

THE «MINOR ARCHITECTURE» IN HISTORIC TOWNS: PORTO VS BUCHAREST/

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Abstract. More than the few isolated monuments, the diffuse minor architecture is the one that determines the specific atmosphere of a historic town. A comparison between Porto and Bucharest points out different local minor architecture and, moreover, completely different attitudes towards it, also including various types of "innovation within heritage". This comparison is an opportunity to reflect on "best practices" regarding the minor architecture, considering its contribution to the local identity of a historic town.

The «minor architecture». The phrase «minor architecture» designates the numerous ordinary historic buildings that individually do not have any special cultural value (and, as such, do not have individual legal protection), but whose significance results from their co-existence in traditional urban areas. Most of them are historic dwellings, grouped in ensembles with a specific atmosphere: simply buildings that, over time, have always found their reason "in the practice of life." [1]

In the early 20th century, Gustavo Giovannoni spoke about major (or monumental) architecture and minor architecture (the rest of the buildings). He differentiated "major" from "minor" architecture according to their historic, artistic, or social importance. Moreover, he considered that "minor architecture" as a whole (i.e. the urban context of a historic town) would have a higher overall value than the principal monuments. [2]

Later, Roberto Pane resumed this idea affirming that the distinctive character of a city was to be found not so much in the exceptionality of the singular poetic episode represented by a monument, but above all in the widespread environmental quality, or in the only apparently minor writing of the built environment, characterized by the shapes and colours of the local material culture. "[...] it is not the few monuments that create the environment of our cities, but the many works that contribute to determining a particular local character"[1].

In 1975, the European Charter of Architectural Heritage stated: "Today it is recognized that entire groups of buildings, even if they do not include any example of outstanding merit, may have an atmosphere that gives them the quality of works of art, welding different periods and styles into a harmonious whole. Such groups should also be preserved." [3] These buildings represent what we generally designate as «minor architecture».

Besides their major architectural monuments, Porto and Bucharest have a particular living charm which reveals itself little by little when exploring the town on foot. In their historic neighbourhoods, there are many specimens of minor architecture which get cultural relevance just from "their being together" [1] creating an atmospheric landscape which

expresses local identity. But Porto and Bucharest are completely opposed as characteristics of the local minor architecture and, above all, in terms of attitude towards it.

Porto. In Porto, the sloping alley-woven historic centre, with rowhouses, small squares with laid-back vibe, and beautiful viewpoints, unveil the spirit of the place. The local minor architecture is composed by ordinary buildings with no intrinsic architectural value but contributing to the atmospheric landscape and creating background for the architectural emergences. In Porto, such modest buildings are consistently preserved and refurbished, even when their architecture is banal, and their obsolescence requires extensive interventions.

Observing closely the minor architecture in Porto, the poor quality of the materials and the longtime lack of maintenance leading to decay, is evident: their lifetime is currently exceeded. On the other hand, one can easily notice the difficulties to introduce modern comfort in narrow existing buildings with a restrictive layout. On the other hand, the continuous use is essential to preserve architectural heritage and minor architecture in particular: when affected by obsolescence and rejected by users, it has to be brought back to contemporary life requirements. Consequently, an overall interior restructuring often appears to be a rational design solution to ensure the decent contemporary use of these modest buildings, at the same time preserving their contribution to the specific atmosphere of a historic urban context. Practically, the conservation of the minor architecture in Porto concentrates on its most relevant values: the characteristics through which it contributes to defining the quality and cultural significance of a historic urban context. This means the preservation of the physical parts of the building belonging to the urban context too: the main façade and the volumetric configuration, also including traditional finishing materials and original colours. (FIGURE 1)

The positive results are visible in the coherence of the historic town. It is also to be noticed that, although radical, the Portuguese approach to minor architecture (conservation with overall restructuring of the buildings interiors) is in accordance with the principles of sustainable development in a broader understanding of the concept: it prevents the negative environmental impact of complete demolition and ex-novo construction, keeps alive the atmosphere of traditional built environments, provides a better quality of life and cultural vitality, helps stabilize communities and revitalizes the economy. (FIGURE 2)

Bucharest. Old Bucharest has its own charm that reveals itself when exploring the town on foot especially when you leave the grand boulevards and enter traditional residential areas. But Bucharest is a very different town. Without fortification walls, it grew freely in the territory, in an organic development coordinated only by internal rules, integrating Oriental and Occidental influences over time. Consequently, Bucharest is as an eclectic town, where various construction eras and architectural styles intermingle.

In the second part of the 19th century, Ulysse de Marsillac (a French journalist settled in Bucharest in 1852) was talking about "the quiet neighbourhoods where the slightly monotonous life of the old Orient has taken

refuge. In these parts, almost all the houses are set in the middle of gardens, quite poorly maintained, to tell the truth. Some are still very beautiful, and the number of really elegant and rich houses in these neighbourhoods is increasing every day and gives these areas of Bucharest a charming look, which reminds a little of Auteuil and Passy or, if you prefer, Baden and the entertainment towns in Germany and Italy.” [4] The same French journalist was suggesting a reason for the melancholy and desire to return felt by those who, coming from highly civilized countries, got to know this city: “[...] if there was a country where you could find both the advantages of civilization and those of nature, wouldn't you like to live there? Well, that's what the city of Bucharest offers us.” [4]

Nowadays, this particular character can still be noticed in some residential areas of the historic Bucharest. The stylistic mix, the low-rise houses alternating with gardens, the significant presence of vegetation, the winding streets and the green squares at crossings, characterize the old neighbourhoods. The minor architecture in such areas is mainly dating back from the late 19th – early 20th century. Even if modest in scale, these buildings represent material testimonies of a historically relevant urban civilization in this part of the world. Besides, their architecture is not devoid of artistic interest. (FIGURE 3)

Very few such buildings survived the massive demolitions of the 1970s and 1980s. At present, these minor historic buildings are again coming under threat from ignorance, contempt and aggressive real estate development. Some are arbitrarily transformed, getting strange, improper, shapes and colours. Thermal insulation with polystyrene, transferred from blocks of flats to historic buildings, is a new threat. Many historic buildings are abandoned and deliberately left to decay becoming victims of a sort of “passive euthanasia” or even “helped” to degrade at an accelerated rate, to justify their demolition for speculative interests. (FIGURE 4).

Above all, facadism is a growing trend in Bucharest and, in most cases, it is just the result of the desire to make the most of the land: the expression of “the money-centric political and market forces shaping our cities”. [5] Facadism is often a tactic used by developers to increase their profits in central historic areas, apparently avoiding demolition and loftily proclaiming that they have preserved the historic heritage. Sometimes they even claim the “rehabilitation” of the historic building from which only a facade was in fact preserved (or rebuilt!), adding on top of it a new building, completely out of local scale. One can find in such intervention many strange forms of “innovation within heritage” that have as a result “totemic markers of a period in which real estate is the ultimate asset”. [6] (FIGURE 5) This way, Bucharest is progressively losing its characteristic minor architecture in the pleasant neighbourhoods once admired by Ulysse de Marsillac and other foreign visitors. Consequently, the identity of the historic Bucharest is severely altered. Even in areas officially declared “protected”, historic buildings are demolished simply because they prevent the profitable exploitation of the land they occupy.

Afterwards, there are the disastrous effects generated by the new constructions replacing the demolished ones, designed with no respect for those elements that define the character of a historic area indicated by the

Washington Charter (1987) and brought back to attention by the Valletta Principles (2011) as elements to be always preserved even when renewing the buildings: “a - Urban patterns as defined by the street grid, the lots, the green spaces and the relationships between buildings and green and open spaces; b - The form and appearance, interior and exterior, of buildings as defined by their structure, volume, style, scale, materials, colour and decoration; c - The relationship between the town or urban area and its surrounding setting, both natural and manmade; d - The various functions that the town or urban area has acquired over time; e - Cultural traditions, traditional techniques, spirit of place and everything that contributes to the identity of a place.” [7]

The Valletta Principles also state that “all new architecture should avoid the negative effects of drastic or excessive contrasts and of fragmentation and interruptions in the continuity of the urban fabric and space. [...] there is a danger that any reorganization of the lots may cause a change of mass which could be deleterious to the harmony of the whole.” [7] But what happens in Bucharest is exactly the contrary, in an explosion of “innovation” whose ultimate effect is the cancellation of the character of the historic “protected” areas. (FIGURE 6)

Observing the current situation of the minor architecture and the historic areas in Bucharest, the comparison with Porto comes naturally, and is accompanied by sadness. In a completely different situation from Bucharest, the minor heritage in Porto – even modest and devoid of aesthetic values – is continuously refurbished and harnessed in base of consistent politics and strategies. Thereby the “apparently minor writing of the built environment” is integrated to contemporary life, and the “widespread environmental quality” is strengthened. [1] And this is very visible by everyone visiting the old Porto.

Conclusions. There is no doubt that contribution to the specific character and atmosphere of a place is the main value of the minor architecture and thus the main reason for its conservation. “Like aesthetic feelings, an attachment to the ‘familiar and cherished scene’ is a very subjective emotion. Yet it is a bedrock of human identity, and we should dignify our attachment to, and need for stability in the world around us [...]” [8]

In Porto, the minor heritage is not only preserved, but also used, promoted, and enhanced, and “its economic, social and cultural values are harnessed to the benefit of local communities and visitors.” [9]

In Bucharest, the minor architecture is despised and “threatened by ignorance, obsolescence, deterioration of every kind and neglect. Urban planning can be destructive when authorities yield too readily to economic pressures and to the demands of motor traffic. Misapplied contemporary technology and ill-considered restoration may be disastrous to old structures. Above all, land and property speculation feeds upon all errors and omissions and brings to nought the most carefully laid plans.” [10] Of course, sometimes replacements are necessary, but the new buildings should respect all those elements of urban setting which define the character of a historic area, clearly stated in the Valletta Principles; but in Bucharest these aspects are ignored.

A certain degree of public (and professional?) ignorance (and opportunism?) under-valuing the minor architecture in traditional neighbourhoods, is a noticeable problem in Bucharest and this situation facilitates

the speculative actions of developers (supported by architects) to the detriment of the character of the historic town.

As teachers, it is our responsibility to educate future architects and, through them, ordinary people too, in order to enhance the awareness of the community and its engagement with the built environment. The current students are the future architects who should consciously assume the role of competent and honest advisor for decision-making in the interest of the community. It must be recalled here an extremely necessary ethical component of architectural education. In an article published in 2008, Steven W. Semes was stating that *“a new conservation ethic is emerging, drawing together traditional architecture, new urbanism and historic preservation in pursuit of a built environment that is beautiful, sustainable and just. In the new paradigm, the architecture of our time will be the result of a critical engagement with the architecture of place, seen as a continuously self-renewing field of character and civility”*.^[11] Semes's text describes an ideal situation where the architecture of present time would find its natural place in historic towns. But the path up there seems long and difficult, as the financial profit is a strong, addictive, drug and people mentalities are not easy to change. A first step would be a new ethic of the kind suggested by Semes, assumed, taught and encouraged by the schools of architecture and the personal model of the academics' professional practice.

On the other hand, the competent authorities should fulfil their mission of serving the public interest. The declaration *“On heritage as a driver of development”* adopted in Paris in 2011 by the participants of the 17th General Assembly of ICOMOS (which brought together 1,150 participants from 106 countries) reminded the public authorities that *“they are the guardians of the public interest and are responsible for the legal protection of the heritage in the face of the pressure on the land”*, at the same time emphasizing that they should *“give priority to restoring rather than demolishing heritage”* and *“place heritage at the heart of overall development strategies”*.^[9]

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Figures.

- FIGURE 1 – Minor architecture in Porto. Foto: Rodica Crişan, 2022. Personal archive.
FIGURE 2 – Refurbished minor architecture in Porto. Foto: Rodica Crişan, 2022. Personal archive.
FIGURE 3 – Minor architecture in Bucharest. Foto: Rodica Crişan, 2018. Personal archive.
FIGURE 4 – Destroyed historic building in Bucharest. Foto: Rodica Crişan, 2006, 2007, 2023. Personal archive.
FIGURE 5 – Facadism in historic Bucharest. Foto: Rodica Crişan, 2020. Personal archive.
FIGURE 6 – New architecture in historic protected areas in Bucharest. Foto: Rodica Crişan, 2023. Personal archive.





