

Daniela Maria Puia, Arhitectura urbană în Transilvania în perioada interbelică (București: Pro Cultura, 2020)

Abstract:

As a practicing architect and as a researcher interested in twentieth century architecture, I have continuously faced the lack of structured and consistent specialized literature on urban architecture in Transylvania. Little, if anything, is known about the various regional and national architectural trends manifested and experimented with here that fit perfectly into the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century European architectural history dominated by the idea of strengthening the newly formed national states in a complex geopolitical setting. Even less is known about the territorial dissemination of the modern movement within Transylvania's spatial borders during the 1920s-1940s, or the transformations of the most recent past, with direct reference to the 1945-1989 period. To understand the contemporary built environment and its tangible manifestation, it is imperative to research in depth, from a critical perspective, its construction, use and transformation, without temporal limit or political, economic, sociocultural, or multi-ethnic bias.

*As for the interwar urban architecture of Transylvania, until recently only sporadic mentions appeared, in reference to historical figures of Romanian architecture such as Horia Creangă or G. M. Cantacuzino, or connected to iconic built elements that defined the country's urban and sociocultural development during the 1920s-1940s, such as the Orthodox cathedrals. Nevertheless, in the last 10 years, scholarly research has managed to contribute to the understanding of certain architectural and urban manifestations connected to specific geographic settings and places within Transylvania, but still lacks a wider territorial approach and its critical interpretation.^[1] From this perspective Transylvania remains marginal in the overall autochthonous and international scholarly scene, raising rather more questions than answers, while its diverse built environment is yet to be decoded. A piece of the wider puzzle is offered by the research of the architect Daniela Maria Puia (PhD, Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urban Planning Bucharest, 2019), who tries, for the first time in a Romanian scholarly setting, to define the architectural approaches, trends and manifestations at the regional level in her book *Arhitectura urbană în Transilvania în perioada interbelică* [Urban Architecture in Transylvania During the Interwar Period], published in 2020.*

The author specifies clearly, from the very beginning, the geographical area of interest – Transylvania; the period – interwar years (1920s-1940s); and the economic and sociocultural setting that influenced the its urban and architectural development. The author states that the research is focused on the urban areas of Transylvania, identifying 31 towns that maintained their administrative status throughout the analyzed historical period.^[2] The attention paid to the territorial administrative history of Transylvania and its continuously changing borders during the interwar years establishes a good base for anyone studying this historic region and its built environment. It stresses the importance of approaching the built

environment within the larger political, economic and administrative setting of the region throughout history, rather than analyzing it exclusively on the basis of its current administrative position. As concerns the urban architecture, the main character of the book, its presentation, is divided into the programmes and themes that defined Transylvania's modernization during the 1920s-1940s. Thus, what follows takes the shape of a territorial survey of Transylvanian urban architecture, with details and indications on the authors (when identified), alongside written and drawn descriptions of the buildings based on archival and bibliographical research and enriched by the in-situ personal observations of the author. This territorial recording represents an extremely useful tool for all practicing architects in the field of architectural preservation and for scholars interested in Transylvanian built area. Moreover, this inventory establishes the basis for a further, much needed, regional contextualization of the architectural critical analysis of Transylvania's built legacy.

Personally, as an architect from Transylvania who studied and worked in the region (Alba Iulia, Hunedoara and Cluj), the book provided new insights, such as the programme of urban villas so widely spread across all towns and connected directly with a certain social and economic development of the local communities;[\[3\]](#) the mention of female architects, such as Lucia Creangă, associated with iconic buildings of the modern movement, and internationally known figures such as the Italian architect Gio Ponti;[\[4\]](#) and the diversity of architectural (stylistic) manifestation that stresses the 'island of coexistence' that Transylvania represents.[\[5\]](#)

Professionally, as a researcher rooted in heritage studies with an interest in the twentieth century's built legacy, the book raised for me more questions that still need to be answered concerning the critical approach and analysis of Transylvanian urban architecture, its transformation and, especially, its patrimonial acknowledgment and protection. The last issue represents a question raised while analysing the territorial recording accomplished by the author. The book is based on a wide and intricate data-gathering project that lacks a coherent methodological approach in exposing and analysing the documentation materials provided by the many diverse sources consulted, which include archives, bibliographical references, ongoing restoration projects, the historical studies required by the current Romanian legislation on preservation, and ongoing research in the field. To this is added the in-situ surveys provided by the author, contributing to the value of the overall research. Despite this, it is sometimes difficult to read and interpret the information exposed. For example, Dr Janos's Csiki Villa in Cluj-Napoca, designed by the architect Károly Kós in 1936-1937 and built in 1938, is illustrated through a contemporary photograph of the building which reveals recent interventions that can be interpreted as façade rehabilitation, but lacks a detailed description of the transformation.[\[6\]](#) On the contrary, in the case of Tătaru, an urban villa in Cluj-Napoca designed by the architects Elzy Lazăr and Gio Ponti, the author provides useful information concerning the overall transformation of the site and the building, to clarify the current situation of the property and its tangible mutations from construction up to the present time.[\[7\]](#) This draws attention to the transformations that this architectural legacy can suffer, which, without proper documentation could lead to the irremediable loss of the material testimony of its authenticity. In other cases, especially when dealing with the 'social dwellings' – the being workers colonies or workers' residential areas – which represent a built legacy directly linked with the industrialization process, the author tries to identify both the interwar planning and design projects and the present-day situation. However, it is not always precisely indicated whether what is currently recorded refers to the interwar projects; whether the archival projects (where available and accessible) were completely accomplished; or what transformational phases these building have been through, under what circumstances, and with what effects on their current conservation and/or decay status.[\[8\]](#) Thus, the separation between what was designed and built during the 1920s-1940s and the further

transformations that in some cases may have altered the architecture is not always clear from the tangible testimony photographed in its current state of preservation (good or bad). Moreover, it is not very clear how much of this built legacy is currently safeguarded for its patrimonial value, or at which level (local or national) with respect to Romanian legislation on the preservation of historical monuments.

The current digital tools – such as GIS, to name only one – offer a wide framework for gathering, managing, and analysing data, and are becoming common in architectural, urban, historic and preservation research, offering the possibility to integrate and control many types of data. To this should be added the easy access to cartographic databases such as Google Earth and Google Maps – used largely by the author – or Mapire,[\[9\]](#) with regard to the historical cartographic documentation of the urban environment, which for Transylvania can represent an added value for any historical research. The lack of historical cartographic analyses for the recorded case studies encumbers the reading and interpretation of the architectural programme, as well as the urban setting in which these buildings were designed and constructed.

With regard to the various typologies of architectural programme, the author discusses those directly connected with the vibrant socio-economic development of Transylvania during the 1920s-1940s. They illustrate the main issues of the local communities in connection with housing (individual and collective housing, workers, and social housing programmes), multi-confessional and sociocultural settings (low- and high-profile schools and other institutions), administrative and political representation within the public space (local administration buildings), and cultural and leisure facilities. What is lacking from this inventory is the industrial architecture: although some direct references to this design programme are made, it is only in connection with the professional figures who practiced in Transylvania during the 1920s-1940s, such as the I.A.R. airplane hangar designed by G. M. Cantacuzino and Octav Doicescu.[\[10\]](#) Industrial architecture is mentioned indirectly through the variety of facilities provided by the industries for the workers: namely, the residential areas and sociocultural facilities documented by the author. Recent studies in the field of industrial heritage[\[11\]](#) have highlighted the need to approach this architectural programme in direct connection with its impact on territorial and sociocultural transformation. The industry shaped territories according to their organization from the basis of the flux in production needs and economic efficiency, generating a continuous exchange in terms of information, know-how, people (migration) and materials (from raw materials to end-products), from the centre to the margins and vice-versa. Thus, detailing the workers' dwellings without indicating the place of production raises further questions concerning Transylvania's territorial development during the interwar period of industrialization in direct connection with the shift in architectural practice. The industrial architecture of the interwar period in Transylvania offers up some of the most interesting experiments in the field of construction materials and techniques, as exemplified by the I.A.R. airplane hangar designed by G. M. Cantacuzino in Braşov, or some of the first experiments in the field of reinforced concrete prefabrication, as in the case of Hunedoara Ironworks (800 mm rolling mill and Siemens-Martin steel mill designed and constructed at the end of the 1930s).[\[12\]](#) However, industrial architecture represents a wide research theme that should be approached separately and with methodological rigor, especially if considered one of the most vulnerable built typologies, threatened with disappearance. Mentioning the places of production (plants, factories, industrial sites), and indicating the urban connection between them and the variety of facilities built for the workers' communities recorded by the author, would have enriched the proposed territorial survey. This would have generated a more integrated approach to all architectural programmes in which the 'architect', as a specialized professional figure, started to appear as more present figure than previously.

The last chapter of the book, dedicated to the figure of the architect, completes

this territorial survey of Transylvania's built diversity. It completes the information detailed about the various architectural programmes, stressing the multitude of cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the professional figures that shaped Transylvania during the interwar years. As with the territorial inventory presented earlier in the book, this chapter establishes a fantastic research base for further in-depth analysis on the issue of knowledge transmission in the architectural profession at the regional, national and international level, while looking into all political, economic and sociocultural details of Transylvania. Moreover, it offers a direct insight into how this migration of knowledge occurred, paving the way towards the approach of other research themes connected with Transylvania's twentieth-century architectural and urban planning history.

Daniela Maria Puia's book illustrates the diversity of the built environment of Transylvania, stressing the interconnection between the diverse social, cultural, and multi-ethnic environment and its tangible architectural manifestations. This occurs through the author's wider territorial approach which becomes an urban architectural inventory, a much-needed and useful tool for both researchers in the field and practicing architects. Moreover, even if indirectly, the book raises the issue of the destiny of this built legacy and its acknowledgment as an important aspect and manifestation of Transylvania's cultural heritage, paving the way to further research approaches in the field.

Keywords: *urban architecture, Transylvania, interwar period*