the main

hall. The building is organised on a basement, ground floor and two upper levels. It stands out for the rhythmical façades, decorated with a concrete grid alternating with perforated panels and with a hint of stars. The volumetric accent is the hemispheric dome of the hall, dominated by the lookout of the control tower. In 2014, the airport was rehabilitated and massively repartitioned. The elegant volumetry, predominantly modernist, although created in the Stalinist period, is still visible today and the exterior colour was appropriately chosen. It was added to the Historic Monuments List in 2008.

The Telephone Palace – Automatic Telephone Exchange Building (Cluj-Napoca), Romania

In 1969, after a technological study by the Telecommunications Design Institute, a plan was drafted for a G+5 building, and a G+3 was constructed in a first stage. Public and administrative spaces were grouped on the ground floor, while the upper floors hosted the telecommunication equipment. Today, the building is covered in graffiti and visibly decayed. The first register of the façade is strewn with air-conditioning units and unsightly cables that seriously alter its appearance. A stylised map of Cluj, created after drawings by the architect and installed on the façade near the main entrance, was removed in 2010 and probably sold as scrap iron, despite its value, with no reaction from the authorities. In 2018, B.A.C.U. proposed that the building, now owned by Telekom, be listed by the Romanian Ministry of Culture.



Fig. 3: *Socialist Modernism in Romania and the Republic of Moldova*

Slovak Radio building, Bratislava, Slovakia

The building of the Slovak Radio is in Bratislava and it is shaped like an inverted pyramid. The architects of this project were Štefan Svetko, Štefan Ďurkovič and Barnabáš Kissling. It was completed in 1983. The building is 80 metres tall and has a large concert hall. The form of an inverted pyramid has attracted much praise and strong dislike, as well as functional criticism for its unsuitability for radio broadcasting due to excessive noise, even though the main studios are located in the perfectly insulated plinth. The Monuments Board announced in 2018 that the building of the Slovak Radio in Bratislava is a national cultural monument.

Federal Ministry of Defense (Generalstab), Belgrade, Serbia

The two buildings designed by architect Nikola Dobrović were constructed in 1955–65 to accommodate what was then Yugoslavia's Secretariat for National Defense. The complex was conceived as an ensemble composed of two modernist blocks that descend in a stepped manner towards Nemanjina Street, thereby creating a city-locked symbol of the city gate. The expressive forms, siting and imposing presence of the complex located at the city's busiest crossroads have made it one of Belgrade's listed architectural landmarks. The building was destroyed during the NATO bombings in 1999. Today it is being restored by the authorities.

Even if we have some examples of good conservation practice and maybe some of promising future restoration works by the authorities, which is great, most of these buildings are still found today in an advanced state of decay. In today's

economic and political situation, there is a great risk that these buildings will disappear – some of them being already illegally demolished or inappropriately renovated, without taking into account their architectural value.

On the other hand, we have been able to notice that the interest in this type of architecture has increased. One way to measure this is the success of “Socialist Modernism”, the platform initiated by B.A.C.U. and including a website, Facebook pages, Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest. So far, we have counted about 250,000 users. The growing online trend and the vivid interest of platform members encourage us to extend our initiative with the database and interactive map, even if a large part of the users are not actively involved. Instead, they are spectators attracted by the obscure and abandoned edifices. Nonetheless, publishing and promoting the works of that period in the social media could help us save this forgotten heritage, whose incontestable historic, aesthetic and cultural values have long been ignored.

A palpable result of our attempt to raise awareness and convince the public about the value of this heritage is our publication, hopefully the first of many Modernist Socialist inventory books, entitled *Socialist Modernism in Romania and the Republic of Moldova*. The photo album is an objective illustration of the socialist modernist phenomenon through a series of examples of buildings and architectural ensembles erected between 1955 and 1989/1991. The materials are the result of field research and of archive and library work performed by the B.A.C.U. Association. The members of the Association started documenting this trend six years ago and are still in the process of checking and adding information. This illustrated architecture album presents a set of representative buildings of socialist modernism in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Although built during the socialist regime, these edifices were conceived in local contexts that were favourable to architectural creation, inspired by pre-World War Two and Western modernism (Fig. 3).

Proposed solutions

An important part in safeguarding the socialist modernist heritage is played by the “Socialist Modernism” initiative. Its actions are directed at the rehabilitation and conservation of buildings in Central and Eastern Europe. Our initiatives seek stylistic discipline and the involvement of both local authorities and the civil society in this process, so as to raise awareness to the architectural value of the buildings, the urban planning and the social and cultural urban tissue still existing. We are currently working on the socialistmodernism.com map and database which are part of a wider programme we launched in 2013. Its long-term objectives are to protect and promote valuable architecture built in the former socialist bloc between 1955 and 1991. Its short-term objectives are to document, archive and distribute information on socialist modernist heritage from Central and Eastern Europe and other regions.

The “Socialist Modernism” interactive map reveals the most valuable examples of modernist architecture created in the socialist period, from buildings to neighbourhoods, parks, recreation areas, etc. The site offers the possibility to navigate



Fig. 4: Socialist Modernism map, version 2

through the map in all the countries of the former Socialist Bloc. The objectives are identified according to architectural, artistic and urban value criteria as well as rarity. They are organised by functional typologies: housing, education, research, culture, medicine, transport, leisure facilities, sports, industry, parks and public spaces, monuments. The search allows selective text searches and the four filters: “country”, “current state”, “built in” and “function”. All monitored objectives are provided with the following details: name, site, planning institute, planning and construction period, bibliographic references and contributor of the research material. An experimental version of the map (version 2) is already available on our site: <http://socialistmodernism.com/> (Fig. 4).

We would like to turn this map into an interactive, community-driven tool to help us grow our database and increase the awareness needed to preserve these buildings. We have also created a mobile app that allows anyone to contribute to our map.

Users are able to:

- locate sites on our map and find directions to them;
- add new sites they discovered;
- upload their own pictures and videos made on site.

The information already introduced in the database, on a trial basis, is available to experts and members of the public who have an interest in modernist-socialist heritage. They are also invited to contribute to the database with information, images and videos. All information originating outside the Association will be checked and confirmed by database admins.

It must be said that we are still working on the map. That is why some of the options, such as video download or users’ forum with individual accounts, are not yet accessible. They

will become active one by one, until the map will be fully operational. Furthermore, we are building a community-driven section to better coordinate the efforts made at local level and help organise our members. Anyone who is passionate about this historic period will be able to join our cause on Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, Pinterest by posting with the hashtag #socialistmodernism. All the important socialist modernist landmarks will be included in this platform, allowing them to be accessed by anyone interested.

The Socialist Modernism platform invites architects, urban planners, historians and art historians or conservationists, artists, activists and anyone interested in this issue to contribute and to broaden the platform. Send us any information regarding neighbourhoods, buildings, monuments, parks and cultural landscapes or any relevant architectural elements – please don’t forget to specify their location and address. All the information will be published on our website under the name of the author.

Conclusions

The Bureau for Urban Art and Research (B.A.C.U.) is an organisation focusing on urban and cultural conservation and rehabilitation activities. Its main directions are to protect, preserve and rehabilitate built heritage and art from the socialist period, as well as to monitor how architectural heritage in Central and Eastern Europe is maintained, protected and preserved. Apart from preserving the historical value of buildings, the Association is also interested in improving the overall urban landscape. B.A.C.U. is also striving to make it possible for certain architectural ensembles, buildings and other valuable objects to be classified as heritage and legally

protected, both locally and internationally. In 2016, the Association initiated the classification process for four socialist modernist buildings in Chisinau, Republic of Moldova and in 2018 for another four objects in Cluj-Napoca, Ploiesti, Mangalia – cities in Romania. On August 8, 2019, the State Circus in Chisinau became a protected monument after a decision of the National Historical Monument Committee of the Moldovan Ministry of Culture.

In order to understand how socialist modernism evolved in these countries by following the artistic aspects of architecture, a good knowledge of the various historical conditions of the period is required, the ones that determined a certain historical evolution. Buildings and urban ensembles of the time were the result of centralised planning, which required work in large teams. Socialist modernist architecture evolved differently from one country to another, depending on the particular social and political context, so that it is possible to identify local characters.

We are currently working on revitalisation proposals for several socialist modernist objects built in cities/municipalities of Romania and the Republic of Moldova.

The proposals suggest the demolition of parasitic structures; prohibiting the closing of balconies and any type of DIY abusive rehabilitation; removing excessive advertising from the facades and, finally, making these neighbourhoods, buildings, leisure facilities, parks etc part of the historical heritage. Under such circumstances, the legislation on socialist heritage protection needs to be reviewed, because at least in Romania and Moldova it does not serve its purpose. We are interested in preparing a draft bill that will help preserve these architectural objects and the specific atmosphere they created. The bill will have the objective of preserving built architectural heritage, setting directions for its revitalisation and supporting projects for the classification and conservation of buildings in a bad state of decay.

The reason for adding socialist buildings to the Historic Monuments List is that the liberal policies promoted by former Eastern Bloc countries over the last two decades have neglected the socialist urban heritage. A series of buildings of high architectural value are not protected in any way and have ended in a very bad shape. Whether they are valuable for their composition, proportions, technological innovations or use of constructive elements, these socialist

buildings deserve to be taken into consideration, analysed and preserved, irrespective of the political conditions under which they were built. Most of them have elements, often original, that synthesise local tradition and culture. Special attention must be given to those that by function, location, size or conservation state are fit for rehabilitation, adaptive reuse and a new life. They can be easily adapted to hold cultural, administrative, sporting, social or economic activities and fulfil contemporary requirements.

That is why classification and restoration programmes for socialist modernist buildings, first of all for the badly damaged ones, must be the next step in the preservation of the built heritage of the former Eastern Bloc countries.

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¹ BACU Association, “Socialist Modernism in Romania and the Republic of Moldova”, BACU Publishing house, 2017.

² Ibid.