

Uranus neighborhood: erased from the city, remembered by its inhabitants

Name: Mara Popescu

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Tutor: John Hanna

Abstract

This paper looks back into the past, to Bucharest during its communist regime. The communist regime lasted from 1947 until 1989, when it ended with a revolution. From 1965 until its end, Nicolae Ceausescu was the leader and his plans and ambitions created big losses among the population and the city.¹ This research focuses on the analysis of the central area of the city before it was demolished due to new plans coming from Nicolae Ceausescu. It endeavors to scrutinize the Uranus neighborhood and the transformation of the location over time from the personal experiences of two individuals who were born there and resided there for approximately sixteen years. Tudor Popescu and Catalin Stoica, childhood companions, will impart oral narratives of how the neighborhood used to be before the demolition, how their lives used to be, and how they were affected by the transformation. Following the research question “how do the former inhabitants of the Uranus neighborhood remember this neighborhood?”, this paper will look into the memories triggered by revisiting the neighborhood.

Key words

Transformation of space, memories, demolition, communism, national identity

¹ Maren Harnack, “Community Spaces - Conception, Appropriation, Identity,” n.d., 34

I Introduction

The Uranus neighborhood remains an open wound for those who lived there.² These were the words of a Romanian newspaper that was commemorating the lost neighborhood in the communist times. The transformation of the location is the main subject of the article, and it highlights the beautiful buildings that were taken down in the process of creating a new city. This research aims to bring back to life the forgotten memories of a neighborhood demolished to make space for a new “Civic Center”. This new center brought along ten-story high blocks of flats surrounding wide boulevards which direct the attention to the enormous Palace of Parliament. The building was named the heaviest building in the world and the second largest building in the world, achieving Ceausescu’s plan of having a grandiose building like none other. This accomplishment raises the question: was it worth destroying almost an entire neighborhood for this building to be realized? Some of the former inhabitants of the neighborhood, who were forced to move out of their homes, were not happy with the change. The two main characters that take part in the research will explain what their losses were and how it affected them. By walking around in the remaining parts of the neighborhood, their memories triggered by the places will be analyzed and detailed.

Literature review

The subject of the construction of the Civic Center under the rule of Nicolae Ceausescu seems to be written by both Romanian and foreign authors, and some texts are in Romanian while others are in English, probably reaching a higher audience. Sergiu Novac, Duncan Light, Craig Young, and Maria de Betania Cavalcanti describe well the political context, the reasoning of the intervention, and the process of constructing the civic center, but from slightly different angles. Novac tackles this subject by looking at the urban development of Romania. In the first part of its research the three different approaches during socialism are described, focusing then on the “second phase” urban transformation that started when Ceausescu came to power.³ According to Novac, the Romanian planners acknowledged the need for a different development, to move from a fixed neighborhood unit hierarchy to a flexible one. The author describes the ambitions and effects of the systematization law at the country level, which is a slightly different approach compared to the other authors which focus on the capital. Different from Novac, Duncan Light and Craig Young focus their research on the capital of Romania and its urban changes. They do not only analyze the period of the construction of the civic center, but also the early post-socialist period, and the 2000s. Important for this research is mainly their work describing the changes in the city due to the construction of the civic center, and not so much what happened after. According to them, the citizens of Bucharest consider building the civic center as one of the darkest periods of the country in its recent history, due to the forced movement imposed on the targeted residential neighborhoods and demolition of important monuments.⁴ A similar content is described by Maria de Berania Cavalcanti, who wrote different papers on the subject of Bucharest during the construction of the Civic Center.

² “Povesti de Bucuresti Cartierele dispărute ale Micului Paris. Vezi ce era înainte în locul Casei Poporului!,” November 18, 2011, <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/bucuresti/povesti-de-bucuresti-cartierele-disparute-ale-1371320.html>.

³ Harnack, “Community Spaces - Conception, Appropriation, Identity,” 33

⁴ Duncan Light and Craig Young, “Urban Space, Political Identity and the Unwanted Legacies of State Socialism: Bucharest’s Problematic *Centru Civic* in the Post-Socialist Era,” *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 4 (July 2013): 515–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2012.743512>, 12

In her work, Cavalcanti touches on the subject of the Uranus neighborhood and looks at some of the monuments demolished in the process.⁵

The subject of the Uranus neighborhood seems to be significantly less covered by scholarly work, and more information is present in popular research. There are different websites available, mainly in Romanian, but some of them have the option for English language as well, that commemorate the neighborhood by describing the buildings lost. “Uranus acum” presents the history of the neighborhood and it describes the important monuments of the neighborhood, some lost and some saved.⁶ The website also presents stories of some inhabitants.

Following the literature review, there seems to be more attention given to the facts of the construction of the Civic Center, and less on the memories of the destroyed neighborhoods. This paper builds on top of what has been written before, following the facts of the construction and demolition, and attempts to bring to light the narratives of two former residents that have not been heard before. The paper aims to bridge the facts and the stories, which are discovered by means of walking interviews given by two former residents. The memories triggered by revisiting the remains of their childhood neighborhood, their first home, play an important role in the research since it attempts to create the link between the facts and the stories.

Methodology

The paper aims to bring back to life forgotten memories of a central area in Bucharest through the eyes of two individuals who grew up there. On one hand, the methodology focuses on the analysis of historical material found by conducting archival research. On the other hand, the methodology focuses on walking interviews and mental maps generated by the interviewees. This paper tries to bridge the events of the demolition with the memories triggered by visiting the remaining of the neighborhood, to generate new knowledge by bringing archival research together with mental maps and interviews. A specific approach is used, in which the narrative follows the stories of two former residents confronted by the changed scene of their childhood place. Their reactions to these changes help consolidate the research.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this paper brings together the works of Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Gerome Truc on the subjects of memory of places, identity, and spatial transformation. Maurice Halbwachs explored the connection between individual consciousness and individual memory. He argues that individual memory is not only set on personal experiences, but it is dependent on the social framework, which bounds a memory to space, time, and context. Following his lines of thought, individual memory is strongly connected to collective memory, which is of high importance, as through collective memory history is remembered.⁷

⁵ Maria De Betania Uchoa Cavalcanti, “Urban Reconstruction and Autocratic Regimes: Ceausescu’s Bucharest in Its Historic Context,” *Planning Perspectives* 12, no. 1 (January 1997): 71–109, <https://doi.org/10.1080/026654397364780>, 97

⁶ “Uranus Acum - Reconstruirea Istoriei Unei Lumi Șterse de Buldozerele Comuniste,” accessed March 12, 2024, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/cartierul-uranus-amintire-istorie/31597757.html>.

⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, “Individual Consciousness and Collective Mind,” *American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 6 (1939): 812–22.

On the other hand, Pierre Nora highlights a primary distinction between memory and history, since he noticed a tension between individual and collective memories compared to the events. He makes a distinction between the two terms and underlines the fact that history represents the real events of the past while memory is an emotional bond between the past and the present. According to him, archives are essential in transforming the memory into history and they act both as proof and as “sites of memory”. In his concept describing “sites of memory”, Nora explains that certain places act as focal points for collective memory.⁸ Building on Pierre Nora’s concept about the site of memory, Gérôme Truc analyses the connection between a place and its memory. One of Truc’s points of investigation is how cities hold collective memories. According to him, the collective memory is shaped, among others, by urban renewal, public monuments, and changes in architecture.⁹

This paper builds on the work of all the previously mentioned authors and attempts to understand and analyze their concepts on the presented situation. The paper is structured to firstly give a brief explanation of the historical and political background of that time, and then to analyze the memories triggered by two men revisiting the neighborhood of their first home.

⁸ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>.

⁹ Gérôme Truc, “Memory of Places and Places of Memory: For a Halbwachsian Socio-Ethnography of Collective Memory.,” *International Social Science Journal* 62 (2011).

II Uranus neighborhood and its history

Formation of the Civic Center and demolition of the neighborhood

In order to investigate the role of memory and the reason for the demolition of the neighborhood, it is essential to first have an understanding of the political movement, so a brief historical account is provided for setting up the scene.

During his 25 years as the communist leader of Romania, Nicolae Ceausescu did not only affect the politics of the country but had a big impact on the everyday life of the citizens, culture, and appearance.¹⁰ He became the leader of the Romanian Communist Party in 1965 and soon after new plans for remodeling the country were in the making, to demonstrate the identity and values of a socialist Romania. This reform was attempting to shift from the fixed neighborhood units hierarchy towards a flexible public spaces and streets hierarchy.¹¹ To support this attempt at change, in 1974 the Systematization Law was introduced, which was aimed at constructing unified and standardized cityscapes that would express progress, modernity, and sociality.¹² The purpose of the “systematization” process was to improve the network of information, goods and labor at country level which was unachievable with the localized neighborhood unit. This new network would be connected by polarizing nodes, envisioned to be civic centers of six different types, that would create a poly-nuclear system.¹³ The process is possible if the existing organic city centers are destroyed and replaced with civic centers surrounded by a new urban scene. The civic centers were envisioned as key centers for administrative and political headquarters and were characterized by monumental buildings, large open spaces, and rectilinear axes.¹⁴

Initially, Bucharest, the capital of Romania, was omitted from the systematization plans, and only small-scale interventions such as squares and plazas were adjusted. However, two factors changed this situation. On one hand, in March 1977 a major earthquake ranked 7.5 on the Richter scale caused considerable damage to the capital city, and provided a good excuse in remodeling the city following new principles. On the other hand, upon a visit to North Korea, Ceausescu admired the monumental cityscape of their capital and was interested to remodel Bucharest following similar principles. Ceausescu wanted to leave his mark imprinted on the city to glorify his achievements so far, but also create the foremost socialist capital.¹⁵ “I am looking for a symbolic representation of the two decades of enlightenment we have just lived through; I need something grand, something very grand, which reflects what we have already achieved”.¹⁶ Shortly after the earthquake, a new civic center for the capital city was announced, which would be the most ambitious attempted urban project in the country.¹⁷ The selected areas to be replaced by the civic center were Uranus, Rahova, and Antim

¹⁰ Michael Vachon, “Bucharest: The House of the People,” *World Policy Journal* 10, no. 4 (1993): 59–63., 59

¹¹ Harnack, “Community Spaces - Conception, Appropriation, Identity.”, 34

¹² Light and Young, “Urban Space, Political Identity and the Unwanted Legacies of State Socialism.”, 9

¹³ Harnack, “Community Spaces - Conception, Appropriation, Identity.”, 35

¹⁴ Light and Young, “Urban Space, Political Identity and the Unwanted Legacies of State Socialism.”, 9

¹⁵ Maria de Betania Cavalcanti, “Totalitarian States and Their Influence on City-Form: The Case of Bucharest,” *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 9, no. 4 (1992): 275–86.,

¹⁶ As cited in de Betania Cavalcanti., 278

¹⁷ Light and Young, “Urban Space, Political Identity and the Unwanted Legacies of State Socialism.”,

neighborhoods. According to Sherban Cantacuzino, these areas defined the old city's character and due to the anti-seismic natural properties of the area were barely affected by the earthquake.¹⁸ The newly built Civic Center overlaps with the old center and landmarks of the city were lost in the process (figure 1). The gray areas are the demolished ones, and the black-drawn buildings represent the new civic center of Bucharest. The numbers show the location of the landmarks lost in the systematization process.

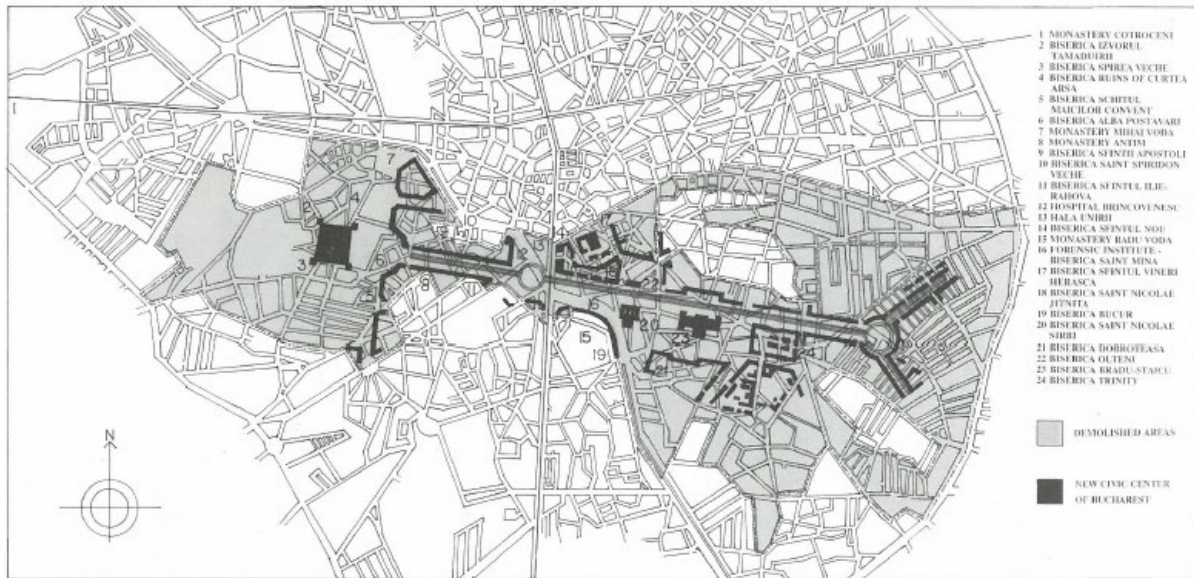


Figure 1 - Bucharest, destroyed and newly built areas (M. Cavalcanti, "Totalitarian", 1992)

The Uranus district had historical importance to the city, a short distance to the city center, and a topographically higher location, the reasons for which it was the selected site for the administrative and political headquarters of the civic center. This district was one of the traditional districts of the city and it was filled with single-family houses with vast gardens and low-rise residential buildings designed by important Romanian architects.¹⁹ This district hosted several valuable monuments such as churches and cathedrals dating from the 16th century. Most of the neighborhood was demolished, and not only were the buildings lost, but also the communities and memories of the people forced to move out. In its places, the new civic center had three principal elements: the Palace of Parliament, formerly known as the House of People, Unity Boulevard, formerly known as the Boulevard Victory of Socialism, and the Government Building Ensembles. Their construction began in 1984.²⁰

¹⁸ de Betania Cavalcanti, "Totalitarian States and Their Influence on City-Form: The Case of Bucharest.", 279

¹⁹ de Betania Cavalcanti., 279

²⁰ de Betania Cavalcanti. 281



Figure 2 - Unity Avenue viewed from Palace of Parliament (left: taken by the author, 2023; right: M. Cavalcanti, "Totalitarian", 1992)

By comparing images taken in different decades from inside the Palace of Parliament focusing towards the Unity Boulevard it can be noticed that there were not many changes between the decades (figure 2). The Unity Boulevard is located right in front of the Palace of Parliament and it extends in a straight line for 3.5 km, having a width of 120 m. Ceausescu deliberately wanted the boulevard to be wider and longer than the Champ-Élysées. The boulevard is margined by ten-story high residential buildings.²¹ From a bird-eye perspective, it seems like the purpose of these high buildings is not only to accentuate this axis but also to separate the boulevard from the neighborhood hidden behind the high buildings. They seem to be acting like a barrier between the old and the new. From a street-view level, there is no perception of the older buildings hidden behind, that were spared from the demolition.

Demolition and preservation of parts of the neighborhood



Figure 3 - Uranus neighborhood ("Uranus acum")

²¹ Light and Young, "Urban Space, Political Identity and the Unwanted Legacies of State Socialism.", 11

A big part of the Uranus neighborhood was affected by the construction of the Civic Center (figure 3). The dark blue buildings were demolished, while the light blue buildings were kept untouched. The red buildings are the newly constructed ten-story blocks of flats as part of the development. The demolition of the neighborhood brought down several monuments, such as monasteries, churches, and traditional buildings designed by Romanian architects. A few of these were lucky to not be in the way and are still standing. One in particular was considered highly important, and it was spared by being moved from its original location. Drawn in black in figure 3 is the Mihai Voda Church, which was translated about 300 meters to the East to avoid demolition.²²

The church used to belong to the Mihai Voda monastery, which was raised in the 16th century by Michael the Brave. The monastery was composed of a series of princely houses and cells, surrounded by a precinct wall, and in the 19th and 20th centuries besides the church, it functioned as a surgery school and a military hospital, together with the State Archives.²³



Figure 4 - Monastery Mihai Voda before demolition (Cristian Zaharia, 1978)

Due to the plans for the new “Civic Center”, the monastic assembly was threatened to be demolished. It was built under the rule of Michael the Brave, the monastery was of great importance not only for the inhabitants of the neighborhood. Ceausescu was an admirer of Michael the Brave which is the reason he agreed to save the church and the bell by being translated about 300 meters to the east. The rest of the components of the monastery were slowly demolished between 1984-1988.²⁴

²² “Mănăstirea Mihai Vodă,” October 18, 2021, <https://uranusacum.ro/en/manastirea-mihai-voda/>.

²³ “Mănăstirea Mihai Vodă.”

²⁴ “Mănăstirea Mihai Vodă.”



Figure 5 - Church Mihai Voda in its current location (taken by the author, 2023)

The new configuration featuring just the church and the bell was surrounded by new and existing blocks of flats, as part of the new “Civic Center”. The new blocks have almost the same heights as the church itself and the church seems to be positioned very close to its surrounding building (figure 5 and figure 6). It feels like the church was saved, but wanted to be made forgotten and hidden. To accentuate this, after the transition, the church was closed, and it only reopened after the revolution.



Figure 6 - Church Mihai Voda and its current surroundings (taken by the author, 2023)

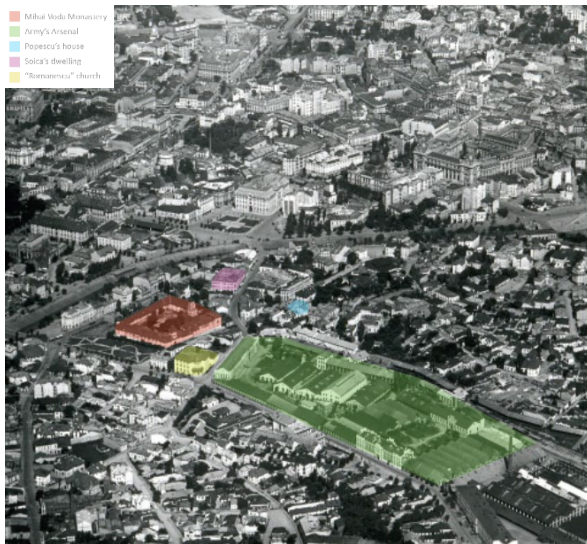


Figure 8 - Aerial photo of Uranus neighborhood in 1927 ("Bucurestii vech si noi", 1927; annotated by the author)



Figure 8 - Aerial photo of Uranus neighborhood in 2023 (Google Earth)

To the south of the original location of the Mihai Voda monastery was located the Army's Arsenal, which was built in the 19th century (figure 7). That location has a longer history than that. In the 18th century, the royal residence was moved up the hill, because the original location was prone to flooding, and it was named The New Court. At the beginning of the 19th century the court was destroyed in a fire, and for a time it was remembered as The Burnt Court. In the middle of the 19th century, the new Army's Arsenal was built there, and the hill would be remembered as Arsenal Hill.²⁵ This military area was built on a large area, and it was surrounded by a thick brick wall with a massive gate (figure 9). It was demolished together with a big part of the Uranus neighborhood, leaving behind a vast empty hill. Nowadays, Arsenal Hill is located inside the yard of the Palace of Parliament.²⁶



Figure 10 - Arsenals gate (Gheorghe Leahu)



Figure 10 - Bateriilor street from Uranus neighborhood (Dan Vartanian, 1978)

²⁵ Ioana Marinescu, "The Archive as Witness. Bucharest: Space| Image| Voice" (UCL (University College London), 2023).

²⁶ Claudia Popescu, "Documentare zone și clădiri demolate," accessed March 12, 2024, <https://centruxpo.uauim.ro/ro/proiecte/documentare-zone-si-cladiri-demolate>.

The Army's Arsenal and part of the Mihai Voda Monastery are just a couple of the total number of important buildings lost in the demolition. Antim Church and Schitul Maicilor Monastery were partially demolished and partially translated to a new location to be saved. Sfintii Apostoli Church escaped untouched, while Alba Postsvari Church was fully demolished.²⁷ Besides the landmarks lost, around 40.000 people lost their homes, their neighborhoods, and their communities.²⁸ They were forced to move out into different parts of the city while bulldozers were taking down the neighborhood. The large streets, which sometimes were filled with laughter from the children playing outside, the two or three-story high houses with tall narrow windows, and the neighbors remain memories in the minds of its inhabitants.

²⁷ Marinescu, "The Archive as Witness. Bucharest: Space| Image| Voice."

²⁸ Light and Young, "Urban Space, Political Identity and the Unwanted Legacies of State Socialism."

III Uranus neighborhood rediscovered from personal experience

Influence on the inhabitants of Uranus neighborhood

In order to analyze the memories triggered by revisiting a neighborhood partly erased from the city, this part of the paper will shift the focus from historical background to investigating oral narratives given by two former residents.

Childhood companions, Tudor Popescu and Cătălin Stoica, share their memories from living Uranus Neighborhood. Having the same age, the two men grew up together and shared multiple adventures. They lived close to one another, which made their frequent meetings easy to happen. They were classmates in kindergarten and primary school, up until around eleven years old. After that, they continued to be in the same school but in different classes. The bond they created during their childhood spent in Uranus neighborhood was kept even after the neighborhood was demolished and both of them moved to different parts of the city. Currently, after approximately 40 years of living in different parts of the city, the two men still consider each other friends and meet occasionally to catch up over a beer.²⁹



Figure 11 - Cătălin Stoica (left) and Tudor Popescu (right) in the remaining of Uranus neighborhood (taken by the author)

²⁹ Tudor Popescu, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author, December 22, 2023.

Tudor Popescu, 57 years old, is a dentist and he still lives in Bucharest, although a very different city than the one he remembers from his childhood. Born in Bucharest, he lived in a spacious house located on Sfintii Apostoli Street (figure 12). The house belonged to his grandfather, together with two other neighboring houses, and two out of these three properties once accommodated his thirteen children. When the communist regime came to power, the property of the houses was nationalized, together with most houses and private companies in the city. The Popescu family became a renter in their own house and were not allowed to live alone in the extent of their large house. Strangers were brought in to live with them, in the attempt to make everyone equal. Tudor Popescu's grandfather was forced to live with his wife and some of his thirteen children in only two rooms of the house. They endured difficult times, as the house was not designed to have multiple families inside, so they had to share the amenities. According to Tudor Popescu, his grandparents did not end up having a long life. They could not adjust to the new lifestyle, which brought upon them many problems, including hunger and cold winters. Besides being a renter in his own house, his grandfather, a lawyer as a profession, lost his job due to communism and struggled financially, a worry that made his life shorter.³⁰



Figure 13 - The house where Tudor Popescu grew up (Gheorghe Leahu)



Figure 13 - Tudor Popescu with his sister and mother in their backyard (Petre Popescu, 1974)

During the decades, the children moved out, until only Tudor Popescu's father, Petre Popescu was left behind with his wife. Other tenants moved out as well, and by the time Tudor Popescu was born, the Popescu family had five rooms for themselves.³¹

³⁰ Popescu.

³¹ Popescu.



Figure 14 - Current site of Tudor Popescus house (taken by the author, 2023)

Due to the construction of the Civic Center, Tudor Popescu's childhood house was demolished. Where the large and grandiose house used to be, there is currently a parking space for the surrounding blocks of flats (figure 14). If only the house was located a few meters more to the left, it would still be standing today.³²

Cătălin Stoica is Tudor Popescu's childhood friend. As opposed to the story of Tudor Popescu's family, Cătălin Stoica's parents were brought in the neighborhood from a town next to Bucharest, before he was born. Stoica grew up in a two-bedroom apartment situated in a low-rise block in the neighborhood. The block and apartment belonged to someone else but became the property of the state due to the nationalization process and the Stoica family was brought in to live there (figure 15). The block had three floors, with a few apartments on each floor. It had tall narrow windows all around its street façades.³³

³² Popescu.

³³ Catalin Stoica, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author, December 24, 2023.



Figure 15 - The house where Catalin Stoica grew up (Dan Vartanian, 1978)

The block was demolished during the construction of the Civic Center and the family was forced to move out. Where the block used to be, there is now an empty green space, in front of a big block of flats, built as part of the Civic Center (figure 16).³⁴

³⁴ Stoica.



Figure 16 – Current state of the placet where Stoica used to live (taken by the author, 2023)

The two companions remember the neighborhood as their childhood place. Walking around the streets of the remaining parts of the area, vivid memories came to the surface for both of them, and they narrated their adventures and daily lives. Watching the remained houses and the empty plots that used to be houses, they remember with impressing clarity their neighbors, the interaction between them, and the dynamic of the neighborhood like it was yesterday. Filled with memories of nostalgia, the two men admit that the Uranus neighborhood will always be special to them and they regret not having had the possibility to live there longer.



Figure 18 - "Romanescu" school (left: Ion Mureșan, 1979; right: "Bucurestii vechi si noi")

From classmates in kindergarten, they advanced to classmates in primary school, as they both attended the same school in their neighborhood, called "Romanescu" school (figure 18). They both continued to middle school in this school, but this time they were in different classes due to different choices in subjects and teachers.³⁶ The school was constructed in the Romanian Revival architecture style and ended up being demolished. According to Tudor Popescu, at the time of the demolition, this school was the oldest school in the city, being built at the beginning of the 20th century. He also stated that King Mihai of Romania was educated in this very school, and was in the same class with one of Popescu's uncles.³⁷

The two companions were living close to one another. Stoica's house was located at the end of Sfintii Apostoli Street, where Popescu's house was (figure 19). The bigger and taller building in the background represents the block where Stoica's apartment is. On the left side of the image, where the car is parked, is Popescu's house. Tudor Popescu states that the car belonged to his father and that the boy on the bicycle might very well be himself (figure 19).³⁸

³⁶ Stoica, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author.

³⁷ Popescu, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author.

³⁸ Popescu.



Figure 19 - Sfantii Apostoli Street (Dan Vartanian, 1982)

This short distance between Popescu and Stoica made it even easier to spend their days together. According to both men, in those times of communist Romania, there was not much to do. They state that they had limited access to television and no serious activities besides school, homework and occasionally helping their parents around. So they were spending their days together, playing with a ball or roaming around the neighborhood.³⁹

Around the corner from Popescu's house, there was a street known very well by the two men (figure 20). They claim this street to be one of their main playgrounds. As the neighborhood was lacking a proper playground, the kids had to improvise. On the streets and grass space between the streets they used to run around or play with a ball together with other kids living in close by buildings. The available space on the street was bigger than it is nowadays as back then there were almost no cars around. Tudor Popescu and Cătălin Stoica remember with joy how they used to jump the fences around the backyards, to get to Popescu's back garden in the shortest way possible.⁴⁰ Several classmates of theirs lived in houses on this street. Both of them suggest that the neighborhood had a strong community, where everyone knew each other.



Figure 20 - The place where they used to play (taken by the author)

³⁹ Stoica, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author.

⁴⁰ Popescu, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author.

Stoica remembers with impressive accuracy the names of everyone in the neighborhood and where they used to live.⁴¹ Popescu remembers mainly the names and houses of the people he interacted with the most: classmates, friends of his parents, and annoying neighbors who used to not return their ball when it would accidentally get in their garden.⁴²

At the end of the street, there used to be a building that housed a dorm for girls. The building was demolished and now it is only an empty plot (figure 21). In their teenage years, the two friends used to spend a big part of their free time around this building, hoping to get some attention from the girls living there.⁴³



Figure 21 - Location of the girls dorms (taken by the author)

They used to be creative in filling up their free time, within the grounds of the neighborhood. One frequent location was the Army's Arsenal (figure 9 and figure 22). Located on a hill, but not far from their houses, the Army's Arsenal became a favorite spot during both winter time and summer time. After the demolition started to make its way into the neighborhood, the Army's Arsenal was closed from business. In the first phase, a part of the industrial buildings inside the extensive yard was demolished, leaving behind the massive gate and fence, a few closed buildings, and a vast open field. The plot was later fully demolished and then construction took place there for the Civic Center and the Palace of Parliament.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Stoica, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author.

⁴² Popescu, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author.

⁴³ Stoica, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author.

⁴⁴ Popescu, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author.



Figure 22 – Army's Arsenal partially demolished, photo taken from inside the Arsenal towards the gate and the city (Andrei Birsan, 1984)

Passing the intimidating entrance there was the base of the hill (figure 22). After the first demolition phase, when a big part of the hill was unoccupied, the field became a magnet for curious eyes, and unsupervised teenagers transformed it into their new playground. Tudor Popescu and Cătălin Stoica were among them. They used to play with a sleigh up and down the hill during wintertime. During spring and summer time, this location became an egg quest for the two. They used to climb the different structures inside remaining parts of the Arsenal yard in the search for pigeon eggs.⁴⁵

They retell with joy how they used to dig around the vast field. And luck was on their side. Popescu proudly retells about his findings. He found an empty grenade and several empty bullets, that he kept until present days (figure 23).⁴⁶



Figure 23 - Artillery found by Tudor Popescu (taken by the author)

⁴⁵ Popescu.

⁴⁶ Popescu.

According to Tudor Popescu, the Army's Arsenal was built on top of Mihai the Brave's citadel. While digging, he found a human bone, which has been in the ground since Mihai the Brave's rule. Proud of his finding, Tudor claims to have taken the bone home to show it to his parents. His father was not pleased with his finding and asks Tudor to return the bone immediately, remembers Tudor with joy.⁴⁷

What is left of the neighborhood

The remaining parts of the neighborhood feel surrounded by the high communist blocks on all sides. There is a clear difference in the architecture between the old and the new. Walking in the old part of the neighborhood is an experience that seems to be out of a story. It brings you back in time to simpler times, and it showcases how the city used to be half a century ago. The old part is low-rise and full of hidden gems. Unfortunately, not all buildings have been properly maintained. While some buildings are in a very good state and reproduce the true potential of the neighborhood, others are on the verge of collapsing. Representative architectural elements are still visible on these buildings, but it requires a bit of imagination to visualize how they would look.



Figure 24 - Well maintained building from the neighborhood (taken by the author)

If properly maintained, the neighborhood would have presented a multitude of houses and low-rise blocks of flats in a representative architectural style (figure 24). The buildings, well maintained and with details still in place, show the true potential of the neighborhood. They seem to bring a delicate atmosphere to the area, compared to the communist blocks that seem very massive and rough cut. These houses are a good representation of the original style of the neighborhood. It was filled with either one-family houses either with low-rise blocks, that hosted a few apartments inside.

⁴⁷ Popescu.

Not all buildings were so well taken care of, and the degree of maintenance varies a lot within the neighborhood. Hotel Tranzit is one of the buildings that only has some remaining parts standing (figure 25). According to Catalin Stoica, the building was originally a hotel, but it was converted into dorms towards the end of its lifetime.⁴⁸ Behind the hotel, the high communist blocks of flats can be spotted. It seems like the hotel barely escaped demolition when the Civic Center was constructed. However, this escape did not bring the hotel eternal life. The building is currently abandoned and in a poor, unsafe state. On every side of the hotel, there are banners stating that entrance is forbidden due to the risk of collapsing. The banners also state that the demolition permit is waiting for approval.



Figure 25 - Hotel Tranzit; picture taken by the author



Figure 26 – Former asylum for blind people; picture taken by the author

At first glance, the asylum for blind people is another building that seems abandoned (figure 26). The gaps in the walls show how thick the walls of the building are. There seems to be damage to both the walls and the roof. Architectural details are still visible. Although based on looks the building seems abandoned, according to Tudor Popescu, it is actually under restoration.⁴⁹ In order to bring the building back to life, an extension of the building is being

⁴⁸ Stoica, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author.

⁴⁹ Popescu, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author.

built to its right, with the intention on having an interior connection. Even though the extension is in an early stage of construction and only the skeleton is placed, based on the opening sizes, there seems to be a distinction between the former asylum and the extension.

The buildings by the river show a clear distinction between how the buildings used to look and how they look now (figure 27). They are located at the edge of the neighborhood, towards the center of the city. The initial buildings presented high and narrow windows, some of them even with rounded top frames. There was a diversity in rooftops and the buildings were rich in architectural details. Looking behind these buildings, the city seems almost empty, due to the fact that it was composed of low-rise buildings. The new buildings, on the other hand, are higher and very uniform in terms of aspect, having similar types of windows and typology in facades.



Figure 27 - Buildings: before vs now (left: Paul Filip, 1954 right: taken by the author)

New housing adjustments made by the inhabitants of Uranus neighborhood

The moment demolition was getting closer and closer, people started moving out of the neighborhood, according to the interviewees. The Popescu family left their house a year prior to its demolition when Tudor Popescu was around sixteen years old. Other houses were already being demolished in the neighborhood, and they sensed there was no other way. Although sad with the change of scenery, they decided to move sooner rather than later to get a better housing replacement. Before their departure, they were still renters of their former owned house. Through connections, they managed to be placed in a rented apartment not very far from Uranus neighborhood. Tudor Popescu suggests that they were one of the lucky ones since they were offered to rent a spacious three-bedroom apartment close to the city center.⁵⁰

When communism ended, the Popescu family was able to buy that apartment and make it their permanent home, but they were never reimbursed for the loss of the property located in the Uranus neighborhood. The parents lived there ever since and Tudor Popescu's mother, at 88 years old, is currently still in that same apartment. She suffers from senile dementia and from time to time states that she wants to go back home, referring to the house in Uranus

⁵⁰ Popescu.

neighborhood. That was the place where she raised her two children to their later adolescence and maybe for her in that house, some core memories of home were created. It seems like even after living in the new apartment for forty years, she does not always see it as her home.⁵¹

Catalin Stoica and his family stayed in their home in the Uranus neighborhood until the last moment. They were forced to move out and were offered an apartment at the edge of the city, approximately ten kilometers away from the neighborhood.⁵²

⁵¹ Popescu.

⁵² Stoica, Interview about memories from Uranus neighborhood with the author.

IV Conclusion

In his rule over Romania, Nicolae Ceausescu changed the appearance of the city of Bucharest. He redesigned the center of the city, to accommodate his plans for the “Civic Center” which was composed of his grandiose “House of People”, the Government Building Ensembles, and the Boulevard Victory of Socialism, specifically made to be wider and longer than Champ-Élysées.⁵³ The accomplishment of building the “Civic Center” would have not been possible without demolishing the existing neighborhoods from the city center. In this process important landmarks of the city were lost, around 40.000 people were forced to move out of their homes, and their neighborhoods and communities were lost.⁵⁴

By means of archival research, this paper followed the story of two men who grew up in one of the destroyed neighborhoods until their late adolescence years. Their oral narratives accompanied by walking interviews portray the Uranus neighborhood as how it used to be, 50 years ago. From their memories, this low-rise residential neighborhood used to be a place full of life with a strong community. The transformation of this space is followed by analyzing and comparing the archival material with the images taken upon visiting the area. The stories of the two men provide useful insight into the potential of the area if it was not demolished.

The knowledge accumulated from the walking interviews and archival searches is important for understanding what the city lost in the making of the “Civic Center”. In further research, this knowledge can be used for further investigating the area as well as other potential neighborhoods that were demolished for the same reason. While this paper focuses on the experience and memories of only two individuals from this neighborhood, future analysis could look into other inhabitants, especially into some whose houses were not demolished. This interesting gap left for further research could add a new layer to the story of the neighborhood, and explain its slow transformation during the 50 years since there was a small part not demolished. By interviewing individuals who continued living there after the demolition, the perspective of how the community changed and how their lives changed due to the demolition since they continued living in their home, could be investigated. The research conducted based on Tudor Popescu and Cătălin Stoica’s stories offers insight into the memories triggered by revisiting, after 50 years, a place that used to be called home.

This research and the possibility of further research underline the fact that there is not only one narrative that matters but a multitude of narratives that contribute to a complete story.

⁵³ Light and Young, “Urban Space, Political Identity and the Unwanted Legacies of State Socialism.”

⁵⁴ Light and Young.

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