

## **Dreams for a happy life. Mass housing in the early 1960s Romania**

The 1960s were the starting point for the construction of the large mass housing estates in Romania, reifying promises for an ideal living. As theorized and imagined by the architects, public facilities were the magnetizing elements of the new neighborhoods. However, in the following years, the need for economical efficiency in centralized investment shaped the initial architectural concepts enforcing the construction of denser housing areas and minimizing the public facilities. Today, the attachment of the inhabitants of these neighborhoods especially to the public areas (especially the housing estates in the early 1960s) manifested in civic activism might be understood as a barometer indicating that a response for affordable housing is inherently tight to the existence of a good quality collective space.

The evolution of the postwar (mass) housing policies in Romania the general trend followed a precise direction leading by the end of the 1980s toward the full institutionalization of the housing construction. A second observation resides in the fact that if by the beginning of the period, private investment in individual housing exceeded centralized funding for collective housing, by the mid 1960s the investment was balanced between private and state investment, ending in the late 1980s to the drastic reduction of the private funding. This brief overview brings into the discussion another perspective related to the concepts that stood behind the state investments and to the fact that 1960-1970s represented a period of experimentation in state funded mass housing areas. In most of the cases the first state mass housing investments displayed the ideal concepts of the architects which resided in conceiving minimum livable (private) space as accomplishing the promises for affordable housing for everyone and large collective green areas and public facilities attached to the residential areas. The three case studies selected fit to this portrait, being constructed between 1955 – 1970. Further developments, in the 1970-1980s, led by the necessity of investment efficiency are characterized by density increment through the construction of higher and more compact collective housing and by de-escalation of the public areas and collective facilities.

*Floreasca neighborhood* was one of the first experiments of the state funded collective housing, located in the northern area of Bucharest. *Floreasca neighborhood* was an addition to an already existent residential area partially built in the interwar period, and it was presented as a successful solution in achieving affordable housing for everyone since the first projects for individual housing allotments, dated in the 1920-1940, proved to be inefficient and were unaccomplished by the end of the 1940s due to the high costs. With an average of 50 square meters for a two room apartment (the two room apartment was the main unit) and an approximate height of 3 floors of the blocks of flats, the area became by the time into a very domestic environment due to a densely green area of the main park and of the front and back gardens surrounding the rigid display of the collective units. The central area of the estate included public facilities (kindergarten, school, cinema) and a park of approximate 25.000 square meters.

*Circus Park* was mostly representative as a town scale public funding, in the benefit of Bucharest citizens, but as an addition to it, the investment envisaged also the construction of several surrounding collective blocks of housing, which were partially raised in the same time with the construction of the circus. The housing area constructed in the 1960s was comprised of approximate 1000 apartments, mainly with two rooms, with total area less than 50 square meters. The height of the collective units was up to seven floors but initial concepts included the construction of several high towers in the vicinity of the park. Further interventions were postponed and followed only in the mid 1970s with housing areas characterized by density. Nevertheless the lack of green areas in the new estates created and the close vicinity of the circus park transformed it into an appendix of the surrounding housing areas.

*Drumul Taberei neighborhood* represents one of the most successful large scale mass housing estates of Bucharest. Beginning with the 1960s the two major mass housing areas of Bucharest were located in the eastern and western outskirts of Bucharest, according to the distribution of the two main industrial areas envisaged to be developed. The area on which *Drumul Taberei neighborhood* was constructed was scarcely occupied by buildings and constructions which created a favorable condition for the architects, without determinations rooted in a pre-existent urban structure. From east to west, the construction of *Drumul Taberei* started in 1950s and was closed by the end of the 1980, therefore it represents a perfect case study to create a radiography of the evolution of a the double-edged system that represented an uneven balance between the architectural concepts and a rigid centralized system. The neighborhood was constructed in several stages of investment; each of them closed with the finalization of several clearly defined units (a *microraiion* – a sub-unit of the neighborhood). The central area of the neighborhood represents the development between 1960-1970s. Apart of the modernist mass housing specific expression in which planners used variations of the masses and heights of the apartment blocks, the housing estate has an enhanced diversity of the apartment types. In terms of outdoor facilities, the design of mass housing units strongly complied the theories of the moments: variety of the road structure layered in wide and straight vehicle roads and sinuous pedestrian alleys; greenery surrounding the blocks and green central areas disposed in the heart of the housing units; education and health facilities calculated according to the density of the inhabitants and local multifunctional complexes (commercial, administrative, cultural) designed in a distinctive architectural expression and intended as identity landmark for each of the housing units.

The design of the units further constructed later in *Drumul Taberei*, suffered alterations due to the impetuous necessities for efficiency. Even if the overall concept remained the same, transformation of the design occurred until the 1980s in several stages, which may be displayed in a rough schematization, as it follows. In the mid 1960s during the construction works, several areas, initially reserved for public facilities, suffered a change of use being covered with housing units. A second stage of interference affected public facilities which made the project for the residential area comfortable (constructions for the garages, larger distances between the housing units, etc.) during the design and authorization process. A third stage affected the design through efficiency measures, introduced before the design process and which reshaped completely the initial architectural and urban concept.

Among a few others, the three case studies mentioned above are idealized today in the public narratives, without lacking a consistent dose of nostalgia, veiled by an inherent exaltation. In order to position the case studies in a more balanced perspective, the use of civic activism coagulated around these specific mass housing areas seems a useful instrument.

Around 2000, post – socialist Romania faced a growing interest of the civil society regarding urban issues. It was only by the end of the decade that grass roots participation and local activism coagulated around civic groups, located in some of the large mass housing estates. An analysis developed in 2022 stated the fact that 13 out of a total of 28 civic groups located in Bucharest arouse in the dense peripheral housing areas built before 1989. Among some of the first and the most vocal and active civic groups are the ones related to the three case study presented. According to the study previously mentioned, the civic groups are claiming for the maintenance of the public space (green areas and outdoor facilities), blocking interventions for constructions in the public areas led by local, municipal administration or private investors, improvement of the small scale outdoor facilities (parking areas and garages, outdoor urban furniture, etc.). For the moment, the actions of the civic groups or specific actors within the civic groups are rarely driven by a special interest oriented toward a heritage based perspective, such as the accomplishment of a particular legal degree of protection of the architectural and urban characteristics of the mass housing estates. Nevertheless, an intersection of the two perspectives, the historical based approach and current positions and actions seems at this

point to emphasize that the requests and needs of the „communities” tends somehow towards the re-imagination of the ideal projects altered through the process of densification and towards an active reaction to possible contemporary threats for densification, this time forged by an uncontrolled process of privatization of the public areas within the mass housing estates.

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04. Circus building, archive photo published by <https://arhiva.uniuneearhitecilor.ro/arhiva/foto-diapo>

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06. Drumul Taberei mass housing estate, photo 1960-1970, private collection.