

Addenda to an Exhibition: About Urbanism and Heritage in the City of the Union

Abstract:

The restoration of an image of a city and its evolution through time is not an easy endeavour, especially when the object of restoration consists of unprotected urban ensembles which oftentimes become unrecognizable even during their existence. The case of the city of Alba Iulia – which underwent repeated major transformations, from the late Middle Ages, when architect Giovanni Morando Visconti sketched a map of the capital of the Transylvanian Principality (1711), until around the 1900s, when the new city outside the walls of the old fortification already comprised six districts – offers a relevant example. Its new identity as “city of the Union”, received in 1918, which became characteristic of its entire subsequent evolution, led to establishment of new symbol monuments capable of vying with, and even obliterating, those erected in the previous eras. Today, the latter are found and made the most out of, whereas the old city (as it ended up being called, so as to differentiate it from the citadel) remains alike a silent witness, with the profound wounds of time lingering as scars. The ambivalence represented by the architectural heritage which had a particular value, but which did not make up an area of the community, and by the symbolic contribution of the “city of the Union”, which was essentially just a discursive construction, awards it an uncertain identity which ranges between the “the largest citadel in Romania” brand and the “the other capital” slogan. On the other side, its current image is the result of urbanistic policies favoured during the last two decades of the Communist regime (1968-1989), similarly to many other cities in the Central and East European socialist area.[1]

Beginning from these arguments, the “Cities of the Union – Cities of Memory” exhibition, which opened on October 3, 2019, proposed to recompose the image of the city of Alba Iulia, focusing on the two areas of development targeted by the post-1918 urbanistic projects: the old city, or the Centre, which surrounds today’s citadel from southeast to northeast, and the Platoul Romanilor on the Western side of the citadel, where the new Cetate district was gradually erected. These were supplemented with the connecting area between the Habsburg fortification, today a touristic destination par excellence, and Cetate district, which after 1918 became the object of various redevelopment projects. The materials used to guide the restoration included photographs from the collections of the Great Union Museum, the City Hall of Alba Iulia and the National Institute of Heritage, as well as plans drafted as part of the systematization projects, found in the fund of Alba County Service of National Archives and the National Institute of Heritage. Photographs and plans from the archive of Victor Ștefănescu, the architect of the Coronation Church, were also made available by the remarkable graciousness of Mrs Ilinca Ștefănescu-Neagu.

The decision to use a less typical display area – the recently restored old Synagogue, possible thanks to the support of the management of the Jewish Community of Alba Iulia – was not random, as the synagogue is located in the centre of the areas whose restoration we proposed, and is, at the same time, the

representative monument of Alba Iulia's Jewish community, formerly the most important in Transylvania. Thus, we aimed to approach those for whom the exhibition was conceived – yesterday's and today's inhabitants of the city of Alba Iulia – but also to involve all those interested in the history of the city of the Union. The joining with the other two cities of the Union, Chişinău and Cernăuţi, offered the occasion for a retrospective look at the destiny of some cities with an extraordinary cultural heritage, characteristic of the entirety of the historical provinces they represented in 1918: Transylvania, Bessarabia and Bucovina.[2]

The first section of the exhibition, Alba Iulia – The Portrait of a City, featured sequences of the central arteries and squares of the pre-war and interwar city which once invested the city with a distinctive allure that is hard to infer today, based on the few preserved disparate constructions. Hunyadi Square, Ferencz Novák Square (known after 1918 as Mihai Viteazul, and today as Iuliu Maniu) and Sétatér (Promenade) Square constituted between them the central area of the city, an area of the community. The central Ferencz Novák Square was flanked on its southern side by the City Hall (fig. 1) and to the east by Nagyboldogasszonyutca (today Regina Maria Street), shown here with the Reformed church in the background (fig. 2), and on the northern side by Gisella Palace (fig. 5). The premises of trade companies, such as those of Albert Jakabfy, Elias Kohn and J. B. Misselbacher Sen., illustrate the ethnic diversity of the local entrepreneurs. On the western side of Hunyadi Square, which subsequently lost the appearance of a square after being sectioned by a pedestrian artery with the role of a mini-park, stood the Hungária Hotel (known after 1918 as the Dacia and during the Communist regime as the Apulum) (fig. 3), and on the northern side, the square opened towards Lépes Street (today Tudor Vladimirescu) (fig. 4) where, in the proximity of the Alba Iulia People's Bank building, the Jewish school and the new synagogue (fig. 6) stood. Together with the old synagogue and the Rabbi's house on the opposite fronton of the street, these formed a true institutional centre of the Jewish community in Alba Iulia. Promenade Square also lost its initial appearance, marked by the positioning on the western side of the city's redoubt (casino), which was repurposed during the interwar period as the headquarters of Caragiale Theatre, and on the eastern side by the Neo-Gothic façade of Europa Hotel (fig. 7). In the first decade of the twentieth century, standing further south from the symmetric area of those three squares, the Palace of Justice, an imposing building with a Neoclassical aspect, highlighted Szechenyi Square (after 1918 known as General Berthelot, and today as Ion I. C. Brătianu) (fig. 8).[3]

Immediately after 1918, two symbolic monuments erected in the citadel attested to the new political and national context in which the city was evolving, together with the entire Transylvanian province. These were the Coronation Church, erected in the vicinity of the Roman-Catholic cathedral (figs 9, 14-15), based on the design of architect Victor Ştefănescu (figs 10-13), and the Hall of the Union, a result of the rearrangement of the military casino, based on drawings by the same architect (figs 16-17, 20-21).[4] The latter fully earned its status of symbolic monument only much later, in the postwar period, when it formed an ensemble with the Great Union Museum, accommodated since 1968 in the former building of the officers' pavilion (figs 18-19).[5] This was the theme of the second section of the exhibition, Symbol-Monuments of Alba Iulia, the City of the Union.

In the third section, Alba Iulia – Systematization of the Platoul Romanilor: From the First pProjects to Victoria Boulevard, we aimed to restore the main stages of the shaping of the new district in the area of the Platoul Romanilor. A result of the tendency to apply Soviet-inspired urbanistic models (kvartal and micro-districts) (figs 22-24), the appearance of this district has generated the issue of its inclusion in the urbanistic ensemble of the city (figs 25-26) through various solutions for the capitalization of the intermediary area between the citadel and the new district. Although the object of some projects conceived as early as the interwar period which were not put into effect (figs 27-29), the development of the area was

decided in 1972 in the manner least recommended by designers (figs 30-32). The images of the city from the Communist period circulating via postal cards or the local press betray the deficient character of the urbanistic solutions applied (fig. 33).

The last section of the exhibition, Alba Iulia – Systematization of the Centre, presented the systematization plans created in 1984 (fig. 34), 1985 (fig. 35), 1986 (fig. 36) and 1987 (figs 37-39) and shots from the image of the old city streets, based on documents from the expropriation files, with public buildings and particular houses proposed for demolition under the grinding machine of the area's systematization during the "Golden Age" (figs 40-56). Most of the selected examples referred to the area to the north, northwest and west of the city's central square, which was the one most affected by demolition. Although inadequate for an integral restoration, these offer sufficient evidence for the area of the city outside the walls of the citadel whose individuality was mostly irremediably lost.[\[6\]](#)

Keywords: Alba Iulia, exhibition, Cities of the Union – Cities of Memory