



City-Fragments: Some reflections on 'urban lacuna' in Bucharest

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Around 1976, Liliana Grassi elaborated her theory about 'grande lacuna' that we may translate as 'urban lacuna.'¹ That means that she posited at urban scale the complexity we have at architectural scale and asked how to deal with discontinuities in historical and cultural stratification. She meant by this term the element of discontinuity which the individual building can represent in an urban environment. (Crippa, Sorbo 2008)

This definition is important because it interprets the urban environment as an organism in which every element contributes to define the harmony.

In order to fix this problem we have to answer a few basic questions: what is the *architectonic* value of place? Should we conserve it? And why?

The analysis of the context is a very difficult one because it is hard to classify it. The methodological approach we use for buildings, like material or damage analyses, is unfit to reveal its complexity.

The architectonic value of a context-environment is a mix of *natural* elements (its essence as a geographical place, determined by materials, climate, etc.) and *cultural* ones (or, we should say, the way natural data are absorbed in a social system).

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Cultural and natural data are mixed in context analysis and become necessary instruments to understand the complete identity of a place.

The natural – primitive data are more extended and less visible; that is why they are so difficult to grasp and to use in an architectonic dialogue, or for a conservation act, if it is not to be an embalming one.

The urban landscape we find today in Bucharest is heterogeneous. We have lost the indefinite value of a place for a generic and indefinite global value of a fragmented city. We deal with a crushed text.

You can respond to this fragmentation in two ways: one is to find that indefinite value and refer to it in design choices; the other is to go on with discontinuities, finding answers in new languages, following a new idea of the future city and keeping the ancient, more or less, as an accident.

In both cases we undertake an interpretative dialogue with the history of the city, in the first case giving a conservative response, or suspending, in the second, the investigative process in starting a new creative design action, which involves economical, political and social proceedings.

To acquire cultural and material data and give a name to the problem of Bucharest identity, the first step is to elaborate an urban design able to link spaces, and answer the second and third questions – should I conserve it and why? – in an operative

perspective related to needs and involved with the identity of the place.

In the Bucharest case study (focused on an area in the northern part of the city built between 1985-1940), cultural data has completely absorbed the natural data. The alternating political situation created stratified and different urban images. As in a Great Exhibition we find many architectonic typologies (National Style, Eclecticism, French and German influences, Art Deco, Modernism, *avant-garde*) each referred to different materials, also suggested by the villa's typology.



During the workshop sessions we referred to this fragmentation as an intangible value of the place, as a part of the contemporary Bucharest identity.

The point is to conserve this complexity as a stratified memory of the city.

So the answer to the second question – should I conserve it? – is positive. This fragmentation could be a new identity itself and to delete it means to lose the place itself.

But how can we conserve fragmentation? This is the hardest part of the process.

We may imagine two different perspectives in designing a solution for this part of the city: the owners' point of view and the public intention to harmonise the transformation of the city. This is particularly true in what pertains to the relationship between private property and public life, such as the transformation/alteration of façades, the changing of roofs, fences, green spaces and the introduction of new high quality facilities such as solar panels.

We know that a lot has been done, recently, to control this process: in 2000, Law no. 5 for the Approval of PATN Section III - Protected Areas; in 2001, Law no. 350; a catalogue of historical monuments in 2004 (many of them in this area) and, after 2008, revised regulations for protected areas.² But the possibilities for derogation planning are still problematic.

This may be seen as a lack of communication between public institutions and private owners or, at the same time, a lack of trust as the rules may easily be derogated.

It may be a solution to increase dialogue and give owners the responsibility of being a part of a high quality system and the obligation to preserve it as social issue. But how?

We discussed a lot during the workshop about the instruments needed to create awareness of the high architectonic value of the place, and a focal point is to educate about the architectonic value with multi-scale interventions.

First, establish interventions to improve the owners' pride with cultural events like exhibitions, public lectures, guided tours in a close collaboration between private and public. Second, give an important role to the school and university as the primary step in educating the public to respect and preserve the city. But this process of awareness building is futile when the public institution does not reveal its intention to engage in dialogue to create public spaces and more services as a mutual exchange. A serious programme is needed to raise the standard of living with political action towards social cohesion. This could be a first step in asking for a wider participation of the owners and towards creating the feeling of being part of a system and not a single initiative.

Of course this will not overcome the speculation-derogation planning problem but it will increase control, extending it from the public to the private realm. It is possible to master the balance between the public will and private obligation with a participation process when the public institution creates guidelines that allow the private interests to have a choice but not a prevaricating role.

In an operational perspective, the opportunity to paint façades or built-up fences without public control in an integrated building context or in a historical high quality parcelling (such as Filipescu park for example) creates strong fragmentations in the urban structure, and when it is done it is difficult to go back.

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When the public declares its intention to preserve some core elements of identity this may collide with the private person's will to express their own taste and wishes. This is particularly true in Bucharest where there was a strong presence of the public sector in recent decades. That is why the dialogue with the private interests, giving them awareness of the value of all architectural interventions in an urban contest (from the façades to the green spaces) could be a meeting ground between private and public.

Education in architectural culture is the focal point in administration for the preservation of urban values: if the citizen can recognise the value – an identified value in which he is involved somehow – he will want to preserve it as a collective memory.

**Notes**

1 Liliana Grassi (1923-1985) was an Italian architect and scholar of architectural history and restoration. Grassi studied at Politecnico di Milano under Ambrogio Annoni. In 1947 she was appointed as Assistant and in 1964 Professor of Architectural Restoration at Politecnico di Milano. From 1950 until she died, she worked at the restoration of 'Cà Granda' in Milan, designed in the 15th century by Antonio Averlino known as Filarete (Grassi 1972). Grassi elaborated a conservation method where the culture and the history of the monuments are the basis of a critical approach to conservation design (Grassi 1960). Grassi developed the theory of 'grande lacuna' during the 1970s, following the Venice Charter of 1964, but she never published it. Grassi's thoughts on the subject, developed through her lectures to students, are now published in the volume *Liliana Grassi e il recupero creativo della memoria storica*, with an Introduction by Giorgio Carbonara, Scuola di Specializzazione in Restauro dei Monumenti, Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza (Crippa, Sorbo 2008).

2 Some of the planning instruments to which we referred are: 2000, Law no. 5 for the Approval of PATN - Section III - Protected areas; 2001, Law no. 350, the Territorial and Urban Planning Act; 2001, Law no. 422 for the Protection of the Historic Monuments; 2002, Law no. 451 for the Ratification of the European Landscape Convention; 2004, List of Historic Monuments (updated in 2010).

References

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