

FAMILY, HERITAGE AND CULTURE. A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON THE PRESERVATION OF THE NATIONAL HERITAGE/

Silvia-Ileana Costiuc - *“Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urban Planning, Romania*

silvia.costiuc@gmail.com

Abstract. The purpose of this research is to address the ownership and abandonment issue of the historical monuments, one of the main causes of the national decay of historical architecture in Romania. After World War II, in 1948, the Nationalization Law was enacted, leading to the confiscation of private enterprises. Two years later, a decree was issued that extended the state’s control to the headquarters of these enterprises, along with the homes and other forms of immovable heritage the elite owned. Afterwards, the state often confined the rightful owners of historic buildings to a small section of their property, imprisoned or dislocated them to forced domicile, replaced them with other social groups, or, in some cases, forced them to cohabitate. This upheaval disrupted many individual and family lives across generations, severing the natural familial connection to their ancestral homes. Consequently, we now face a situation where multiple tenants, concessionaires and administrators inhabit one historical monument and lack a natural attachment to the building they inhabit as well as they lack cultural knowledge. Some of the original families spent decades reclaiming their properties. Some had regained them in a context where maintenance costs exceed their financial capacity. During the endeavor they saw their intrinsic bond to these buildings eroded. In addition, due to limited financial means in most of the cases, many of the historical monuments remain neglected. In conclusion, there is an urgent need to reestablish a positive relationship between current owners and the historical monuments they possess. This should include heritage education for the owners, anthropological research, financial aid and international collaboration. The effort has the potential to restore trust in the state among monument owners, heritage experts and society and can lead to a situation where the owners take better care of our common architectural heritage.

The nationalization of houses and other properties after world war II. During the post-World War II urbanization process, which involved significant demographic shifts, the naturalization process commenced. In 1948, the Nationalization Law was enacted, leading to the confiscation of all private enterprises. Two years later, a decree was issued that extended the state’s control to the headquarters of these enterprises, along with any houses or other forms of immovable heritage they owned. The decree included hotels, buildings damaged by earthquakes or war, and other properties. Later, under the guise of the 1977 major earthquake damage to the capital, despite opposition from heritage experts, the state demolished a part of Bucharest the size of Venice, and replaced it with socialist urbanism and architecture.

One of the most important reasons for the deterioration of historical

monuments in Romania is the fragmented ownership. Many houses, important buildings or heritage sites held by private enterprises and owned by the elite were confiscated after the second World War and have been under state ownership for more than half a century. After 1989, some of the expropriated homes went through a process of restitution, fraught with corruption and inefficiencies. In other words, a long separation occurred between the owners and their homes, which, in some cases, were eventually reunited with their original owners in recent decades. The expropriated generations of owners often did not live to see the moment when their family regained the properties, leaving their heirs to inherit the trial, the buildings and the psychological burden of the injustice they had endured.

The home as a soul symbol. A house is more than a physical structure. A house is considered a strong self-symbol and is the repository of memories and the place where one’s identity takes shape [1]. The rupture between humans and their house was probably one of the most important traumas that communism produced with long aftereffects, and it was not a punctual event. Based on my personal experience, I have become increasingly aware of the emotional repercussions on generations affected by expropriation, which may include feelings such as sadness, frustration, anger, and resignation. A former family mansion in Santău, Satu Mare County, which was bombed during the Second World War, was later confiscated by the state as a ruin. The family was only recently financially compensated after a prolonged legal battle and exhaustive administrative processes initiated by my maternal grandfather (1914–2002), a lawyer, following 1989. In this case, the mansion, now in ruins, was repurposed as a local school. The heirs chose not to reclaim ownership of the building and land, instead opting to leave them to the community in exchange for financial compensation. Ironically, following the 1989 regime change, local authorities erected a bust of Leontin Sălăjan, a prominent communist figure after World War II, born in Santău, in the school’s front yard.

To emphasize the narrative more effectively, I conducted a brief interview with Constantin Șerban Cantacuzino, although the case of the Cantacuzino family is exceptional [2] in terms of material and historical heritage and perhaps as well in terms of measures applied by the totalitarian state. I have thought of a set of questions to highlight lesser-known aspects of the expropriated families’ experiences, including: the owners’ education, professions, and cultural background; memories of the home and its movable heritage; the moment of property confiscation; the displacement and exile they faced; population influx; the process of reclaiming the property; the state of the home after 50 years and the present challenges.

Conversely, what initially appears to be a collection of individual narratives reveals a broader, more significant societal impact. The so-called quarrels and passions inside the international conservation movement [3] are very vivid in Romania today as they are intertwined with personal stories of nationalization and the general physical decay and abandonment of heritage buildings. Many of the prominent specialists are direct successors of the expropriated elites or the administrative successors of their persecutors – the public advisors. These pronounced national quarrels underscore a deeper collective problem.

Rupture between home and owner. The numbers regarding the displaced landowners (“relocated elements”) in March 1949, a Numerical Situation of Former Landowners, drawn up by the General Directorate of the Police/Miliția on January 24, 1951, mentions a total of 4,375 heads of families and a total of 8,528 people, of which 1,573 are from the city of Bucharest and 6,955 from the regions [4]. These numbers could be relevant for nationalization of properties in the 40ies - 70ies, but the confiscations were done in several stages and the displacements of the landowners were of short term. Probably many categories of historical monuments had a similar story, among which we can identify [5] 339 mansions, 221 villas, 150 palaces, 20 fortified houses, 9 manor houses, 143 castles, numerous gardens, 79 banks, 17 warehouses, 3 slaughterhouses, 17 granaries, 5 barns, 47 inns and taverns, 72 hotels and restaurants, 18 casinos, 65 power stations, factories and plants, 5 other industrial monuments and other. To all these we add the properties of the religions that were not tolerated by the state.

The owners were usually the leaders in their localities and surrounding areas by superior education and manners and the philanthropic activities of the elites. As Constantin Șerban Cantacuzino, stated:

“My grandfather did not practice as a doctor at the Râfov manor, but he provided free medical care to all the villagers. He also took care of the children going to school, dressing and providing shoes for them so they could attend school even during winter. When the Russians came in 1940, everything changed, and he was placed under house arrest in Pitești, where unfortunately, he passed away.”[6]

The moment the house was confiscated, was generally marked by aggressivity, humiliation and injustice. I have asked C. Ș. Cantacuzino if his grandfather received any previous notice about the nationalization of his house probably in 1951 and his answer, in a sad resignation tone with repressed anger, was relevant:

”To inform them?! My grandfather was at the manor when six men dressed in black leather entered. No one from Râfov wanted to take part in the event, which was done with a lot of fuss, and they said “Why? We have nothing against our master| conașu”. The six men had been brought from the Jiu Valley, and they took him. Over his pajamas, he put on some additional clothes. On his nightstand, he had a signet ring that was a family heirloom from the prince, and one of the men put it on his finger and they took the ring away. My grandfather was held for three days in detention in Ploiești, after which he was sent to Pitești.”[6]

The evacuation and confiscation of all the belongings was done during the night time, without the assent of the local community and this is the atmosphere in which the vandalization of the mobile heritage of such properties – like the mentioned ring, an item of national importance – began. In order to create a sense of the value, diversity and richness of the mobile heritage I have asked for any memories from the houses and another violent episode emerged along with links to other incommensurable immobile values that were lost. At some point some close family party that had joined the new regime asked his grandfather if he would like to have something from the house, and the former owner of the mansion had asked for a folder with a collection of stamps and a few books from the library. “My grandfather was interested in what had survived from the Alexandria library,

some treaties that had an immeasurable value. His comrades burned them in front of the house – <<we don’t need what the boyars read>>.” [6]

Forced dislocation, forced domicile and exile followed the nationalization of their properties. A note dated December 23, 1953, prepared at the verbal order of the Minister of Internal Affairs, contains a report on those who were under house arrest throughout the country at that time, with a total of 51,341 individuals. [7] C. Ș. Cantacuzino’s paternal grandfather was “placed under house arrest in Pitești, where unfortunately, he passed away”. His grandmother [8] “was sent to Bacău, but she didn’t go; she stayed for three days with friends and then returned to Păulești, where everything had been destroyed and taken. However, she found an annex where she lived.” There, somehow, they left them 6,000 square meters of land for her to live on, that were later supposed to be taken away too in 1973, but C. Ș. Cantacuzino had moved there in order to prevent that from happening, declaring that he will make agriculture. C. Ș. Cantacuzino’s father, expelled from the university as an “enemy of the people”, was forced to move to the Jiu Valley, as it was the only place he could find employment was the mining complex. Later, with his wife that he met there, moved to Bucharest. Another family house on Polonă 7, Bucharest “had a strange history; it was not nationalized”. The family was moved from the house. Maria Cazimir, the married sister of his grandfather with her husband, returned to the house on Polonă 7, after they found out that the person who lived there was moving. This last story shows the connection between family members and their houses, and especially the intrinsic longing for the house, that most likely had been a general feeling for all the dislocated families.

After the nationalizations of homes, the population was randomly distributed inside them. Emanuela Grama [9] published a study indicating the dramatic change in the social and ethnic composition of Bucharest’s Old Town after World War II. In the soviet countries during the Cold War [10] it was considered that the built heritage was permeated by hostile value systems – religion, feudalism and bourgeoisie applied to the main types of buildings (churches, palaces, industries, banks, etc.). The complicity of conservation with fascism was addressed as well and also, the incompatibility of old buildings and complexes with socialist aspirations for the future were aspects that contributed to the general atmosphere. Some researchers state that an unofficial influx of economically disadvantaged and undereducated populations was facilitated inside the nationalised homes, potentially with the aim of gradually undermining heritage values [11].

Re-bonding with the house. Following the regime change in 1989, the state slowly implemented administrative mechanisms to return nationalized properties to their original owners. For many victims, reclaiming ownership of their homes proved to be a lengthy and arduous process. Meanwhile, illicit businesses were formed – with persons buying litigious rights [12] – that most likely had inside information [13] that were coming at the former owners that were in vulnerable health, old or in financial difficulties, some living abroad. For those who started a process the trial lasted for years of frustrating and endless solicitation of documents. And another set of painful events was faced by the descendants of the owners, who saw the destruction continue long after 1989. Looking at the conservation status of the buildings of the majority of the historical monuments, we

can assume that after 50 years many of the houses and properties regained after a long and complicated trial, were returned damaged, with stolen and destroyed elements.

The manor at Râfov was destroyed in '92 — I emphasize 1992, and it was not demolished by the communists; it functioned as a town hall until '92. The first ones who stole what they found interesting were the mayor at that time and the police chief, who left together for a small house with four rooms, 100 meters across the street after the trial, which was easy to maintain. In winter, heating costs more, and they stole everything, everything that was there. They took the metals first, then wooden beams as much as they could from the roof. In 2000, I came into possession of the building, and I was alerted by them that it was a historical monument, so I shouldn't modify anything. I said: "In this state, what should I modify?". The land registry is still not clarified so I can make a project, while some have already been built nearby. What can I say? It's a mockery. All the mayors up to now have allowed something to be done; if it is a monument for me, why wasn't it for them? A state representative told me to file a criminal complaint [against the illegal construction that was built in the vicinity]. That is, I would be the one guilty, not the town hall or the heritage department. I didn't do it. He called me saying it would remain there; I spoke with the mayor, and I was promised that it would be resolved by winter. Let's see if these are realities or just stories, as I am tired of promises. [13]

In this case, the heirs took the house in possession – destroyed by abandonment and vandalization, after it was used by the state representatives that have failed to protect the cultural heritage and, as it seems, failed to create a natural bond with the building while they were using it. On the other hand, the feelings the owner has towards these authorities is obvious and is, most likely a prolonged feeling of the attitude of the family towards the state was formed in the first 20 years of communism and later, to this day.

The difficulties that the owners faced after recovering ownership of their houses were economic, administrative, legal concerning the conservation of historical monuments and other. Sometimes occupied by objects that belonged to the temporary tenants that could not be moved for a long while, as it was the case of the house on Marin Serghiescu Street in the Cantacuzino family, reclaimed after four years of legal proceedings [13]. Meanwhile the house served as a storage facility for the mobile heritage of the Museum of the City of Bucharest. The museum did not have financial resources to move the mobile heritage and the owners were, even after the trial and decades of communism unable to use the house properly as *"the mobile heritage could not be thrown out onto the street because it could be destroyed"* [13]. After they left, the house was rented to the Spanish Embassy for the Cervantes Cultural Institute, until they moved to a larger space. Later on, the new director of the Museum of the City of Bucharest asked for rent.

Regrettably, similar practices detrimental to architectural heritage persisted even after the events of 1989, as exemplified by the case of the Matache Market and the Buzești-Berzei boulevard. These demolitions, carried out under the direction of the mayor in 2011, marked a continuation of such destructive trends in democracy.

In the contemporary developed societies, a major factor in human unhappiness is the loss of the connections between us and the environment, the

world around us [14]. Consequently, the most important connections of humans with the environment are their home, their neighborhoods and their heritage.

The dual ownership of heritage houses: the individual and the state. The communist regime had a lasting impact on property ownership and cultural heritage in Romania. The aftermath of the communist regime has profoundly affected three generations, creating a lasting trauma that severed individuals from their expropriated homes, even in cases where legal victories were achieved. This disconnection resulted in a significant loss of identity, disrupting the continuity of personal and familial histories. It also led to a massive depletion and vandalization of both built and movable heritage. While some properties were never reclaimed, others fell into the hands of organized networks that exploited legal and administrative systems. Even post-1989, authorities have perpetuated harmful practices that continue to damage cultural heritage and undermine the rights of the original owners.

For Romania to foster a deeper societal appreciation of cultural heritage, it is crucial to respect and rehabilitate the historical owners and their legacies. This process should occur at both the national and individual levels, particularly in cases where state-owned, historically significant buildings are in need of restoration. A national strategy should include the following restorative measures:

- 1. Inventory and collaboration:* An updated inventory of nationalized properties and their ownership, particularly those now designated as historical monuments, is essential. Collaboration between key institutions — such as the Ministry of Culture, the National Authority for the Restitution of Properties, and the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile and others — is important for coordinating efforts.
- 2. Financial aid and heritage education:* Financial assistance for owners and targeted education programs about cultural heritage should be provided. Education programs must cater to various groups, including heirs of the former owners, the state, and those who have been assigned properties from state institutions. Each group has unique needs: heirs who have regained properties need information about the legal frameworks protecting cultural heritage, while those assigned by the state owners or state institutions must learn to appreciate the cultural value of these assets through community engagement.
- 3. Research and state support:* Anthropological research on the expropriated generations should be conducted, including interviews with heirs. Additionally, the state could provide support for these heirs to meet and share their experiences, helping them navigate past injustices and current challenges. Public dialogue, acknowledging guilt, and action by the state are crucial in this context. Conferences and publications would help heritage experts and owners better understand the differences between administrative bodies and the human and emotional element of these issues.
- 4. International collaboration:* Romania could also benefit from partnerships with other former Soviet countries that have faced similar challenges, learning from their approaches to restitution and rehabilitation of heritage.

A significant state investment in the systematic rehabilitation of historical monuments that were nationalized remain under public ownership is a priority. The deteriorating condition of these buildings underscores the ongoing professional tensions within the field of heritage conservation, tensions that have been exacerbated by the communist legacy.

Rebuilding both collective and individual emotional bonds with these properties is essential for both the original families and new occupants, especially in cases where assets remain unclaimed. Financial reparations, emotional redress, and policies that honor the contributions of landowners and elites who played a foundational role in shaping the nation are necessary steps in restoring trust in authorities. By addressing past injustices and fostering a sense of shared responsibility, Romania has the opportunity to transform its historical monuments from symbols of loss into beacons of cultural identity and resilience, ensuring their preservation for future generations.

Acknowledgements.

This article was possible thanks to the kindness of Irina Popescu-Criveanu who introduced me to C. Ș. Cantacuzino and his willingness to grant me the aforementioned interview. I am grateful to both of them and thank them again for this opportunity.

References.

1. Marcus CC. *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*. Berwick: Nicolas-Hays; 2006. Passim.
2. As Irina Popescu-Criveanu had pointed out, in a discussion prior to the interview.
3. Glendinning M. *The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation. Antiquity to Modernity*. London: Routledge; 2013. Passim.
4. Tismăneanu V. Raport Final. Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România. București; 2006. p. 292.
5. Asociația Prietenilor Muzeului Național de Istorie România. *Monumentele Istorice din România* [Internet]. Disponibil la: <http://www.monumenteromania.ro/> [accesat 22 nov 2024].
6. Cantacuzino CȘ. Interviu. București; 2024 oct 2.
7. Tismăneanu V. Raport Final. Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România. București; 2006. p. 300.
8. Probably his paternal grandmother, divorced.
9. Grama E. *Centrul Vechi din București. Politică și patrimoniu*. București: Polirom; 2023.
10. Glendinning M. *The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation. Antiquity to Modernity*. London: Routledge; 2013. Passim.
11. Grama E. *Centrul Vechi din București. Politică și patrimoniu*. București: Polirom; 2023.
12. Romania-Insider.com. *Romania's restitution saga: A group of 70 people received cash and Fondul Proprietatea shares worth over EUR 1 bln* [Internet]. Disponibil la: <https://www.romania-insider.com/romanias-restitution-saga-a-group-of-70-people-received-cash-and-fondul-proprietatea-shares-worth-over-eur-1-bln> [accessed 22 nov 2024].
13. Cantacuzino CȘ. Interviu. București; 2024 oct 2.
14. Marcus CC. *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*. Berwick: Nicolas-Hays; 2006. Passim. p. 285.

Figures.

FIGURE 1-5 Via Constantin Șerban Cantacuzino – family archive.

