

Guest edited by a leading national organization in a single European country or region. Within a range of themes, they strive to give deeper insight into the current state of architectural affairs.

Romania is one of those European countries where new construction has fallen off the hardest because of the economic crisis. Yet, during these years, the number of internationally recognized Romanian projects (and the awards they have garnered) has only increased. Is it, then, a case in which the crisis has proven beneficial to the quality of architecture? In many ways, the equation 'fewer projects, more reflection' seems to function here, too. But there is something more than that: Romanian architects have, in a fortunate manner, combined this habit of making do with what they have, a characteristic typical to the Balkans and Eastern Europe, with opening up to the world, and with a new sense of responsibility. Zeppelin, guest editor of this edition of *Eurovision*, explores the results so far.

# Collision and collaboration

TEXT: STEFAN GHENCIULESCU, COSMINA GOAGEA, CONSTANTIN GOAGEA



It is certainly too early to talk about a 'Romanian lesson', but interesting things are happening here: examples of innovation with minimal resources and internationally relevant, but still locally bound works. On the other hand, it must be said that most of the architectural production and the way the territory develops are not even remotely approaching this quality. Clashes of interests, exacerbated individualism, and lack of coordination still reign. But then, Romania may serve as a case study for contemporary developments in this regard as well. Of course, if you look at China – or even in Europe, for instance, at the scale of urban and architectural change in Russia – nothing comparable is happening here. What is interesting, we believe, is mainly this extreme tension arising from the diversity of phenomena, from the collisions and disparities present everywhere, but also from the smart efforts to find solutions. And architecture obviously serves as an indicator for a whole society.

Thus, many people usually associate this country with a huge gap in development, social problems, and massive migration. But it is also the place where more than twenty minorities coexist, and sometimes even begin to create their own version of modern architecture. It is also here that one finds one of the best Internet connections in the world. Extreme poverty is directly (and physically) proximate with exhibitions of wealth, but also with cool clubs or independent maker-spaces.

Immediately behind the totalitarian buildings in Bucharest, one can find perhaps the greatest amount of modernist interwar architecture on the continent, along with art centres intensely connected to the international stage. Also in Bucharest, already in 2006, it was estimated that since the fall of the totalitarian regime in 1989, one million cars had appeared and one million trees had disappeared. Today, marches for environmental issues or saving historical heritage gather more participants than any political party. And the number of bicycle users, previously just exotic presences in a demented traffic system, continues to increase exponentially.

Perhaps, as in the 1930s, when the avant-garde was so fashionable in Romania, a kind of laboratory of modernity is now beginning to operate here, on the fringe of Europe. A modest laboratory, little-known and even less self-conscious, which works with interruptions and failures, but at least it is heading in a good direction. In many directions, in fact, which we will try to explore together: large-scale architecture where aggressive or absurd operations now have quality counter-examples; the very energetic young generation; independent cultural and social initiatives that change cities and build a new practice; and inventing new materials, but also retrieving traditional ones, as seen in the burgeoning critical regionalism in Transylvania. ◀



Zeppelin magazine is a bilingual publication on architecture, design, and urban transformation, and focuses on emerging practices.



## The creation of civic

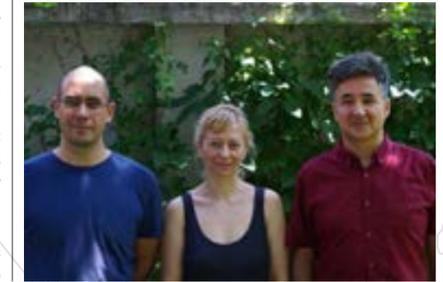
TEXT: INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER

Constantin Goagea, Cosmina Goagea, and Stefan Ghenciulescu started working together in online architecture publishing more than fifteen years ago. From that point, they gradually built up a collective that took the name Zeppelin in 2008. The name is, indeed, inspired by interwar constructivist imagery and Archigram's 'Instant City', which features the zeppelin as a floating means of transportation, observation, communication, innovation, and urban advancement. Not surprisingly, their activities have a similar aim and multifaceted approach, focusing on criticism, urban interventions, and coherent city-building. Inter- and cross-disciplinary discourses and methods encourage the development of creative commitment in communities. Besides the production of a monthly magazine, *Zeppelin*, their regular activities include organizing conferences, workshops, exhibitions, debates, and competitions. Moreover, they are also involved in architecture and interior design, building, and research projects, like 'Connected', an international effort investigating the concept of socially smart cities (see A10 #63), or the Carol Factory, begun last year for the redevelopment and cultural programming of a 19th-century industrial complex.

Looking back, they conclude that a lot has changed over the last fifteen years in Romania. 'We

started out with the aim to promote good architecture, which was a very rare thing,' says Constantin Goagea. 'Since the crisis, the private sector is quite weak, and the public sector is not interested, unless it's something conservative that promotes "national values". The younger generation has taken up themes like regeneration, sustainability, and public space. This has given room to smaller, grassroots and self-initiated community projects. Nothing fancy, maybe, but good architecture and living proof of a growing sense of responsible civic attitude as a lively factor of urbanity.'

Info [www.e-zeppelin.ro](http://www.e-zeppelin.ro)



Zeppelin editors (from left to right): Stefan Ghenciulescu, Cosmina Goagea, Constantin Goagea



Zeppelin curates Carol Factory, a regeneration programme for an old industrial complex in the southern part of Bucharest. Pictured here is an installation by Norwegian architect Marit Haugen.

# Public architecture: individualism, identity conflicts, and the new monuments

TEXT: STEFAN GHENCULESCU



The rehabilitation of the National Theatre in Bucharest scrapped the kitsch facade from the 1980s, but also some thousands of square metres of cultural spaces. The result is a partial and hybrid reconstruction of the 1960s image.



Prior to 1989, the communist state was the investor, the lawmaker, the architect, and the builder. Both architecture and city were part of a general economic and social planning, while private initiatives were nearly absent. After the bloody fall of the Ceaușescu dictatorship, the paradigm was completely reversed: the state withdrew almost entirely from the field and, in an absolutely understandable way, its place was taken over by a burst of individual energies. 'All together' (as a must) was thus replaced by 'Every man for himself'. The territory became an archipelago of private spaces – the bigger, the most intensely exploited and protected, the better – floating on a sea of nobody's space. Chaotic growth through a collage of individual fragments applied to all scales and actors, and no administration was able to control it. The boom of the mid-2000s has both sharpened this phenomenon and ascertained an awareness of the results that such a development might have, leading to a more powerful movement, both for its remission and for finding some balance in a more responsible system.

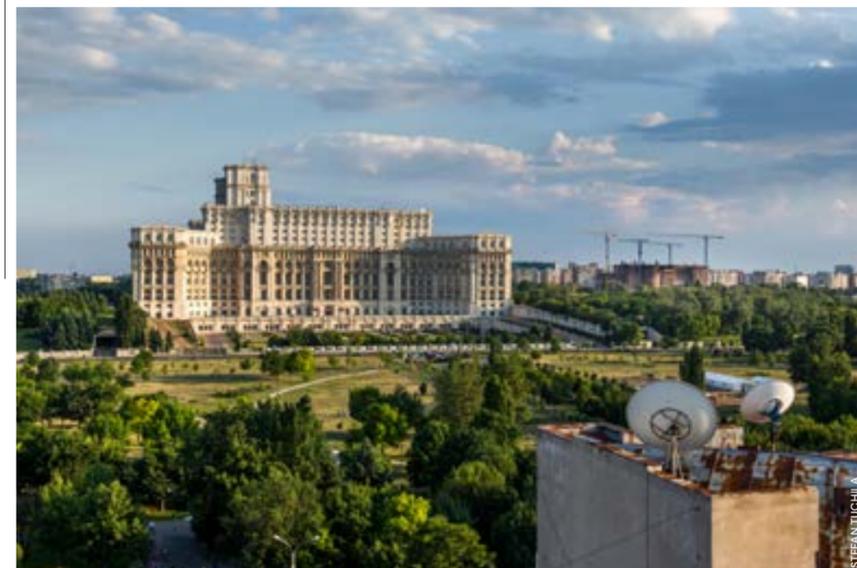
The recent crisis definitely did not work in the advantage of public investments. These still take place, however, but fail to offer a counter-example to the private initiatives. In Romania, there is no

compulsory system for public competitions. These are optional, which means that administrative bodies overwhelmingly prefer the bid system, in which the sole major criteria is the overall cost, and where the design is simply part of the construction offer. Because of this, and the lack of architectural culture and transparency, most of the new public buildings are of a lower quality than the private ones, where (at least for the major investors) a minimal architectural level is nevertheless a business advantage.

Two recent major public actions stand out through what they reveal about the relation with history and society, but also through the fierce controversies they stirred. The first is an older project, initiated back in the 1990s, and refers to the construction of a huge orthodox cathedral in Bucharest. The church, being extremely powerful and influential (like everywhere in Eastern Europe), has managed to engage the local and national administrations in supporting a pharaonic project. Its location is a large, empty field behind and to the right of Ceaușescu's former palace, today home to the Parliament and other public functions. It will clearly be quite an ugly building, as there was no competition for the design, but more damaging to the city are its scale (the tower will be more than 100 metres high) and the obvious

conflict between the symbols of old and new. The project was criticized for its huge expense in a time when there is no money for restoring old churches, and for the fact that the state and the city will contribute to the costs, using funds that could have otherwise been applied to highly necessary public functions. Leaving aside the actual discussion on architecture, there is much significance in the lack of public consultancy, the symbolic vicinity, and the perpetuation – while in a democratic regime – of totalitarian gigantism, albeit now with an altered significance.

The National Theatre in Bucharest is another example. Built in the 1960s, it was a mildly pleasant example of modernism: a large crown and curved concrete walls strongly inspired by Le Corbusier's chapel in Ronchamp. Ceaușescu, who loathed not only historical heritage, but also modernism, had it surrounded by a hideously classical screen. After 1990, the spaces between the old and new facades began to be colonized by exhibitions, art galleries, the very radical National Dance Centre, and by one of the most popular bars and terraces in Bucharest. Around the end of the 2000s, the completely reasonable decision for the structural and functional rehabilitation of the building was made. But then, there



The tower of the National Cathedral now emerging near Ceaușescu's former palace will reach over 100 metres.

Cluj Arena and Sports Hall by Dico & Țigănaș



was no contest and no public debate. Responsible for the whole operation was the only living author of the original project. Consequently, the complete elimination of the 1980s intervention was decided upon, together with a return to the original image. The new functions would have to find place in a fairly improbable extension, given the present conditions, but for now they have all disappeared. Moreover, the reconstruction is not faithful to the original, which would have been difficult anyway. An approximation of the initial volume is accompanied by details

typical of contemporary commercial architecture. Beyond the issue of the complete erasure of a historical layer and the reinvention of the initial object, the fact remains that this pseudo-restoration has destroyed a complex, perfectly functioning urban centre.

One of the most valuable examples of recent large-scale public architecture is the arena and sports hall ensemble in the Transylvanian city of Cluj, by Dico & Țigănaș. Constructed with a relatively low budget, the two buildings do not just aspire to be



Unicredit Building by Westfourth Architecture, Bucharest

spectacular icons, but also an urban game changer. Therefore, the space between and around them is not residual, but a truly public one: seven hectares of squares, hills, and platforms, all completely accessible. Thanks to the suspension of the stadium's stands, the space is completely visible from the outside. Moreover, in a very uncharacteristic way for this type of building, the stadium's main level, above the slope, becomes part of an urban promenade. The sports hall, completed last year, supports and complements the initial urban idea.

Concerning large-scale private investments, two programmes stand out: firstly, the mall (extremely popular as a public space surrogate); and secondly, the office tower (a symbol of the break with communism and the connection to the West). Romanian office towers are almost all found in Bucharest and are not very tall (because of potential earthquakes), and their emplacement follows, almost exclusively, the logic of the real estate market. For the most conservative part of society, they have become a symbol of cities' loss of identity, and the office that authored most of the ones in Bucharest (Westfourth Architecture) serves as workhorse for all of those that oppose such buildings. Still, beyond the planning problematic – which actually escape any control of the architects – most of the office's works stand for an optimistic and civilized modernity. The projects tend to maximize the public nature of the ground floors and of the free spaces in front of these, in a manner that is very different from the general autism of most of the new buildings. Presuming that one does not completely refuse changes in the city, the issue is not whether to accept the towers and, generally, the densification, but to concentrate, guide, and delineate these operations, to use them as hot spots for the development of urban life, as well as for smart negotiation in Romania – and everywhere else, for that matter. ◀

Cluj Arena and Sports Hall by Dico & Țigănaș

# The pragmatic, the activist, and the people's poet

TEXT: INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER

## Reactivate Romania

Here, at the basement of Dogarilor Apartments, we happen to be in a totally unique place in Bucharest. It's a communal space for the people that live here. It has a kitchen, chairs, tables, and place to convene. This simple space doesn't betray anything of the troubles ADNBA has gone through to realize it. And yet, here it is – a sign of hope and endurance, living proof that within the complicated urban settings of Bucharest it is possible to create valuable space. Present are Andrei Șerbescu of ADN BA, Justin Baroncea of Point 4 Space, and Cristina Constantin from Abruptarhitectura. A pragmatic architect, an action-architect, and a people's poet. All three are attempting to deal with the complexities of being an architect in a city that has no direction – one that is fragile, yet ultimately vibrant and powerful.

'This city is complicated,' says Andrei. 'Both in our practices and as teachers at the university, all of us are interested in using the city as a lab, exploring it, finding new strategies. This hybridity, this flexibility, the constant transformation, is very inspiring. The way we try to create public space, how we can adapt the city, plot by plot, gradually. It is very important to look at the city and learn from it. The urbanistic point of view of how to create neighbourhoods and squares is more important than the scholastic way of doing architecture – we compromise all the time, but in a good sense.' Justin agrees. 'I'm interested in the way cities develop, what knowledge we can use from other cities. The problem is that we still don't know how to build communities. We didn't learn it recently, and not before World War II. We need to make proper public and private spaces. The model will be European, but adapted to the 21st century. We know how to do this in Cluj or in Basov, but in Bucharest it seems impossible to create that type of space. The city will interfere and spoil it. It is my goal to work on this. Building the city is more important than making buildings.'

One of his experiments in how to create meaningful places for communities is 'Magic Blocks', a self-initiated project for which Zeppelin found funding. It's a way of creating communal space in inner-city blocks, which resulted in several semi-temporary art projects. There was no real plan, they simply rang

doorbells and started collecting leftover objects to create an artwork on the spot. 'I am an action-architect,' proclaims Justin. 'We are working on projects from extra-extra-small to extra-extra-large. I redefine my position anew with every new project – with different production systems, partners, and processes.' It's materiality in all its forms that interests him; materials and their structural possibilities. Point 4 Space recently finished two tectonic houses and a monumental tower. 'I like to work with garbage and with the newest materials at the same time. We are not specialized, we adapt to every context. We live in a big urban-social laboratory.'

Cristina is more hesitant. 'I still don't know what it means to be an architect. Andrei does big projects, Justin can handle used and new materials, but I prefer garbage and things you can make or find locally. Abruptarhitectura is just myself and Cosmin Pavel. We work on small personal projects. I find big projects too complicated. We mainly do private houses, exhibitions, interior design. Mostly in the rural areas, small cities, or the periphery of cities.' However modest her approach, their Garage House, built of leftover garage boxes, is quite famous (see A10 #49). Contrary to Andrei and Justin, she prefers to work in villages, as it offers more opportunities to work intuitively, on site. 'Usually, people don't have the money to build a house at once. They start with the structure, a first floor, maybe a second, but we stay involved over the years and are able to establish long-term commitments.' As such, they have worked on private houses, several churches, and exhibitions. 'I doubt whether I am actually an architect. It's not art; it's more social, actually.'

Each of them in their own way works on building communities, as they believe that communities will fuel future developments. 'Town planning is useless here,' claims Justin, 'you need to build a community.' Which is not an easy thing to do. 'I'm not sure whether my client will aim for a collective space again,' ponders Andrei. 'It brings a lot of other responsibilities to make it work, and to make use of it in a good way.' To get the collective space in Dogarilor Apartments was hard work, but working in the city has been an advantage. In the villages, the role of an architect is much smaller. Locals are accustomed to

finding their own solutions. 'People living in small towns or villages need something very specific, not something fancy. Sometimes, they don't know they need an architect at all. They begin by thinking they know better how to build their house and that the architect is just for the authorization of the paperwork,' adds Cristina.

Whether urban or rural, these communities need to be built at a smaller scale. The bigger the project, the more insecurity, because projects are stopped with every change of government. Even in conventional projects, with regular clients and processes, it's difficult to maintain control over it. That's one reason why ADN BA deals mostly with housing projects by private clients, who are more reliable. 'But still, there are many risks. The risk of getting involved and failing, of staying involved while all other partners leave, of politics changing. The risk to innovate, even when the client is willing to experiment, like the flexible floor plans in the Dogarilor Apartments. The risk that a project may not get started or may not be finished. Those are not only business risks, part of my soul and ambitions are in it, too.'

They all agree that, in Romania, there are hardly any inspiring examples to build upon. 'Western Europe has had centuries to find out how to make good public places. I don't think we have that experience,' says Cristina. 'They say the rupture came with the communist era, but it started earlier. Here, we have to start from scratch every time and again.' Andrei adds, 'We could make better use of our history, and most importantly, slow down the commercial real estate developments.' For Justin, it's just a matter of time: 'Countries around the core of Europe will make different choices, and it will change Europe. One day, we'll see that Greece is not an isolated case. Banks need to change, government, commercial companies, they all need to change. Look at the developments in Madrid and Barcelona, where Podemos-minded mayors have taken power. Things will change. And Romania will change with it. And we will learn. Not from *Dezeen*, or national politics, but from local projects, with local craftsmanship and real needs.' Which is why Romania needs all three kinds of architect: the pragmatics, the activists and the people's poets. Andrei, Justin, and Cristina are living proof of that. ◀



House by Abruptarhitectura, Cornetu village



Abruptarhitectura (Cristina Constantin and Cosmin Pavel)



Justin Baroncea



House in Breaza by Justin Baroncea and Iulia Vasile



RADU MALASINGIU



COSMIN DRAGOMIR



COSMIN DRAGOMIR

ADN BA was established in 2003 by Andrei Șerbescu and Adrian Untaru, who were later joined by Bogdan Brădățeanu.

Two projects by ADN BA in Bucharest: apartment building Mora Street (top) and Dogarilor Apartments (left).



OLTEI DOGARU

## Reactivate Romania

# Responsible pragmatism: new collaborative practices

TEXT: STEFAN GHENCIULESCU

Some of the most fertile grounds for today's architecture are independent, collaborative, and bottom-up projects that clearly state the transition from protests and compromise to actual action. It is by no means a phenomenon specific only to Romania, but here these initiatives develop almost entirely without public support. While the lack of resources compels the use of small-steps politics, the concrete and immediate actions are always thought through in order to trigger significant transformations. Each activity marks a new step in a long-term strategy with ambitious goals. These respond directly to a series of urgent social and cultural needs that, for the moment, are not addressed by either the free market or the public administration: the salvaging of threatened heritage and its usage as social agent, the creation of contemporary culture, the construction of public space, the democratization of technology, and so on.

The small scale of these actions is, most of the time, complemented by the participation in, or even the initiation of, international networks. Self-organization, together with the fact that the architect becomes a collaborator (sometimes the initiator) and not just a service provider, signals an outstanding shift. All of these initiatives have proved to be sustainable, even though we must still see if they can sustainably develop on a long-term scale, and to what extent they will succeed in contributing to a paradigm shift for the general practice. ◀



ARA ASSOCIATION



VLAD PETRI

**ROSIA MONTANA**  
Architects from the Association Architecture, Restoration, Archaeology (ARA), members of other NGOs, and volunteers are restoring, together with locals, heritage houses in the Transylvanian town of Rosia Montana. A historical settlement, Roman vestiges, and an outstanding landscape are threatened by an open-pit mining project. The restorations are conceived not just for the salvaging of buildings, but also for supporting the sustainability of the local community (through tourism, organic agriculture, etc.) – a viable alternative to the mining operation. Protests in Bucharest in 2013 against the mining project triggered a significant public movement, including a series of marches in large Romanian cities and abroad. A unique phenomenon emerged from the combination between community-architectural local actions and the global scale of the protests.



DOROTHEE JANSSEN



DACIAN GROZA



DACIAN GROZA

**THE ART TOWER, PANTELIMON**  
Make a Point Organization has placed an extraordinary bet: to create an art centre not in the central, fashionable areas, but on the periphery, right in the heart of an old socialist neighbourhood. The organization took over spaces inside an old baize factory. The exhibitions and conferences bring together the local community and Romanian and international artists and curators. The most spectacular action was the conversion by of the original factory's water tower, which was empty, into an exhibition hall. The simple attachment of a light spiral staircase (Stoicescu & Garcia Architects) makes the tower's exterior accessible, and has transformed the structure into a belvedere and urban landmark.

**THE PAINTBRUSH FACTORY, CLUJ**  
The community kitchen, by Klara Veer, and artist's studio at The Paintbrush Factory. The factory managed to escape demolition during the pre-crisis boom, and was rented and developed by a federation of artists and other cultural workers. Studios and performance halls find place in a flexible and democratic structure, and a European-level cultural brand was created. Emerging artists and community organizations share their space with internationally renowned galleries and artists, which, through recurrent auctions in European capitals, contributes a great deal to the project's financing. In the meantime, teams from within the Factory have begun to take action in problematic places and communities throughout the city. Thus, the Factory has become one of the engines of city branding, despite that public support is still almost non-existent. Today, Cluj is considered to be one of the main centres for contemporary art in Central and Eastern Europe.



**FUTURE GARDEN, BUCHAREST**  
The Future Garden (Grădina Viitorului) was established on Vitorului (Future) Street, in one of the poor but very lively areas of Bucharest. It is a maker-space and a place for education, technological and cultural production; a DIY effort by the Modulab team. The organization creates, appropriates, and militates for new technologies oriented towards practical use, while the garden and pavilion define the physical space for its collaborative and interdisciplinary production platform. Modulab has created, among others, the first multi-touch that allows for multi-user interaction, the first DIY artificial muscles, and several installations that explore the interaction between human and digital.

# Transylvanian critical regionalism

TEXT: STEFAN GHENCIULESCU



ISTVÁN BENEDEK

→ Tourist shelter prototype by BLIPSZ + Atelier FKM, Tomești village

The region surrounded by the Carpathian arch (internationally known as Transylvania, although it contains several historical regions with quite different identities) is profoundly marked by the cohabitation of various cultures. Along with the Romanian population, there is a strong Hungarian presence, and several German communities – of very small proportions, nowadays, but with great historical impact – as well as other minorities, a sum of various religions, languages, dialects, and architectural traditions. Beyond any opposing nationalist discourses (and there are a lot of them), there is an acknowledgement of a regional identity, of a particular cultural space.

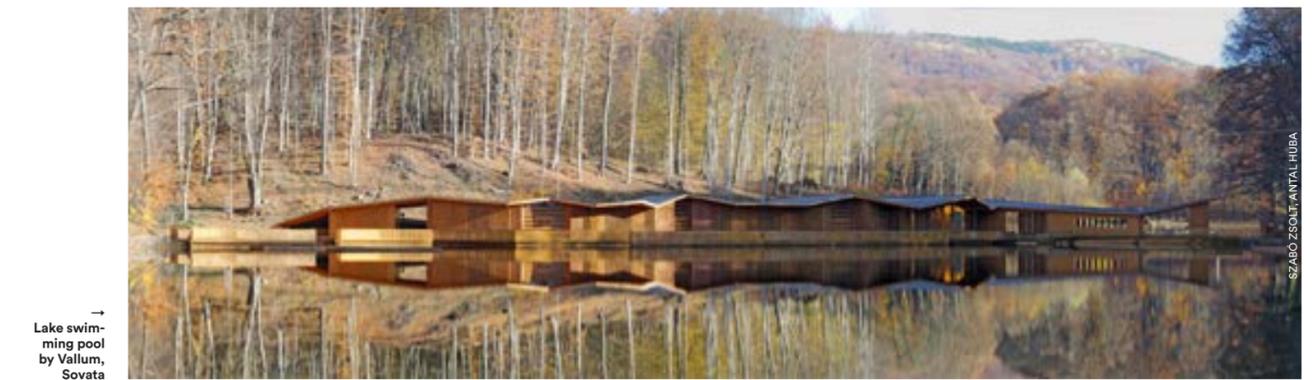
Over the last few years, a series of projects and offices were initiated in the region that intend to reinterpret in a modern key the local traditions. However, the only area in which we can discuss a consistent movement

(although lacking any founding manifestos) is the so-called Szekler region, comprising a few counties mainly inhabited by a Hungarian community with a very strong self-identity. This is an area with a historical tradition of autonomy and self-organization, even when it was part of the old Hungarian Kingdom or the Habsburg Empire, but also with a remarkable vernacular wooden architecture.

Some of the best projects we can find here do not simply attempt to re-assume inveterate shapes, but tend to further a philosophy of construction and emplacement. Beyond the local heritage, the architects take their references (without imitating) from other concurrent European movements that produce an absolutely contemporary architecture, while starting from traditional materials and constructive cultures: Switzerland, the Nordic countries, and, closer still, the Austrian Vorarlberg. ◀



→ Shelter for a traditional saw mill and info centre by Larix Studio, Zetea village



→ Lake swimming pool by Vallum, Sovata

Local Romania

# Conclusion: activation, collaboration, innovation

TEXT: STEFAN GHENCULESCU



ANDREI MARGULESCU



COSMIN DRAGOMIR

Concrete House by Bogdan Gyemant-Selin, Bucharest



ANDREI MARGULESCU

Light canon in the attic of Mincu House by Șerban Sturdza and Prodid, Bucharest



COSMIN DRAGOMIR

Exemplary Romania

Exemplary Romania

We chose to conclude with two projects that, perhaps, synthesize a large part of the tendencies we have discussed in these pages.

The Mincu House accommodates the headquarters of the Order of Architects in Romania. Its name comes from Ion Mincu, an architect from the end of the 19th century, who inhabited and transformed the building. It escaped some speculative alterations thanks to its acquisition by the Order. The

organization had already decided that it should renounce building a new office, but instead give an example of good practice by saving and rehabilitating an old house. One of the important aspects here is the opening of the building towards the city: basically, all of the offices are located in the attic or in the secondary wing. The rest of the space is used for public events.

Financing the project was troublesome, and it came mainly from personal funds and donations,

while the construction site benefited from the help of volunteers over a ten-year period: architects, restorers, students, and also people from other domains. This emphasis on the public character and the realization through a collaborative effort, with the generosity of various people, gives Mincu House a much richer meaning than that of a standard institutional headquarters.

The restoration, led by Șerban Sturdza, is respectful and, in a way, almost didactic. The various layers

of the house are revealed, rather than being melted into a stylistic reconstitution. The former attic – now the main office space – is where the intervention is most visible: here, the architect expresses his design philosophy, that is, working in (and actually taking further) a traditional spirit. Archetypal elements like the clerestory, the cabinet in the wall, the fireplace, etc., become elements of a poetic discourse, and of a relaxed reinterpretation of the history of our profession. As this is done in a sensitive manner, and by

avoiding any pastiche, it works. The attic is a delight for both architects and the wider public.

Concrete House seems to emanate from a completely different story. It is a new house, with an absolutely contemporary expression, and it relies on the invention of a new material: the thermo-insulating concrete with aggregates of basaltic slag (see A10 #62). It is an example of innovation, despite a very difficult context, and a determined outlook on the future. At the same time, it is again the result of a

collaboration – a local partnership between architect, client, constructor, and producer. Moreover, the project combines innovation with a very human scale and the integration of elements from Bucharest's urban culture, such as the vine canopies that convert almost all courtyards in the city into green outdoor 'rooms'.

Both of these houses point to a civilized way of working with the city, while achieving an architecture with a strong personality. They are good models, indeed. ◀