

## PROMOTING ROMANIAN SOCIALIST SPORT HERITAGE: A CASE STUDY/

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**Abstract.** The objective of this paper is to advance the academic discourse on the Romanian socialist sporting heritage and to examine potential avenues for enhancing its visibility in the public domain. This heritage encompasses a range of sporting facilities, including multi-purpose and gymnastic halls, as well as outdoor spaces such as stadiums and parks. Despite their construction during the socialist era, some of these buildings defy the prevailing norms of the period, representing experimental projects that combine concrete structures and architectural elements in new ways.

In the course of my doctoral research on the architecture and politics of sports in Romania during the socialist era, I have identified a significant challenge: the distorted perception of these buildings by the public. These structures are typically regarded as obsolete buildings and emblematic for the communist era, despite their continued utilization by local sports teams and communities.

An illustrative case is the Sports Hall in Bacău, designed in 1971 and built the following year. The building, which is an excellent example of late modern architecture, a popular style in Europe during that period, has remained largely unchanged over time. It continues to serve as the city's only sports hall. Until the new and larger sports hall is completed, this will remain the sole option for local teams. The question thus arises as to what will become of this building when it is no longer the only option. Will it be demolished first, as has occurred in other similar cases across the country?

This paper initiates a discussion about the socialist sports halls, which remain a contentious architectural presence in public spaces, and how we as a society can understand and utilize them.

**Introduction.** This article employs a case study approach to examine the development of sports architecture in the socialist period, with a particular focus on multi-purpose sports halls. The architectural programme, constructed between 1960 and 1970, resulted in the creation of numerous buildings with architectural merit within the context of the contemporary urban environment. However, the lack of funding and the neglect of the authorities over the last three decades have created a challenging situation for these buildings, resulting in a negative perception by the public and other users. Consequently, there is no impetus for local authorities to intervene, which leaves the fate of these buildings in the hands of the owners.

In the context of the socialist regime's utilisation of sport as a propagandistic tool, the sports architecture that persists in urban areas to a considerable extent constitutes a testament to that historical period. In light of the persisting negative perception of the communist era among a significant portion of the population, this text explores the potential

for promoting this architectural style and its contemporary relevance. It traces the context of their construction during the communist era and subsequently analyses their current state, highlighting the challenges they face. Last but not least, the article presents some strategies for promoting socialist-era architecture.

**Sports halls in the socialist period.** The sports movement and the building of the 90% sports infrastructure in Romania today began after the Second World War, when the Communist Party came to power. Sport and sport development became a constantly promoted topic at all societal levels. From the working class to children and students, everyone was involved in some form of sport [1]. They just needed the space to do so, as the existing sports equipment was quickly deemed inadequate [2].

In this context, the sport hall was a rather new type of building, that represents a significant and valuable investment for the city, serving not only as a venue for sporting activities but also as a facility capable of accommodating a range of other events that require a relatively large audience. From the 1960s onwards, this type of investment became a priority for the development of sports activities in urban areas, resulting in the construction of a significant number of multi-purpose sports halls in a considerable number of Romanian cities. Since 1963, the Institute for the Design of Typical Constructions (IPCT) has been responsible for the study of sports facilities, including multi-purpose sports halls, which have been constructed in a series of buildings in various cities in Romania. Notable examples include those in Cluj Napoca, Iași, Pitești and Deva. It should be noted that these instances are not isolated occurrences; in some cities, architects from the local design institutes were responsible for the design of the sports halls and new sports complexes [3].

Indeed, the primary objective of the National Council for Physical Education and Sport, the main beneficiary of all sports investments and the coordinating authority for physical education and sports activities at the national level, was to ensure that by 1989, each county seat would have at least one stadium, a multi-purpose hall with a seating capacity of 1,300 to 3,000, a swimming pool, and an artificial ice rink[4].

The necessity for contemporary, multipurpose facilities in the rapidly developing urban centers of the 1950s and 1960s, coupled with the availability of funding, led to a remarkable advancement in integrated architectural and structural design at both national and local levels, as a result of the sports halls program.

But it wasn't just a matter of quantity. It was also a matter of quality of architecture. Even though architecture in the communist period was controlled by the state mainly in terms of style and meaning, the sports halls were a terrain open for experimentation. Beside this, giving the large investment that such a building required, the novelty of the program and the fact that it required special structures, architects and engineers were encouraged to be creative and come up with new images for the socialist architecture. Given the novelty of the program and the specific problems posed by the need for large openings, the structural solutions for the sports halls are the result of combined architectural and structural experimentation. Finally, the number of multipurpose sports halls built

according to standardized designs is actually quite small compared to those built according to one-off designs.

Depending on the internal capacity of the sports hall, a number of typologies of interior design were outlined by a group of architects from the Institute for the Design of Typical Constructions. Based on those typologies and the rules and regulations for this type of buildings, the architects were able to create unique spaces of the sports hall, even used today.

For the city, the sports hall becomes more than just a space for sporting events. Given the nature of the investments, they are designed from the outset to allow for other activities in addition to sport. In addition to the large number of sports that can be played in the hall - the court is mainly designed for handball (20 x 40 m), basketball (14 x 26 m), volleyball (9 x 18 m) and tennis (10.97 x 23.77 m) - a minimal interior design can extend the hall's capacity for larger events with a larger audience, so-called cultural-educational activities such as shows, conferences, meetings and even film screenings. However, according to the standards, cinema screenings are not indicated in a sports hall due to the overloaded schedule of competitions and training, the small number of sports halls, low comfort and poor projection quality. This type of building, which has local significance but could be of national importance as part of a wider program, is difficult to discover - it is hidden in the oblivion of generations and there is little information to be pieced together. In this respect, local histories published in newspapers or online are very important as a starting point for finding out the details behind the building.

**“Communist” Sports halls today.** Following the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989, the economic, legal and ideological context in which sports halls operated underwent significant transformation. These changes coincided with another significant shift in public perception. In contrast to other public edifices erected with state funding during the communist era that were subsequently privatised, the majority of sports complexes and facilities, including multi-purpose sports halls, remain under state ownership and are overseen by the Ministry of Sport and Youth. However, in the 1990s, there was a notable decline in investment in sport compared to the period under communism. The existing material base, which would have required repair, was the first to suffer as sport was no longer a priority of the new system of government.

In this context, sports halls underwent a variety of interventions to ensure their continued use, even with limited funding. In some cases, however, these halls were completely demolished to make way for new structures. In the most favourable instances, following a lengthy period in a state of disrepair that posed a risk to their continued use or even led to their closure, these facilities have undergone a significant refurbishment process.

Another issue is that the facilities and annexes for athletes, which were constructed over 50 years ago, no longer meet current standards. Furthermore, the heating and ventilation systems are also outdated, and the pursuit of energy savings has resulted in alterations to the architectural design. It is evident that certain modifications to sports halls have been implemented in an attempt to rectify inherent design flaws through the most cost-effective and straightforward means possible. Such issues also

engender a negative perception among the general public. The absence of maintenance of indoor and outdoor spaces, coupled with the lack of basic facilities, gives rise to subjective reactions such as the suggestion that the structure should be demolished and replaced with a new one. This, in conjunction with the continued prevalence of a predominantly negative general perception of the communist period, can result in detrimental consequences for sports halls in the absence of explicit guidance on the appropriate course of action.

Furthermore, it is essential to contemplate the large dimensions of these structures, the wide openings, and the fact that they were constructed five decades ago, necessitating specialised maintenance. Such an undertaking cannot be accomplished without substantial financial and technical resources. The continued responsibility for these facilities of the Ministry of Sport, rather than the local authorities, is becoming increasingly problematic. A never-ending chain of interaction exists between municipalities that are unable to intervene over these structures and the central authority, which lacks both the necessary resources and a clear plan of intervention.

Probably the most damaging effect of the lack of care is on the people that actively use the spaces of the sports halls – athletes and spectators. Because the buildings are spread all over the country, for this study the negative perception was assessed through comments from social media platforms and google maps. By using this tool, one can find comments and impressions from people that visited the sports halls. Such examples are listed below, together with the images of the sports hall that they refer to.

Table 1 shows three examples of sports halls together with comments that refer to the state of the buildings, the amenities and the lack of care from the municipalities. The comments were originally in Romanian and they were translated trying to keep the original topic and punctuation. Because of this, they might sound strange in English but I think it is important for the understanding of the whole situation. For example, about the sports hall from Bacau (FIGURE 1) one can find comments from people that recognize the importance of the buildings at a local or even national level, but don't appreciate how the ones in charge took care of the building. In the other two cases, the sports hall from Iași and Pitești (FIGURE 2 and 3), people aren't that understanding. Their opinion is that the sports halls should be demolished as they are too old to be still in use. These remarks show that some people understand the importance of the past, while others don't see any other solution than tearing down the buildings.

The lack of funding and the absence of intervention from the authorities have resulted in the deterioration of the sports halls, despite their continued use by the public for indoor sporting activities. The poor condition of these buildings has fostered a negative perception among the population, which has led to calls for demolition and rebuilding. However, the reuse of existing structures would be a more appropriate approach in line with current ideas of reuse. Unfortunately, without pressure from civil society and NGOs, these buildings, which are important for local histories and communities, are likely to be neglected until it is too late.

In order to break this vicious cycle, firstly the local communities have to be informed about the value of the buildings near their homes. Social

media is a great way to inform and create a better public perception. For example, a recent study showed how social media can be used to promote late modern socialist architecture from Balatonalmádi, a Hungarian city on the outskirts of Lake Balaton [6]. By using social media platforms, the researchers discovered that archive images were the ones that reached the most people, as many were curious about the original intentions of the architects and how the buildings used to look like. Online communication together with on-site presence and programs could be used to raise awareness of the local community about this subject.

Beside their importance to the local communities, socialist architecture can also become touristic attractions. For example, a study from 2018 [7] analyses whether buildings from the socialist era could become tourist attraction in Warsaw. This study takes into consideration the perception of both tourists and the locals in order to assess the importance of the buildings in the city. As some of these buildings are part of the city's identity, such as the Palace of Culture and Science, they are a reality of everyday life no matter the general perception of the population. With proper restoration the buildings could be integrated in the contemporary city. The study aims to promote the idea of creating a city brand of Warsaw through the buildings from the socialist period, an image that would make use of already existing elements that are part of everyday life. Nevertheless, some residents might not agree to the use of the socialist period in creating a brand of the city due to their negative perception of the past. The same would be available for the Palace of Parliament from Bucharest, a building mostly visited by tourists than by residents. As Ochkovskaya and Gerasimenko put it, *“the architectural sites and other artefacts from this era are magnetic for those who have never experienced it in reality.”*

**Conclusion.** The necessity for contemporary, multipurpose facilities in the rapidly developing urban centers of the 1950s and 1960s Romania, coupled with the availability of funding, resulted in a notable advancement in integrated architectural and structural design at both national and local levels, as a consequence of the implementation of the sports halls programme. As long as sport remained a significant aspect of communist society, investment in sporting infrastructure continued to grow. Following the collapse of the socialist regime, the role of sport as a propaganda tool diminished, leading to a decline in efforts by officials to maintain existing infrastructure. Furthermore, the economic difficulties encountered during the transition period resulted in a gradual deterioration of the sports halls due to a lack of maintenance and investment.

While some of the numerous buildings erected during that period were privatized, sports halls and other facilities intended for sporting activities remained in the property of the state, specifically under the ownership of the Ministry of Sports. Over time, this proved to be a significant issue, particularly for the sports halls, which gradually deteriorated due to a lack of adequate maintenance. The current situation can be described as a vicious cycle, whereby the public perception is negative due to the poor state of repair of the sports halls. This has led to a lack of action on the part of the municipalities and the state, in the absence of pressure from the public.

The practice of social media promotion and the formation of local action groups has highlighted the potential for this approach to break the aforementioned vicious cycle. By raising public awareness and encouraging activism, it may be possible to stimulate local authorities to become involved in the reconstruction process.

It is a challenging task for architects to identify and address the flaws encountered in the daily use of these buildings through efficient interventions that maintain their architectural value. However, it is a crucial step towards creating a more optimal urban space.

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#### Figures.

FIGURE 1 – Sports hall from Bacau. Source: Author's archive.

FIGURE 2 – Sports hall from Pitesti. Source: Author's archive.

FIGURE 3 – Sports hall from Iasi. Source: Author's archive.



*“A special opportunity. A hall built in the communist period in the specific style, perfect for sporting events at a national level. About the maintenance, things aren’t bright [...]. The Sports Hall should be the pride of the city, so its maintenance should be a priority for the authorities. Some people died building it. “*



*“A big hall, but obsolete. It wasn’t renovated in a very long time, a lot of mess. Broken chairs, everything fails expectations.”*

*“A place where time stood in place. A renovation is necessary in order to bring this place closer in time.”*



*“Horrible, not a single investment, it looks the same as in Ceaușescu’s times. In 30 years, they really didn’t find any funds for renovation. Intentionally they want to destroy it, Romania governed by thieves. I understand that you steal, but at least do something good for Romania.”*

*“Like the Stadium this sports hall should be demolished and built a new, modern one, according to the standard of the century in which we live in! The old construction from the communist period hangs heavy from the shoulders of the athletes of this amazing city.”*