

Cultural and Architectural Promenade Route in the Historical Centre of Bucharest

In this paper, *Cultural and Architectural Promenade Route in the Historical Centre of Bucharest* (**cover slide**), I am going to look at an ongoing project which addresses the re-appropriation and regeneration of public space by the citizens and for the citizens within the dense architectural heart of Bucharest. I shall discuss a proposed urban zoning plan and its public consultations, both initiated by members of the civic society in 2005, aiming to recuperate the public space, and to preserve the memory of the city.

In 2005, the Chamber of Romanian Architects (CRA), a non-profit professional organization, initiated a project of urban revitalization based on an urban zoning plan aimed at promoting a sustainable cultural and architectural itinerary, a promenade, for pedestrians and bikers in the centre of the Romanian capital city. Architect Serban Sturdza, president of CRA, his architecture studio, and Mariana Celac, an architect and dissident during the communist system, and also a member of the community in a seventeenth-century Bucharest neighborhood, developed this city planning model that relates to public space, culture and communities, integrating architectural heritage, community life and cultural practices. Since 2005, I have been the coordinator and concept planner of these street events, working closely with these architects.

We believe that our private initiative is in accordance with the critical strategy for an urban integrated development policy as stipulated in the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities, issued in May 2007 and signed by EU member states, including Romania. We believe that it is our responsibility, as community members, to determine the public administration of Bucharest to take in consideration our real needs and to meet them by respecting the stipulations of the Leipzig Charter (**Leipzig slide**):

The interaction of architecture, infrastructure planning and urban planning must be increased in order to create attractive, user-oriented public spaces and to achieve

high standards in terms of the living environment, a “Baukultur.”... This is particularly important for the preservation of architectural heritage. Historical buildings, public spaces and their urban and architectural value must be preserved. (p.3)

Starting with the first half of the nineteenth century and the Romanian independence, the city of Bucharest oriented toward West, and especially to French culture. Bucharest became, between the two World Wars, one of the important modern European cities in terms of urban development and lifestyle **(1)**, being called the “little Paris” or “the Paris of the East.” During the almost 45 years of Communist totalitarianism, the traditional organic urban structure and significant architecture, ordinary family homes as well as churches, were simply demolished to make room for grandiose buildings and boulevards **(2)** or alienating neighborhoods of standardized, high-rise communist blocs. Public space became associated with the surveillance by the authoritarian system **(3+4)**. Public space became everybody’s and nobody’s. After 1989, Bucharest became a battlefield torn between weak policy makers and profit-oriented entrepreneurs, defined by a soaring number of cars **(5+6)**, pollution, severe shortage of green space, chaotic construction of inappropriate steel and concrete buildings within the heart of the traditional, nineteenth-century area. There was total disrespect of the collective interest and indifference to the public space. Under such circumstances, citizens have a crucial position, their voice and their role become essential. Citizens have the right to quality environment, to culture and education within the public space.

The principle behind this urban project aims to convince the Municipality of Bucharest to make decisions that will reorganize the streets alongside this promenade, through a simple but sensitive operation of increasing the green space, and redesigning the traffic, pavements, urban lighting fixtures, pedestrian pathways, and building façades. The architects and the people involved in this urban project and its public consultations, using a

participatory design theory, believe that private initiative and community-based programs should be supported by the public administration, which has the legal power to create the proposed “green” line through the core of the city. In a city where steel and concrete are systematically replacing valuable landmarks, it is possible to preserve the character of the remaining traditional neighborhoods, to modernize the infrastructure and to communicate through culture. Finally, this project is about the individual and collective responsibility of the community towards public space.

In 2005 this project was communicated to the Municipality of Bucharest by members of the cultural and architectural organizations and institutions that reside along the planned route. The community initiated a dialogue with the public administration to proceed with this project in a private-public partnership. The proposed urban zoning plan was officially approved in 2007.

Nineteenth century Bucharest was planned similar to mid nineteenth-century Paris and Haussmann-inspired lines, including the north-south and west-east axes, Victory Avenue (black line) and Queen Elisabeth Blvd (7). The planned cultural and architectural promenade is intended to reshape and to reconnect two important parts of Bucharest, making use of the existing Haussmann-type boulevard, this is the Magheru boulevard (red line) which parallels the Victory Avenue.

Alongside the proposed route of promenade, or in its close proximity, there is an eclectic array of historical buildings, cultural institutions and private properties, dating from the nineteenth century, with small secluded gardens. The pedestrian-friendly route starts at the Cismigiu Garden (8), a nineteenth-century landscape design, goes to the National Museum of Art (9), crossing the north-south axis, reaches the Romanian Atheneum (10) and continues under the overcrowded Magheru boulevard (11) with a

proposed underground pedestrian passage. On the other side of the boulevard, the route includes a special bookshop, Carturesti **(12)**, located in a historical monument, and one of the first modernist blocks in Bucharest, a building by Horia Creanga **(13)**. Now is terribly damaged and this is how it should look like. The promenade shifts to a silent street with traditional houses, gardens, cats and pigeons, that is Verona Street, the very opposite of the bustling contemporary boulevard. It continues towards Ion Mincu House **(14)**, re-built in neo-Romanian style, a pre-modernist style enhancing the national identity, using traditional proportions and vernacular elements. This landmark is currently hosting the Chamber of Romanian Architects. Then, the street continues to the Anglican Church **(15)**, which is located in the vicinity of a 17th century orthodox church, which was the heart of the neighborhood. Finally, the route shifts to the Icons' Garden **(16)** which has another orthodox church as point of perspective as well as another neo-Romanian monument - the Central School of School **(17)**. Another historical public garden, the Ioanid Garden, is located in the vicinity.

Along this route one may find old, established trees and secret gardens. The project proposes to increase the green space and the number of trees, so as to mark this connecting route between three existing nineteenth-century public gardens: the Cismigiu Garden, the Icon's Garden and the Ioanid Garden. For example, a green canopy **(18)** is planned to cover part of Verona Street. Moreover, two green areas are to be united **(19)** in one park to increase the environmental potential of the neighborhood; the current traffic would be deviated to another street.

Alternative transportation is part of the project. Bicycle routes are planned in order to encourage a sustainable and healthy lifestyle. The sidewalk of Verona Street **(20)** – a space dedicated to public life and communication - is enlarged; a decorative rivulet is to

become part of the street, as a reminder of an old river which used to spring from the Icon's Garden.

The artistic component of this promenade includes permanent art installations. Some refer to a memorial site, evoking and celebrating a prestigious nineteenth-century museum, which was destroyed in the 1960s by the communist power. Others refer to sculptural compositions such as a sculpture entitled the *Maternity*, to be placed in front of the Anglican Church and to busts of cultural personalities and architects, to be placed in front of the Carturesti bookshop and Central Girls' School.

Since 2005, two-day street events were organized by the CRA every year – a form of “on the spot” public consultations, with a strong participatory, human-centered component (21). For these occasions, the Chamber established a working partnership with the mayor of Bucharest and with private and public institutions residing in the vicinity of the area planned for redevelopment within the Verona Street. Entitled Street Delivery or Art Delivery, these public events took place in May 2005, May 2006 and June 2007. The municipality of Bucharest gave the green light to transforming part of the route into a pedestrian promenade by closing car traffic for two days. The municipality imposed traffic

Besides the public consultation, the events had two other objectives: raising awareness and promoting the values of integrated urbanism and community-based public interventions. The process of public consultation was paralleled by interactive and learning activities, as well as by art projects that lured passers-by into addressing the problems of public space and quality of life in Bucharest. During Street Delivery events, historical buildings and their gardens were open for visitors.

We have started these public consultations with the volunteer support of friends within the artistic community and with money from private donations and sponsorship,

including those of the organizers. We called for partners among the artistic community to create the visual identity **(22)** and a weblog for each non-profit Street Delivery event. We strove to promote the event among children and young communities.

The main component of these two-day events was the presentation of the above-mentioned urban zoning plan designed by Serban Sturdza and his studio **(23)**. The people were asked to contribute. In addition, new landscape projects for Icon's Garden were presented, explained and subjected to public debate. Other architectural projects proposing a holistic approach to Bucharest public space were exhibited on the street. Some stressed the values of historical Romanian architecture **(24)**, others spoke of restoration, memory and urban identity. Weeping Houses, an organization of architecture students, organized a guided visit to damaged historical landmarks in order to make their architectural value known and to raise awareness about their critical situation and by extension to serve as a memorial reminder.

Alternative routes of transportation were suggested and presented by Velocity **(25)**, a young community of bike-riding architects involved in designing a network of cycling routes in Bucharest. The idea of paddling in public parks was introduced to passers-by, who had the opportunity to test canoe-training equipment.

A key organization for urban politics in Bucharest, the Association for Urban Transition, organized a sociological poll **(26)**. This was done to identify the main issues regarding the quality of life. Artists put together installations against the drastic cut of green space per capita.

In 2006, drawing competitions were organized for high-school art students who researched and learned about the traditional urban texture of the Verona Street neighborhood **(27)**. Also, architecture and design students participated in a thematic

contest for drinking fountains in the designated Icon's Garden area. An essential element for developing the public space-based responsibility was represented by a diversity of workshops focusing on the historical roots of the neighborhood. Some of them were organized by Arhiterra, a Romanian task force devoted to sustainable architecture and especially to the use of earth building techniques today.

In 2006 and 2007, children learned about the utility of clay, painted fired pottery and were shown by craftsmen how to use the potter's wheel **(28)**. Children were told stories about traditional childhood games and the history of this neighborhood. Art galleries invited the citizens to draw and write about their relationship with Bucharest **(29)**. In 2007, music **(30)** was a crucial component of this public event, either classical music played in a secluded garden, or organ music played in the Anglican Church.

Ad-hoc street music and short-film projections, book exchange, cartoons exhibitions, legal graffiti **(31)**, urban art, water fights, and ping-pong games came to complete the picture of these two-days of street partying in the historical center of Bucharest.

The series of annual Street Delivery events have allowed us to understand that, apart from the cultural and architectural route proposed by architects, residents have a need to inhabit the neighborhood just as they do their own private home space. Citizens took responsibility by getting involved in the events and claimed their right to urban identity and memory. Each event was archived, taped and recorded to be analyzed and published for further reference.

The recuperation of the public space through a cultural strategy was possible due to the unexpected by large volunteer participation of almost sixty entities composed of neighborhood-based communities, visual artists, architects, art galleries, non-governmental

organizations, high-school students, and children **(32)**. Their contribution had the effect of generating solidarity within the community and was more successful than the private-public partnership.

Although the urban zoning plan was approved in 2007 by the urban planning committee of the Municipality of Bucharest, the public administration did not proceed any further, and the regulations of the urban zoning plan were never enforced. Not even one tree has been planted. This is a deadlock and challenge for our project. However, we intend to continue our Street Delivery events, advocating for the implementation of the urban zoning plan.