Micro-urbanism and identity. Case study_Bucharest, the city as palimpsest

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Abstract

Bucharest, a palimpsest city composed of all its historical stages, starting with natural writings and erasures of urban text til rough displacements, is currently the witness of rapid changes that often leave gaps in the urban structure. In this process the public space becomes most affected, because an arbitrary intervention of the post-communist period fails to mediate the relationship between public and private. A central theme of contemporary Romanian society is the loss of a sense of belonging to a community, primarily due to ambiguous relations established between historical and everyday reality.

*As Stefan Ghenciulescu noticed in his article "*Unpublic.Urban Space in Bucharest after 1989", (...) islands of order, cleanliness and even luxury exist close to vacant deserted places. Public domain has become a battleground of interests and insignia. There are still existing rules but they are often bypassed or ignored. There is not an empty field but does not seem to be part of a coherent system. Therefore I think we can talk about city territory as an archipelago of private spaces.[1]*In this context, the article aims to draw attention to an acute current issue. The emergence of discontinuities in the city structure creates the tendency of using space for a different purpose than the initial one, reaching a point where the mediation between social and urban space occurs.*

The project is part of a series of urban interventions-proposals on urban level that identify waste sites, vague areas, along with the community tendency to appropriate them. This type of local-scale interventions, without having a permanent character, represents a socio-urban hybrid that turns a local tendency into a temporary occupancy vision of space, based on its dominant character. The study objective is to identify an intervention strategy that respects the spirit of place, and in the same time that will identify the fragments along with their own identity and write a new layer filling in the urban tissue. Thus, the urban tissue is handed back to the inhabitants through a punctual intervention, a strategy in which the process in itself becomes the most significant element of urban cohesion.

First approach

Nowadays, in the way of approaching (expressions of survival public feelings) there are a lot of examples showing how residual space could be occupied. Many of these examples show up as temporay structures. Turning privat spaces (left already residual) in spaces belonging to community is a society act, a mediation between public and privat relationships. A short walk on the streets of Bucharest, you will soon notice the presence of these residual spaces. The article intends to describe a case-sample belonging to the historical center (Calea Mosilor) as part of a process of *vague spaces* temporarly requalifications. First, the residual spaces will be identified (together with their situation/status) and after they will be reactivated as part of the community through a series of steps that involves both urban and social levels. *The invisible conflict caused by historical convulsions generates periodically urban form and architectural expression.[2]*

1. Stefan Ghenciulescu - *Nepublic. Spatiul uban in Bucuresti dupa 1989* in StudioBasar – Evacuarea fantomei, Visual Introspection Center, Bucharest 2010, p. 177.
2. StudioBasar – *Evacuarea fantomei,* Visual Introspection Center, Bucharest 2010

Case study_Bucharest

In its urban history, Bucharest can be seen from two perspectives - on the one hand as a palimpsest city, which suffered in the same time natural evolutive transformation, and serious political will insertions, brutal erasures and unnatural re-writings, and on the other hand as juxtaposition of urban fragments with their own identity as a result of specific urban evolution. The lecture of the city on different levels is influenced by the heterogeneity of composition - layers are overlapping, gathering, displace or replace each other. In the case of Bucharest, the overlaying is visible both on the level of successive writings and on the level of juxtaposition – of the spatial co-presence of writings.

Thus we have two types of urban reading – a reading of overlapping layers and a reading that regards urban fragments defined as typology and identity. In most cases, for reasons of historical evolution due to natural or violent deletions, at the intersection of these fragments or even within the same fragment appeared "ambiguous" areas that need to be reconnected to the urban fabric. In this context, the question that arises is what type of urban intervention is needed for giving quality to the space and respecting *the spirit of place*. The new layer that is writing is required to consider both the

existing layers of urban palimpsest and the identity of the parts. Thus what we considered to be a suitable intervention strategy for this complex urban situation is the intervention at local scale, the micro-urbanity or urban acupuncture, which takes into account the witness-layers and respects the identity of the fragments.

The research is conducted on two levels – a discussion about the evolution of historical layers – the layers are overlapping, are joining, displacing or replacing each other, along with the city seen as a juxtaposition of fragments that together lead to the identification of an intervention strategy based on process and not on the final object, a strategy that identifies problem-areas and propose local interventions of urban requalification.

The concept of palimpsest

Tha concept of *palimpsest* is in the first place a concept that belongs to the field of writing and which, applied to the city, brings to the fore the size of reading the historical overlaying. Palimpsest involves a number of identifiable spatial and temporal moments - writing, erasing and re-writing - which can be seen in several ways: the proper meaning of the concept designates the re-used parchment that maintains traces of previous writings and in the same time receives new scriptures; on the temporal aspect, the palimpsest means the present involving both past and future, means that any writing occurs in the presence of other writings.

By taking the metaphor on architecture and city level, the parallel between the text and urban texture regards the city as a superposition of layers (each with its own rules of composition) and meanings; the city as palimpsest means in the same time the archive and resource; the palimpsest moments and the type of urban writing are giving signs about the ideology that transformed the urban parchment and about the possible directions of evolution.

The city as palimpsest, the city of urban fragments

Bucharest is a palimpsest to the construction of which contributed all moments, but that hardly reveals itself. This is because the reading grid shows that since the nineteenth century, Bucharest palimpsest is largely the product of violent erasures through authoritarian gesture. This aspect of the transformation of urban palimpsest frequently creates imbalance in the witness layers and of the subconscious of the place, through the character and strength that was required. Bucharest faced historical, political and social mutations concentrated in a period of only two centuries: all

meant authoritarian wills, which produced such erasures, and the lost layers can often be found only on the level of collective memory.

In this way can be identified historically – chronological and typological – several stages of evolution embedded in the urban texture that influences both the plan of transforming the city itself and the perceptive plan.

1. Bucharest before the middle of the nineteenth century: the initial writing generates a free and rarefied structure at the intersection between rural and urban, with a calligraphy in Balkanian style; palimpsest appears as writing and erasing sequences naturally occurred, in an evolutionary way is predominant the writing that territorializes and the co-presence of layers, and is translated into urban reality through a series of parish nucleuses and densities coagulated around them.

2. Bucharest of the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century is marked by a rapid westernization, caused by general modernization of society; predominant writing is a consequence of the adoption and adaptation of the French model.

3. Bucharest between the two world wars, which was integrated into the direction of the previous period, but is marked by a rapid connection to modernist trends. In both periods occured, in addition to the original writing, certain replacements and overlays that con-reside with the previous layers and are considered as a necessary evolution.

4. Post-war Bucharest sees the urban development and social structure strongly marked by the change of regime (with all that this implied) in specific ways and shades that can be highlighted into several periods: the period immediately following the war - marked by the reconstruction, the period of the 1950 – affiliated to the Stalinist regime, the period during 1960-1970 – the intensive building period – modernist and functionalist housing – then the period of dictatorship until 1989. In each of these periods, ways of writing, deleting (organic or violent) and re-writing (as replacement, modification or co-presence) marked in different ways the urban palimpsest.

Thus, the first period has meant an evolution in post-war reconstruction purposes, continuing the previous writing, in some cases over the erasures of war, trying to recover and complete the existent layer. As Ana Maria Zahariade recalls in the work, *The architecture of the communist project,* the year 1952 is referential for the paradigm shift, since *it becomes the official debut of the new architecture production listening to the ideology of the communist project. Everything is modeled after the Stalinist experience, which becomes, moreover, the reference and celebration term - "the model".[3]*

Paradoxically in its continuing, *socialist realist writing – Soviet, Stalinist* – although resentful trumpeting *the cleaning of the old*

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3. Zahariade, Ana Maria - *Arhitectura în proiectul comunist*. România 1944-1989, Simetria Publisher, Bucharest 2011, p. 139.

Figure 1 – 1852 Bucharest plan.

regime traces, will not overlap aggressive on previous layers but will find its place in the existing tissue, inserting themselves without major changes or leaving scars. Returning to *modern calligraphy*, that features the following period, it is largely indifferent to previous writings (the very definition of this calligraphy type). This period is associated with continuing operations and complementing many existing areas, operations until the late 1970s characterized by co-presence, changes and fewer replacements. But mostly, it is associated with intensifying housing building (collective, templates, standard), mostly related to industrial development areas, and which extended the urban writing on a very large surface of urban residential districts or neighborhoods-bedroom, homogenizing the territory.

Moreover, their monotonous writing occurred (mostly) outside *the fullness* of the existing calligraphy, broadened the palimps-
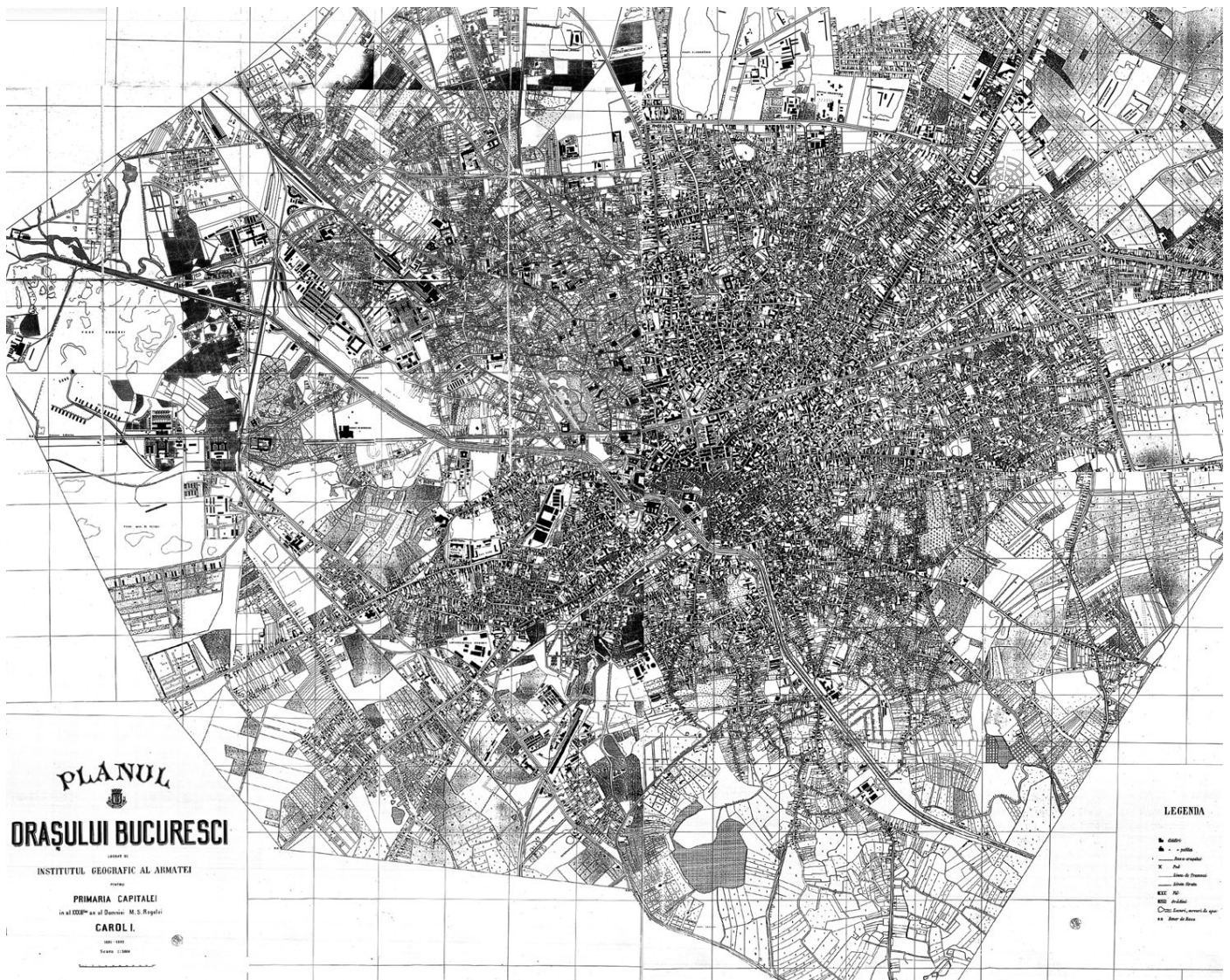
Figure 2 – 1895 Bucharest plan.

est area with another calligraphy, but without significant deletions. The writing of political power will increase after 1971, when *Ceausescu public criticizes the model of free urbanism and the lack of attention from the architects to traditional values and national specificities; he talks about (of course with the inability language of the moment) the street, avenue, traditional town ...* [4]

What at first seems to encourage debate and creativity is actually a total closure. This type of radical writing will become very visible after the 1977 earthquake, which itself was a violent erasure, taken as a pretext for monopoly over urban image. It is the beginning of reaching the pinnacle of political control, started in 1945 - *the state as the sole investor, promoter and client. We are witnessing the rise of a "post-Stalinist Stalinism" whose culmination is the construction of the Civic Center in Bucharest. All demonstrates: the irrational investment (by the way, not all clearly provided by the state plans), systematization of villages, massive*

demolitions through which the memory of the city is really deleted and replaced with the following blocks to live in (...). [5]

In this way, the subsequent violent erasure due to the will of political power was superimposed a brutal and non-calligraphic writing, whose specific is clearly distinguishable by its destructive force as against previous layers.

5. The post-communist Bucharest is the layer that we are writing: is in the process of defining and includes all stages of urban palimpsest. Although the destructive dictatorship was disappeared, in the same time at this stage appear to intervene violent deletions (sometimes very violent), but whose reasons consists in a completely different ideology - the financial interest or pragmatism of the market.

All these stages make up the complex characteristic three-dimensional texture, non-homogeneous, translated through levels and layers adjacent or overlapping in a spatial and plani-

4. Zahariade, Ana Maria - Arhitectura în proiectul comunist. România 1944-1989, Simetria Publisher, Bucharest 2011, p. 143.

5. Zahariade, Ana Maria - Arhitectura în proiectul comunist. România 1944-1989, Simetria Publisher, Bucharest 2011, p. 143.
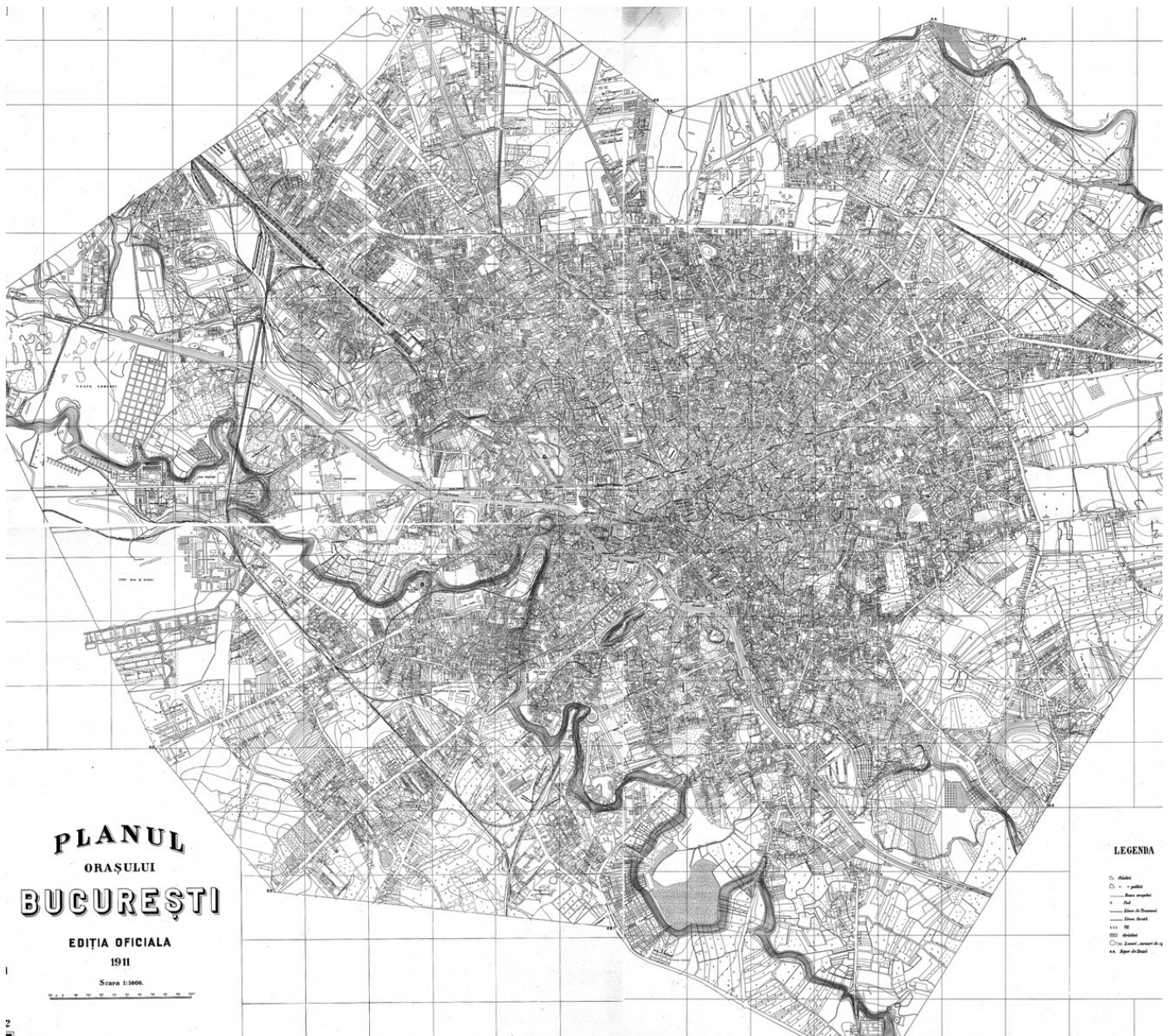
Figure 3 – 1911 Bucharest plan.

metric way. Looking Bucharest as a palimpsest are revealing areas with different concentrations of scripts, that are forming individual nuclei results of natural evolution of urban tissue and whose characteristic is the absence of violent erasure superimposed on a relatively uniform writing, or adjoining areas of different writing, most often involving the step of violent deletion. *At first is striking the picturesque image, than the architectural quality, and in the end we discover countless urban fragments, coherent itself, combined in a manner difficult to understand in the first place. Gradually is found the consistency of a cohesive urban settlement, resulting in overlapping of urban components from different periods of time. [6]*

On the thread of time, this palimpsest which starts initially from development around parish nuclei in the premodern period, turns into an irregular urban tissue gradually evolving, as we have shown above, by adding successive layers. In this way we have an overlap of tendences - on the one hand this fragmented disposal, characterized by homogenous typologycal and identity areas, which were preserved as urban cores in the tissue of the city, on the other hand the layers are overlapping and joining or replacing. But both directins would be read together as part of the same process of urban transformation.

The reality of both urban architecture - the traditional one, the single-family house, and that "socialist" one, the blocs with tens of apartments - is currently being questioned and challenged by post-December systematization, triggered by the investors and property

6. Lascu, Nicolae in Cina, Giuseppe – Bucuresti, de la sat la metropola. Identitate urbana si noi tendinte, Capitel Publisher, Bucharest 2010, p. 9.

Figure 4 – 1987 Bucharest plan.

developers appearance, driven by the desire of maximum profit.[7]
Thus, this latter layer continuously writing in not often related

to the existing urban fabric and creates contrasting images that denies the identity of the place. Each stage that replaces the previous stage often generates interstitial spaces difficult to read, but in the same time characteristic, singular, and an alter-

7. Giurescu, C. Dinu – Arhitectura Bucurestilor incotro?, Vremea Publisher, Bucuresti 2010, p. 10.

nance of densities that varies in a nonhomogeneous manner. Currently the city is suffering unnatural transformations, partial results of the pressure of real estate market whose main characteristic is a distinctive raport to the existing urban valuable tissue. Such fragments appear incomplete in the urban fabric, both results of natural evolution and transformation of the present, areas that give rise to residual spaces that disrupt urban structure. Writing the new layer means first identifying these fragments and their "understanding" in relation to their context, followed by proposals that can revitalize, can reactivate the fragments. In this case these fragments can be seen in two situations – on the one hand they turned into residual spaces, passage gaps that people bypass, and on the other hand they were taken into possession for various commercial activities changing their initial status but becoming part of community life. The main goal of this study is precisely the urban and social reactivation through punctual interventions that bring forward a current issue of the city – this waste space with uncertain status.

Micro-urbanism and urban acupuncture [Calea Mosilor and the historical center]

Because a feature of the city is the public space reduced to

aggressive deletions are less visible and in which the development of urban tissue was more natural and gentle, is currently the most assaulted by uncontrolled liberalism of the moment. Therefore we present briefly through the palimpsest concept such an area, belonging to the historical center and describing a common hipostasis in the urban texture of Bucharest, being representative for the co-presence of layers, with writings that complement and contribute to the city poetics.

Calea Mosilor or Podul Targului din Afara, as it was called in the past, it was one of the most important and oldest acces routes to the city, with commercial value, an area where natural urban evolution represents the witness layer, and the violent intervention was reduced to solitary presence (we refer to the old part of Calea Mosilor, whose route has remained unchanged since the establishment of the city). Calea Mosilor can be perceived as a specific fragment of traditional Bucharest, a palimpsest whose writing and erasure are juxtaposing, following mostly the natural evolution of the urban fabric. Seen in historical perspective, the street and adjacent area are belonging to the generator nucleus of the city development. From an evolutionary standpoint, the street retains its original configuration and its predominantly commercial character, being bordered by old merchant houses and inns former, but there are currently in a state of continuous degradation. At typo-morphological level, the fragmentation ap-
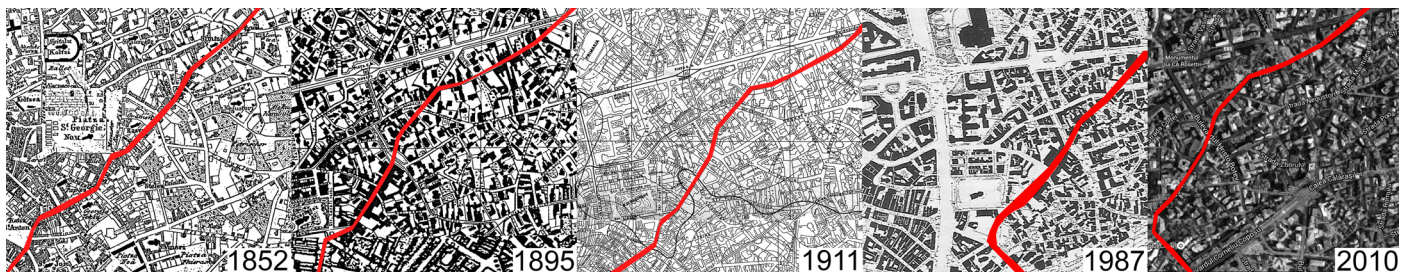

Figure 5 – Calea Mosilor urbanistic evolution.

street level and not to the urban piazza, a dominant characteristic along urban evolution, the case study illustration is chosen as a street with a particular character, that belongs to the historic center but in the same time a number of factors that we will detail in the following are transforming many fragments of it into a residual space.

Indeed, unlike Western European city tradition, in Bucharest premodern public space is not defined in relation to logic of linear perspective, geometrical relationships to connect each building with the surrounding space according to holistic thinking. Urban piazzas are not the central urban points of the city; traditionally, the Romanians did not meet into the piazza or urban square, but on the street.[8]

On the level of urban palimpsest, the first category, in which

pears as a result of dis-placements and replacements of certain areas with typologies on a different scale from the initial one or with residual spaces.

In terms of social majority population is either gypsies (consequence of the process of communist nationalization) who lives in conditions of extreme poverty, or old merchant families whose economic power is relatively low. This whole place is in a process of degradation with consequences both in the public space and in the private sectors. On the other hand the area is depleted of spaces for socialization, becoming an overall vacant land with random and uncharacteristic occupancy for the importance of these places related to the history and evolution of the city. Therefore it becomes essential the way it intervenes in these residual spaces with uncertain status.

The main issue of the area is both on urban and social level. *The remaining spaces* are thus one of the solutions with poten-

8. Cina, Giuseppe – Bucuresti, de la sat la metropola. Identitate urbana si noi tendinte, Capitel Publisher, Bucharest 2010, p. 81.

Figure 6 – Residual spaces Calea Mosilor.

tial for both urban requalifications by inserting commercial or cultural site-specific temporary functions, and at the social level, involving the whole community. Some of these places have already been undertaken by people using temporary markets or playgrounds. Others were improperly allocated for parking spaces, or as a support for various advertisements.

In this sense, what we are proposing in the present study is primarily an identification of the causes for which multiple areas of downtown became residual spaces, results of historical nature or of the present housing market, as we showed in the first part of the paper, and also a reallocation of spaces left by to the community. Even if the property status, often uncertain (can belong to the state or private individuals), can become vulnerable to a permanent intervention, through a public-private partnership they might be included in a system of temporary inserts which till their definitive insertion to the construction-completion process of the built spaces are diventing social aggregation spaces.

The intervention steps

▪ identifying the residual spaces along with their causes that led to this transformation of local urban structure;

▪ highlighting the dominant character of the place along with the role it has on urban and social level;

▪ identifying the disfunctionalities on circulations and function level, trying to maintain the character of the existing tissue;

▪ outlining possible directions of transformation depending on the valences of the place and on the way the community invested them;

▪ creating a public-private partnership (in situations where it is necessary);

▪ urban requalification through temporary structures that change the perception and appropriation of space;

▪ in this way the residual spaces receive a new visual and functional identity.

In this regard we have identified along the historical axis Calea Mosilor a series of spaces with uncertain character - some of them private spaces left in a state of decay, some public spaces used for improper activities (temporary parking spaces or for waste disposal). After a detailed study we tried to shape the character of each place separately, relying in particular on the current tendency and how they are invested by the community, noting that although their use is improper the community is trying to appropriate them. Thus, the voids left by urban palimpsest will become community spaces, a series of wells along an axis, like beads strung on a thread. Besides their individual treatment, what we tried to do through this

Figure 7 – Social (community) activities.

project was to create a system of interconnected public spaces by type activities and treatment at the level of materiality and texture. The suggested activities tries to involve people of different ages, people living in neighborhood or anywhere else in Bucharest. The main focus of the activities is teamwork, creating spaces where people can learn new things, play and enjoy spending time together. So what we tried to do was a number of urban rooms interconnected that extract their essence from the spirit of the place and are trying to redefine the sense of belonging to a community.

The project tries to re-connect, re-weave the urban warp and re-create both on physically and memory level the continuity of the urban fabric. Punctual interventions in the urban micro-unit transform a residual space into a public space that unifies and replenishes the whole text. Temporary structures and activities proposed (street performances, themed markets, interactive play areas etc.) will redefine the character of the street.

Conclusions

Bucharest is part of the cities that can be seen on urban level as palimpsest cities, and in the same time as city of frag-

ments. Because the city was composed of a juxtaposition and superposition of layers, the lecture of the city is complex, generating a process of re-composition, re-interpretation and valuation of its components. Besides outlined coherent urban spaces, inside the urban texture appeared also residual spaces, spaces that in time were disconnected from the general tissue. For reconnection, these spaces require a new approach and understanding.

The discovery of symbolic conditions and of its significance, and also the incrustations of history perceptible in the situation of overlapping different layers of physical plane of Bucharest evolution as palimpsest, it is a re-composition, re-interpretation, valuing the meaning on several levels. On urban level, Bucharest as a palimpsest appears both as a juxtaposition of layers and as an overlay. The lecture of the city on different stages is influenced by the heterogeneous character of composition. Finally, we will resume some of the significance of what Augustine Ioan calls to be the *text-territory*, this urban palimpsest loaded with writings, signs and meanings.

The text-territory is therefore not only a site for a future building or only one archaeologically investigated for preservation. Unlike these two, text-territory is forward-looking, and in that very manner of its discovery realizes his future status somewhere

Figure 8.1 – Green room[10].

Figure 8.2 – Multicultural room.

new, old. [9]

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9. Ioan, Augustin – Pentru re-increstinarea zidirii, LiterNet Publisher 2005.

10. Every room is designed as an open space. Every space contains urban furniture made of different recycled materials (wood, concrete, bricks, plastic bottles etc), playgrounds for children and green patterns with vegetation. Occasionally, every room will host different perform-ance, workshops and presentations.

THE MULTICULTURAL ROOM: It is a place where people belonging to different cultures could meet. People can sample specific food, bever-ages and present their traditions.

THE PERFORMANCE ROOM: theater, mini concerts, different foregrounds with stories

THE GREEN ROOM: reclaims the old traditional market

THE CRAFTY ROOMS: places where people revive old traditions

THE SILENT ROOM: a place where you can enjoy the pleasure of reading a book or listen to the music.

THE PLAYING ROOM: the place melts games for children and for adults in a different way.

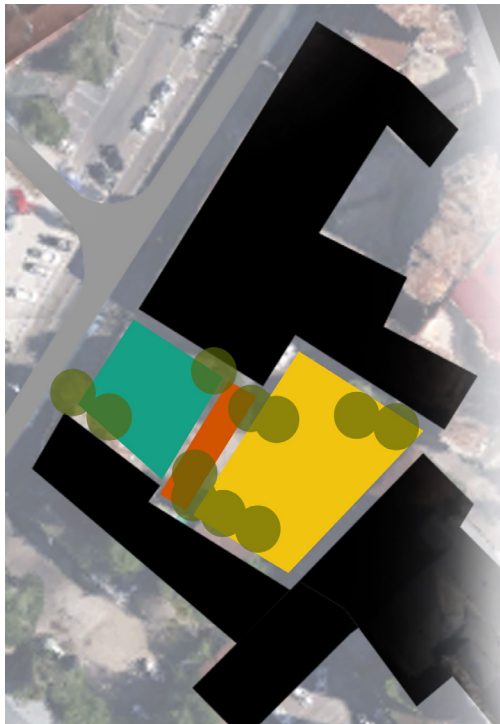Figure 8.3 – Performance room.

Figure 8.4 – The playng room.

Figure 8.5 – Crafty room.
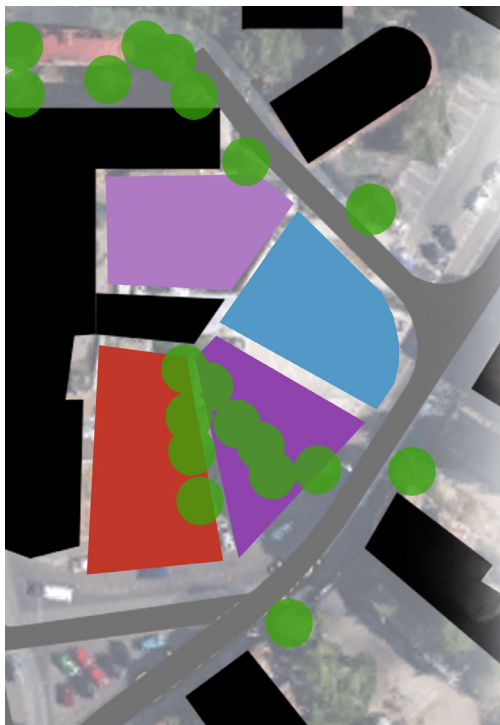
Figure 8.6 – Crafty room.

Figure 8.7 – Silent room.

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