

The average visitor to Romania remains in **Bucharest** – perhaps the most eclectic and erratic European capital – as briefly as possible. Tourists stop by the People’s House, the sprawling palace of dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu built in the 1980s, and several churches, and then off they go to heritage sites or natural landscapes in other parts of the country. For architectural sightseers, however, the city remains fascinating.

Collisions and new communities

■ BUCHAREST (RO) — TEXT: ȘTEFAN GHENCIULESCU, ILLUSTRATION: SYLVAIN TEGROEG

TOUR GUIDE

Exploring a city, region, or theme

Such a collision of historical layers is a rare find: the Balkan city, the 19th-century modernization, a very rich (and rather little known) heritage of interwar modernism, good quality architecture from the '60s, the largest totalitarian urban operation in Europe, and finally, the ultra-liberal, energetic and frightening development since 1990. However, due to the almost complete absence of architecture competitions, most of the new public buildings lack architectural quality. Private capital and, more recently, bottom-up community initiatives are still the major factors contributing to good architecture.

During the last decade, the city initially passed through a spectacular (and very destructive) building boom, followed by the interminable crisis, which led to a nearly complete construction freeze. The crisis, however, favoured an increasingly stronger urban phenomenon: independent community initiatives that manage, with absolutely minimal resources, to

create public places, to rescue and activate architectural and natural heritage, and to create urban, artistic and social focal points. Market stagnation was like a breath of fresh air for the most endangered categories as well: old buildings, such as residences in the central districts or industrial remnants, have ceased being brutally replaced by wild development and are now occupied and used by these initiatives, with minimal changes. Paradoxically, innovation, new urbanism, community architecture and trendy locations have all seen an explosion nowadays, mid-crisis. A tour of Bucharest is like a roller coaster ride through unfinished and layered historical projects, an ever-changing sort of museum of different modernities.

The socialist city today

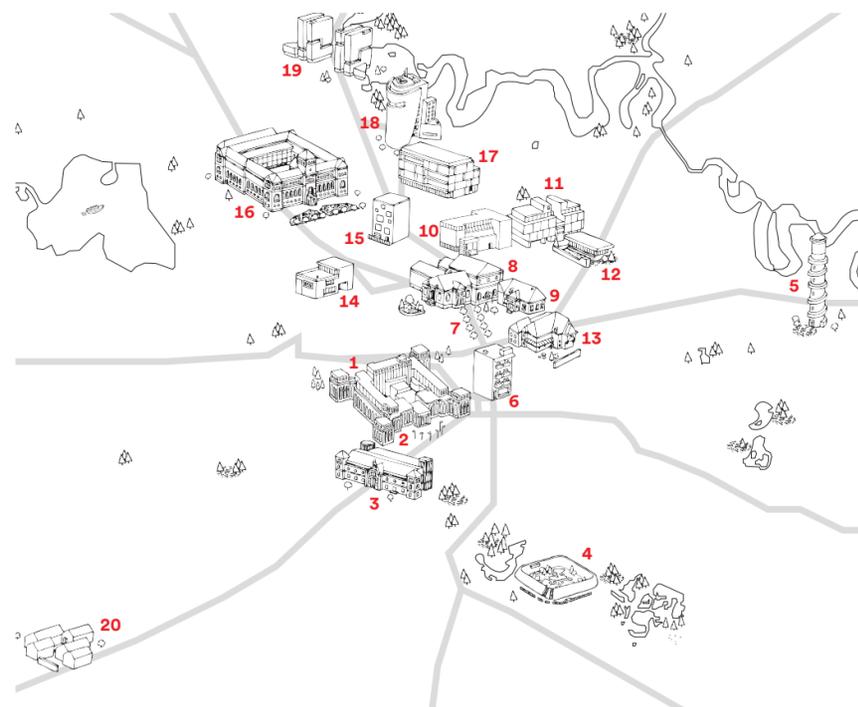
Don't resist the temptation to first visit the landmark of Ceaușescu's Palace, the current seat of

Parliament (1). Still one of the largest structures in the world (in terms of area), it must be foremost among the top examples of totalitarian architecture. Even if you are feeling crushed by its combination of megalomania and kitsch, the **National Museum of Contemporary Art (2)**, situated at the building's rear, with a separate entrance on the south side of the complex, is not to be missed. The project was vehemently contested; for many, contemporary art had no business in such a place. But the contrast seems fertile for artistic production, and this contemporary injection in a neo-Stalinist cake has managed to become a place of experimentation and an outpost – a bit isolated but still alive with genuine urbanity.

Seldom do visitors venture behind the city's concrete curtains. The five-kilometre axis tearing across the city hides, especially in the south, a historic area that is now isolated and deals with significant social problems. **The Ark (3)** is an incubator for creative industries (including the International Centre for Contemporary Art), a courageous regeneration operation in the historic building belonging to the former commodity exchange, funded exclusively through private money (see A10 #31). The initiators (including an architect) wanted a model activation project and focal point for the area. The building is set to become a strong element in a recent urban strategy for a pedestrian network in Bucharest.

Take the subway and get off at Mihai Bravu station to visit what people (improperly) call **Văcărești Delta (4)**. In the '80s, Ceaușescu demolished an entire neighbourhood and began the construction of a lake. Unfinished, and still in muddy real estate waters, the large pit surrounded by a concrete wall has slowly been retaken by nature. Hundreds of plant and animal species (including several endangered ones) are now found in an area surrounded by socialist blocks and new development areas. A group of several NGOs produced and promoted studies and proposals for the site, constantly threatened by real estate speculation, and managed to obtain an official document declaring it a protected area. Minimal intervention is under discussion, but with

‘Market stagnation was a breath of fresh air for the most endangered categories.’



1 PALACE OF THE PARLIAMENT (1980s–2000)
Lead architect: Anca Petrescu
Address: Str. Izvor, 2–4
Info: www.cdep.ro



2 NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART (2004)
Architect: Adrian Spirescu
Address: Palace of the Parliament, wing E4 (entrance via Calea 13 Septembrie)
Info: www.mnac.ro



3 THE ARK (2009)
Architect: Re-Act Architecture Office
Address: Calea Rahovei 196A
Info: www.facebook.com/theark.bucuresti



4 NATURE PARK VĂCĂREȘTI
Address: Near Mihai Bravu metro station
Observation centre: 17th floor, T4 Tower, Asmita Gardens residential complex
Info: office@salvatidelta.ro



5 MAKE A POINT (ART TOWER, 2013)
Architects: Miruna Stoicescu and Santos Garcia
Address: Șoseaua Morarilor 1
Info: www.makeapoint.ro



6 LĂCRIMI ȘI SFINȚI (TEARS AND SAINTS) RESTAURANT (2012)
Architect: Corvin Cristian
Address: Str. Șepcari 16



7 ROMANIAN INTERWAR MODERNISM (1930s)
Architect: Various architects
Address: Magheru and Bălcescu boulevards



8 CĂRTUREȘTI VERONA BOOKSHOP (2004)
Architect: Șerban Sturdza - Prodid
Address: Str. Arthur Verona 13-15
Info: librerie.carturesti.ro



9 CASA MINCU (2013)
Architect: Șerban Sturdza - Prodid
Address: Str. Arthur Verona 19
Info: www.oar.org.ro



10 ELVIRE POPESCO MOVIE THEATRE (2012)
Architects: Attila Kim and Ciprina Țocu
Address: Institut Français, Bucharest, Bulevardul Dacia 77
Info: www.institutfrançais-roumanie.com



11 APARTMENT BUILDING (2014)
Architect: AND BA
Address: Str. Dogarilor 26–30
Info: www.adnba.ro



12 GRĂDINA VIITORULUI (GARDEN OF THE FUTURE) (2014)
Architect: Modulab
Address: Str. Viitorului 153
Info: www.modulab.ro



13 CAROL 53 (2012–)
Architect: Various architects
Address: Boulevard Carol 53
Info: www.casacarol53.wordpress.com



14 CONCRETE HOUSE (2014)
Architect: Bogdan Gyemant-Selin
Address: Str. Institutul Medico-Militar 22
Info: www.facebook.com/ConcreteHouseBucharest



15 TOWER HOUSE (2013)
Architect: STARH (Florian Stanciu and Iulia Stanciu)
Address: Str. Carol Knappe 10
Info: www.starh.ro



16 MUSEUM OF THE ROMANIAN PEASANT (1990–1992)
Exhibition concept and design: Horia Bernea (former director)
Address: Șoseaua Kiseleff 3
Info: www.muzeulromanuluiromano.ro



17 APARTMENT BUILDING (2014)
Architect: AND BA
Address: Str. Grigore Mora 17 bis
Info: www.adnba.ro



18 CHARLES DE GAULLE PLAZA (2004)
Architect: Westfourth Architecture
Address: Piața Charles de Gaulle 15
Info: www.westfourtharchitecture.com



19 CITY GATE TOWERS (2009)
Architect: Westfourth Architecture
Address: Piața Presei Libere
Info: www.westfourtharchitecture.com



20 GARAGE HOUSE (2012)
Architects: Abruptarhitectura (Cosmin Pavel and Cristina Constantin)
Address: Bragadiru, Str. Diamantului 116 V

(Collisions and new communities)

a little sense of adventure and proper counselling, it can be visited at any time. An observation deck was recently opened on the seventeenth floor in one of the new apartment towers nearby.

Also by subway you can reach **Make a Point (5)**, an independent arts centre in the heart of Pantelimon, in a former textile factory. The centre brings together international networks and community actions. The converted water tower that belonged to the factory has become its landmark. The empty, 37-metre-high tower hosts art installations, while elegant and extremely transparent metal stairs enable access to platforms with spectacular views over the city.

Taking over the centre

A large part of the historic centre is now a pedestrian zone; an extremely vibrant place, but unfortunately almost exclusively consumer oriented. Of the hundreds of restaurants and bars that appeared in under five years, those designed by Corvin Cristian are always present in design and architecture media. For example, there is **Lacrimi și sfinți (Tears and Saints) (6)**, a playful version of the popular 'national restaurant', with many items recovered from demolished old houses.

From the historic centre begins the north-south axis of the '30s. Interwar modernism is ubiquitous in the central area, with perhaps the greatest amount of this type of architecture found in any European capital, but the highest concentration is located along **Magheru and Bălcescu boulevards (7)**. This heritage is today in pretty bad shape.

Where Arthur Verona Street meets Magheru Avenue, a 19th-century villa survived and became the headquarters of one of the liveliest cultural institutions in Bucharest: **Cărturești** is a bookstore and space for design (8), an example of creative restoration and a very friendly place with its popular tea and coffee house and terrace.

The same architect, Șerban Sturdza, is responsible for the restoration of the headquarters of the Chamber of Architects of Romania, also on Verona Street. **Mincu House (9)** was the home of an important architect and father of Romanian national romanticism, Ion Mincu. The organization purchased the house, found in disrepair, saving it from aggressive development. The restoration was made possible with own funds and donations, stretching over many years and involving volunteers in all areas. It is a house for the city, mostly with public access and functions, while offices occupy the attic. The ground floor was respectfully and sensitively restored as a family house, revealing various historical layers, including construction drawings on the walls. Ask permission to see the attic – it is a poetical and unconventional office space, and a great example of working with light.

From the Chamber headquarters you can stroll through this charming part of the extended city centre. On Dacia Boulevard, among other modernist villas and buildings, is the French Institute. Attila Kim reverse-renovated the '70s movie hall, **Elvire Popesco**, in its back yard (10). The small construction received a Cor-Ten outer skin and an inner wooden one.

Nearby, a very fresh and cool **apartment building** was just finished (11). The sensitive densification by ADN BA takes over the porosity and fragmentary character of the area. The project proposes a flexible housing typology comprising extreme variety; there are practically no two identical apartments, and most of them can be combined. Units of relatively small areas (and therefore cheaper) are balanced by generous individual outdoor and common spaces.

Fairly close, but completely outside the posh neighbourhoods, **Grădina Viitorului (Garden of the Future)** hides on Viitorului Street (12), a collaborative space by Modulab dedicated to DIY philosophy in new technologies and accomplished, of course, with an almost non-existent budget and private,

self-sufficient means. A creative and educational space for processing, open source design, 3D printing, sound engineering, interactive solutions and other contemporary technological niches. The open space evokes a shelter raised by stranded astronauts using the remains of their own ships.

Many independent spaces have found homes in the East Central area as well, perhaps the most important one being **Carol 53**, a house confiscated by the communist regime, subsequently damaged, restored and now a cultural centre managed (through partnership with the owner) by a group of young architects (13). Events, performances, exhibitions and workshops are mutually supported by the continuous process of safety work, repairs and light interventions.

North-west of the centre, in the area around North Train Station, you can visit the **Concrete House**, designed by Bogdan Gyemant-Selin for an NGO as a space for children's activities (14). Provisionally, however, it serves as a small centre of architectural culture. It is a sustainable house, but one that prefers a more natural behaviour and non-polluting materials and techniques to complying with the passive house standards; its thermo-insulating concrete construction is one of the few experiments in contemporary Romanian architecture.

From centre to periphery

Not far from the train station, in an older neighbourhood intensively developed after 1990, we find the **Tower House** designed by STARH (15). A very simple volume conceals its complex spatial structure (see A10 #52). On the same street, at no. 11, is an older work by the same architects that reinterprets the traditional Bucharest 'wagon house': an elongated body with a side yard.

The **Museum of the Romanian Peasant** occupies an imposing building near Victoria Square (16). The permanent exhibition, owed mainly to the director of the institution during the '90s, painter Horia Bernea, received the European Museum of the Year Prize. Instead of the usual ethnographic presentation, we are offered a direct and often surprising relationship with the artefacts. Made on a close to zero budget, the arrangement appears today just as fresh and strong.

The north is the 'good part of the city', but also includes most of the wild development that occurred after 1989. Here and there you can find some decent interventions, such as **a block of flats (17)**, also a project by ADN BA; an effort to reinterpret the luxury housing programme. Westfourth Architecture, however, designed the majority of the tall buildings in Bucharest in the past twenty years. You can visit the office building insertions in Victoriei Square (Europe House and America House), or step into the garden city of the interwar years, now fully densified, to visit **Charles De Gaulle Plaza (18)**, a building with a public ground floor and impressive atrium. Further north are the **City Gate Towers (19)** flanking access to International Fair ROMEXPO, whose central, round pavilion is a remarkable achievement of the '60s. Near the towers, at the end of the boulevard, is an older landmark, Casa Scânteii (Spark House), a must for all those interested in Stalinist architecture.

Finally, the very tenacious should explore a delirious suburb developed in the past 25 years. Perhaps the most interesting recent work is the **garage house** designed by architect couple Cosmin Pavel and Cristina Constantin (Abruptarhitectura) (20). Precast concrete garages from the '90s (immensely popular then, now rejected everywhere) have been recovered, placed on a foundation and surrounded by a fence (see A10 #49). The house – actually five smaller adjoined structures – is cheaper than a conventional one and speaks simultaneously about archetypes, post-socialism and sustainability. Not least, the project embodies the hope that non-urban sprawl can serve as space for freedom and experiment. ◀

IN THE NEXT ISSUE:

INTERCHANGE: JULIEN DE SMEDT

The life of Julien De Smedt is divided between Copenhagen, Brussels and Shanghai, and he leaves landmarks and conversation pieces wherever he goes. In our upcoming interview, we talk about artistic identity, the importance of visionary architecture and material innovation. Moreover, there's a good reason to talk about versatility and sensitivity in designing on different scales, since De Smedt also co-founded a design label, Makers With Agendas.



↑ Faaborg Harbour Bath and Blue Base by JDS, 2014

EUROVISION: AUSTRIA

All is quiet in Austria. Architects are quite content. Commissions are awarded through competitions reasonably often. Economics and politics are fairly stable. This is, however, no reason to lay back and just relax. On the contrary, more than any other European nation, Austrians feel they must set their sights on far away countries and desirable (sustainable) futures. 'We don't need new morals in architecture. Just a new sense of reality.'



↑ VinziRast-mittendrin by gaupenraub+/-, 2013

READY

A wooden construction of logs, built in 1819, is the new site for the Riga Design and Art School. Local office Zaigas Gailēs birojs has left the original geometry of the building intact, wherein the art and study rooms are now carefully incorporated. Initiated by the Europa Nostra foundation, the pan-European Federation for Cultural Heritage, the project's aim is to draw public attention to the preservation of wooden heritage by developing a standout example that embodies the qualities of Latvia's wooden architecture.



↑ Riga Design and Art School by Zaigas Gailēs birojs, 2014

SECTION

Wood

...and much more. A10's 60th issue will be published 1 November 2014.