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ARCHITECTURAL IMAGE AND STATE POWER: BUCHAREST'S PREPARATION TO HOST THE FOURTH EDITION OF THE 1953 WORLD YOUTH AND STUDENT FESTIVAL

Abstract

Communism subordinates architecture to ideology, like any other totalitarian regime. It imposes control over both education and practice in this field, thereby transforming it into a propaganda tool for a new social order. Bucharest, the capital of Romania, was massively affected by the imposition of the Communist project in different phases of its post-World War II history. We refer here to the Stalinist epoch in Romanian Communist architecture (1948–1957), 1952 being crucial for the reassertion of Socialist Realist guidelines in architecture and the adoption of a plan for the Socialist reconstruction of the capital city. The Fourth World Festival of Youth and Students, which was to take place in Bucharest in August 1953, created the opportunity for initiating this project, concentrating all available resources on it. The festival represented a huge propaganda operation overseen by the Soviet Union, with the aim to gain the sympathy and adherence of the largest possible number of participants, under the slogan of peace and friendship among peoples. Besides carrying out some urban development projects, new structures were built in support of the Festival agenda: Bazilescu Summer Theatre, the movie hall Fraternity of Peoples, the 23rd August Stadium, and the National Opera House. Since the festival itself was a means of propaganda, all of these constructions were meant to serve a specific purpose. The present study analyses the relationship between architecture and state power in the context described above, in particular, the use of architecture as a means of propaganda for projecting the image of a vibrant developing country. The 1952–1953 issues of Arhitectura, the official publication of the Union of Romanian Architects, and Michel Foucault's theory of the power-knowledge binomial, will guide our inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

If the interwar period in Romania is characterized by great cultural momentum and an innovative modern spirit, the same cannot be said for the post-World War II period. Once the totalitarian Communist regime conquered Romania – closely monitored by the Soviet Union – matters changed radically, including the domain of architecture. The entire architectural system was monopolized by the politics and ideology of Stalinist Socialism.

Approximately three periods can be identified in the communist architecture of Romania. The first period, the Stalinist, which is the focus of this paper,

began after the war, when the Communists took over in 1948, and lasted until 1957, when architectural practices began to develop in new directions under the influence of Khrushchev's famous speech in 1954. The second period was characterized by a certain cultural openness and by political changes in opposition to the Soviet Union, which is why it is also known as "the Thaw". This term became popular due to Ilia Ehrenburg's novel, *The Thaw* (1954). This phase lasted until 1971, when new measures were adopted. The last period was defined as a period of radical re-Stalinization[1] under the influence of the cult of the dictator's personality. It ended only in 1989, with the collapse of the Communist regime.

As already mentioned, the Stalinist period is the focus of this essay, a time of most drastic control, coercion and censorship, which seriously limited cultural perspectives, while imposing Socialist Realism. The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between state power and architecture in the context of the preparations that took place in Bucharest in 1953 to host the Fourth World Festival of Youth and Students and the Third World Congress of Youth. The analytical method for this approach is the Foucauldian power-knowledge binomial with reference to the issues of *Arhitectura* magazine published in 1952 and 1953. I employ Foucault's concept of power-knowledge to explain how the newly established power, Communism, generated discourse and produced the built environment, and to understand the political status that knowledge assumes, as well as the instrumentalization of all means, including architecture, in generating the "truth" of the new regime.

NEW ARCHITECTURE FOR A NEW SOCIETY

When the Communists came to power in 1948, the first measures taken were to centralize the economy according to the Stalinist model. These measures profoundly affected the domain of architecture by transferring private property to state ownership, by assimilating the architects employed in institutions of design, thus removing any possibility of free practice, and by ideologizing architectural education and practice.

The year 1952, in particular, witnessed pivotal decisions that directly impacted the domain of architecture and urbanism. This transformative moment was announced by Hotărîrea Comitetului Central al Partidului Muncitoresc Român și a Consiliului de Miniștri al Republicii Populare Române (The Decision of the Central Committee of the Romanian Labour Party and of the Council of the Ministers of the Romanian People's Republic), which stipulated the socialist reconstruction of Bucharest, the construction of the metro railway in the capital, the construction or reconstruction of cities and the organization of activity in the domain of architecture.[2] Regarding

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1 Nicolae Lascu and Irina Tulbure Moldovan, "Arhitectura modernă și contemporană în România" [Romanian Modern and Contemporary Architecture] (Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism, 2018), 69.

2 "Comunicat" [Communiqué], *Arhitectură și Urbanism*, no. 11 (1952): 1.

institutional measures, Comitetul de Stat pentru Arhitectură și Construcții, CSAC (The State Committee for Architecture and Constructions) was established in order to "perform state control and leadership over the activity of various organizations and institutions, regardless of their departmental subordination, in the domain of architecture,"[3] according to the articles in *Arhitectură și Urbanism* (Architecture and Urbanism) magazine no. 11, from 1952. At the same time, Institutul Științific de Arhitectură (The Scientific Institute of Architecture) and Uniunea Arhitecților din Republica Populară Română (The Union of Architects of the Romanian People's Republic) were founded for the purpose of research and ideologization "in order to make a major contribution to the work of building socialism."[4] By adopting these measures, state control over architectural activities became absolute. At the same time, hosting the Fourth World Festival of Youth and Students and the Third World Congress of Youth in the year following the adoption of these measures was meant to encourage their application.

The World Festival of Youth and Students was periodically organized by the World Federation of the Democratic Youth, an organization controlled by the Soviet Union. Most of these festivals were organized in socialist countries, and functioned as an extraordinarily effective Soviet propaganda instrument in the context of the tensions of the Cold War, or, more precisely (in this context), what was called the Cultural Cold War.[5] The participants also included young people from non-communist countries with different political views. The presence of many of them was not a matter of their political beliefs, but due to the desire to interact with other young people, to travel and have fun. This was precisely the Soviet strategy: to lure as many young followers as possible through propaganda disguised in universally accepted slogans and values, such as peace and friendship. In addition, it was highlighted that the festival was open to everyone, regardless of their religion, nationality, ethnicity, or political views.[6] This strategy was probably responsible, in part, for the success of the event, with the exception of the 1959 and 1962 editions in Vienna and Helsinki, respectively, which lacked the political support of their host states.

Following the last minute withdrawal of Poland, Romania had to host the fourth edition of the Festival. The limited time left for preparation, just a few months, put extra pressure on a country that was not in the least prepared to host an event of such magnitude, which involved staggering levels of

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3 "Hotărârea Comitetului Central al P.M.R. și a Consiliului de Miniștri al R.P.R. cu privire la construcția și reconstrucția orașelor și organizarea activității din domeniul arhitecturii" [The Decision of the Central Committee of P.M.R. and of the Council of the Ministers of R.P.R. Regarding the Construction and Reconstruction of Cities and Organization of Activity in the Field of Architecture], *Arhitectură și Urbanism*, no. 11 (1952): 2. All the translations of the quotations are made by the author.

4 Ibid., 3.

5 For more on this topic, see Giles Scott-Smith and Hans Krabendam, eds. *The Cultural Cold War in Western Europe, 1945–1960* (London: Frank Cass Publisher, 2003).

6 Pia Koivunen, "The World Youth Festival as a Soviet Cultural Product during the Cold War," *Quaestio Rossica*, vol. 8, no. 5, (2020): 1614.

investment and (re)construction. These obligations would be reflected in what was called "the Festival hunger" due to lack of food and resources. The project of reconstructing Bucharest was all the more important because one of the aims of the Festival was to show the whole world that young people from Socialist countries enjoy the best living and personal development conditions.

As a means of manifesting power, architecture became a state problem, and all professionals were called upon to design a new architecture, with a new repertory of ideas. The appeal was mandatory and urgent. The urgency was the need to combat the old order and bourgeois influences, such as cosmopolitanism and formalism, and the implementation of a new order, a new architecture, for the New Man. With the help of architecture the Communist regime aimed at "the liquidation of the remnants of the old order, and the building of the new society."[7] As Marcel Locar wrote at the time, "The process of architectural creation, as an integral part of the cultural revolution that is taking place in our country, has an active role in the Communist education of the masses; the new, Socialist architecture, the aspiration of many, must actually contribute to the raising of the patriotic consciousness of our people (...) to stimulate the working people in their fight for Socialism, for peace."[8]

Architecture, which in Locar's rhetoric was presented as part of the cultural revolution, thus became an active tool of Communist propaganda and the indoctrination of the masses. This new Stalinist architecture, adapted to the tradition of Romanian architecture was defined as "Socialist in content, national in form."[9] Soviet architecture magazines and books were translated to clarify the ideology of architectural creation. In addition, the plan to transform Bucharest into a Socialist city was expressly modelled on the transformation of Moscow.

In January 1953, the Decision of the Council of Ministers[10] provided construction plans for a variety of sports buildings and assembly halls, which were to be inaugurated on the occasion of the "great celebration of peace and friendship,"[11] the Festival. Work began in February 1953, with an established deadline of only a few months. However, even this tight timeline was reinterpreted to favour Socialist propaganda as "a new proof of the strength and vitality of our regime of popular democracy,"[12] as B. Gheorghiu noted in the *Arhitectura* magazine of RPR.

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7 Marcel Locar, "Pe drumul unei noi arhitecturi în R.P.R" [Towards a New Architecture in R.P.R.], *Arhitectură și Urbanism*, no. 1-2, (1952): 4.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 "Hotărîrea Comitetului Central al Partidului Muncitoresc Român și a Consiliului de Miniștri al Republicii Populare Române cu privire la planul general de reconstrucție socialistă a orașului București" [The Decision of the Central Committee of the Romanian Labour Party and of the Council of the Ministers of the Romanian People's Republic Regarding the General Plan for the Socialist Reconstruction of Bucharest], *Arhitectură și Urbanism*, no. 11 (1952): 4–7.

11 B. Gheorghiu, "Noi construcții culturale și sportive pentru oamenii muncii" [New Cultural and Sports Constructions for working people], *Arhitectura RPR*, no. 1 (1953): 13.

12 Ibid.

Fig. 1. 23ʳᵈ August Stadium, 1953–2007, in: *Arhitectura RPR*, no. 1 (1953): 21.

Fig. 2. The Skydiving Tower, 1953. Photograph by Cristian Eduard Drăgan.
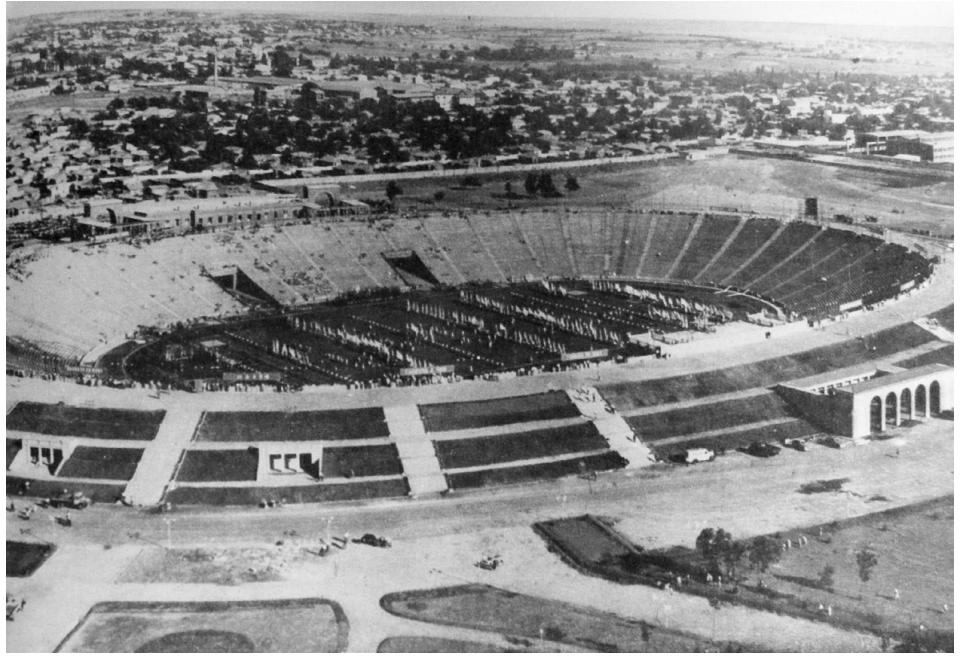
Bucharest's Socialist reconstruction plan targeted housing, industry, public buildings and transportation. The buildings were designed and erected in an extremely short time, as they represented "a dignified and appropriate framework for the great manifestations of the world youth that took place on this occasion,"[13] again in the words of B. Gheorghiu. Neighbourhoods with a dense working population were also targeted, such as 23 August and Grivița Roșie (Red Grivița), which were considered to be neglected in the past. Thus, an attempt was made to diminish the contrast between the city centre and the outskirts, which was actually one of the Communist Party's long-term strategic objectives.

Restaurants, housing, cultural and sports complexes were built. The projects for these structures were designed by the Institulul Proiect-București (Project-Bucharest Institute). The 23ʳᵈ August Cultural and Sports Complex included the Stadium (**fig. 1**), the Summer Theatre, and the Skydiving Tower (**fig. 2**). The 23ʳᵈ August Stadium was built after the model of the Kirov Stadium in
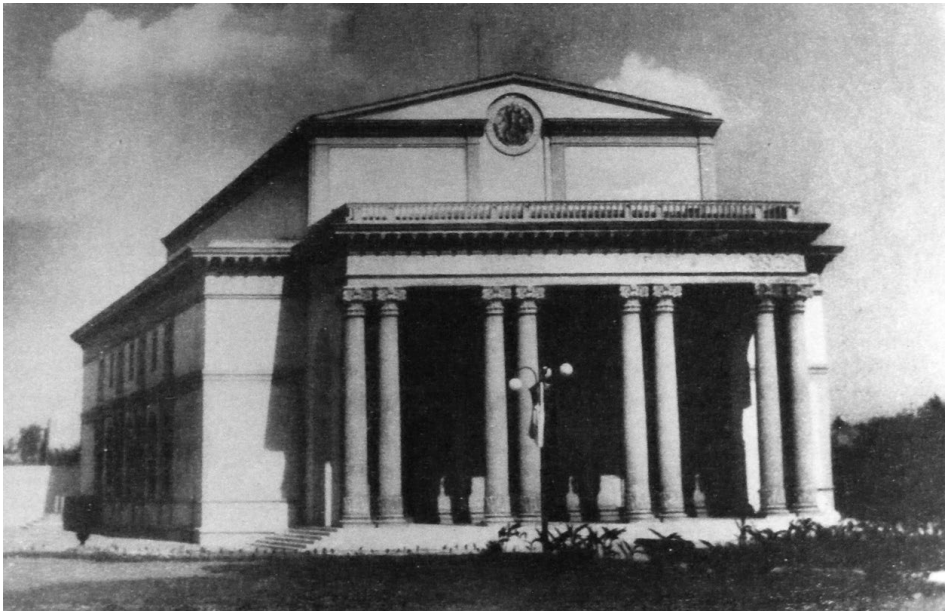
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13 Ibid.

Leningrad (Saint Petersburg), with the grandstands made in the shape of an earthen slope, a solution that was necessitated by the overall time pressure. At the same time, this solution was highlighted as very economical.[14]

Înfrățirea între popoare (The Fraternity of Peoples) Cinema (**fig. 3**) was built on Bucureștii Noi (New Bucharest) Boulevard, a project designed by the architects Nicolae Porumbescu, Dan Bacalu and Traian Stănescu. The inclusion of ornamentation inspired by the architecture of Romanian tradition is a notable example of the application of the principles of the new architecture intended as "national as a form, Socialist in content."[15] The movie theatre formed the focal point of a complex that also included blocks of flats characteristic of similar Soviet projects. The Bazilescu Summer Theatre (**fig. 4**) was designed by the

14 Ibid., 14.

15 Locar, "Pe drumul unei noi arhitecturi în R.P.R," 4.

Fig. 5. The National State Opera, 1953.
Photograph by Carmen Sârbu.

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architect Paul Miclescu and his collaborators Victor Agent, Virgil Marinescu, while the building of the National State Opera (**fig. 5**) was designed by the architect Octav Doicescu. All of these constructions were meant to meet the needs of the New Man, the dignified representative of the working class.

The magazine *Arhitectură și Urbanism*, trumpeted and praised each achievement (construction, landscaping and parks). This magazine was the official publication of the Union of Architects. As of 1953, the name has changed to *Arhitectura RPR* (RPR Architecture). Today the publication is simply called *Arhitectura* (Architecture). In addition to its professional informative role, the review also served as a means of political propaganda, like all communication channels infused with Communist ideology. Here is a relevant excerpt:

> The enthusiastic work of thousands of young brigadiers, who worked day and night with momentum and love, enriched – before the deadlines – the capital of our country with new cultural and sports buildings, designed to meet the cultural needs of the constantly increasing number of working people. These buildings – which quickly became known to the citizens of the capital – were visited by tens of thousands of spectators during the artistic performances of the Festival. They are important achievements in terms of architectural creation and will have to be discussed and analysed during the creative meetings of the Union of Architects.[16]

In reality, the Festival was a difficult test for the country due to lack of resources and food, followed by a period of famine, known as "the Festival hunger." To make matters worse, "the enthusiastic work of thousands of young people"[17] was actually unpaid compulsory labour. However, the Festival was

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16 Gheorghiu, "Noi construcții culturale și sportive pentru oamenii muncii," 26.

17 Ibid.

an extraordinary event for the young Romanians of that time, due to the opportunity to interact with foreign generational peers, and anticipate "the Thaw" after a forced isolation of five years.

ARCHITECTURE, "TRUTH" AND POWER

Michel Foucault's philosophy often intersects with architecture as a space to exert power. In *Power/Knowledge*[18] Foucault describes the reciprocal relationship between power and knowledge. Power determines knowledge, and knowledge establishes "truth" as a product of power. Power and knowledge are in a mutual dependence, which means that power is based on knowledge, and generates knowledge and truth. Truth is understood here as a reference to the criteria of knowledge established by the power. From this perspective, each power determines and imposes its own regime of truth. The truth is fabricated and spread through economic and state apparatuses such as institutes of education and research, the media, and so forth. As Foucault emphasizes, "'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements. "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it. A 'regime' of truth."[19]

Defining power as repression does not suffice, according to Foucault. Rather, power must be understood through its effects, as a network that runs through the entire social body, inducing behaviours, generating knowledge, and ultimately shaping lives: "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body."[20]

Therefore, from a Foucauldian perspective, the control, censorship, and constraints imposed by the Communist regime implied a productive aspect, a form of knowledge. Once installed, a new power requires consolidation, affirmation, and visibility. Architecture becomes an instrument to strengthen power, to generate power relations. Architecture should assist power in its attempts to legitimize and impose itself. By converting some features of traditional Romanian architecture into political propaganda, the new style of Socialist realism searched for a false national root as a form of legitimation, while any bourgeois influence was plucked out from the start. The Western influence, which was highly valued in the interwar period and continued in the years of reconstruction after the war, was suddenly interrupted by the

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18 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

19 Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader. An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1984), 74.

20 Ibid., 61.

imposition of a new style and new principles. The truth of the bourgeoisie was entirely annulled; the new regime instituted new knowledge and a new truth, to be imposed as soon as possible, through all channels of dissemination. Power as a productive network that saturates the entire social body, as Foucault asserted, was reflected through the manufacturing of the architectural environment, along with the discourse of political propaganda and the construction of the Socialist system. Architecture served the state as a means of production and, consequently, of political propaganda, materializing its ideology. Consequently, architectural production became a way to hide and, simultaneously to show off. To hide reality and to display a new image and a new truth.

On the other hand, the newly founded institutes of design were centres of power-knowledge, part of the network through which power was manifested via the centralization of the architectural profession, disciplinary training, and ideological imposition. This network produces knowledge, because it "leads," (…) "guides," (…) "analyses," (…) "decides," (…) "approves projects," (…) and "exercises state control."[21] In this way, architectural discourse is altered by political discourse, or becomes an instrument of the latter in issuing the official "truth." The truth of the new regime was produced and disseminated through state apparatuses. Truth often takes the form of scientific discourse and is disseminated by authoritative institutions such as universities and research institutes.

Architects, engineers and construction workers, together with thousands of young people called to complete the construction work for the Festival, became actors in this network or, in Foucault's words, "vehicles of power."[22] They all engaged in the accomplishment of the new Stalinist ideology and, therefore, in the consolidation of power. This process could be compared to a kind of ideological contamination of the entire social and professional body.

Power-knowledge relations in this context must also be viewed from the perspective of the information gathered by the security apparatuses, through which the state acquires more power and control over citizens, reflected in all aspects of social and professional life.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between state power and architecture is an exemplary formation of power-knowledge, especially in the context described above. The architectural projects of the Stalinist period in Romania acquired a political dimension through the ideological functions they embodied. The grandeur of Communist dictatorial power was manifested by relying on classical principles of composition in the design of these buildings and by foregrounding their

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21 R. Laurian, "Reconstrucția socialistă a orașului București" [Socialist Reconstruction of the City of Bucharest], *Arhitectură și Urbanism*, no. 12 (1952): 2.

22 Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 98.

monumental aspect. On the occasion of the Fourth World Festival of Youth and Students in 1953, Bucharest became an embodiment of the ideal-type of Communist propaganda, a large-scale experiment in total political control of urban space.

Coincidentally or not, some of the structures built during the Festival are either missing or abandoned today. On the one hand, this reflects that the power at the time wanted so much to hide, the pathetic reality behind the gilded façade of propaganda. The "construction economy"[23] and the very short time allowed for the execution of the works prevented their durability. At the same time, this process indicates the very low degree of acceptance that the new formation of power-knowledge of so-called capitalism in present-day Romania has towards Communist (as well as other) architectural heritage.

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23 Lascu, Tulbure Moldovan, "Arhitectura modernă și contemporană în România," 70.