

# THE SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATION OF INDUSTRIAL SPACE INTO AN ASPIRATIONAL PROJECT: THE IMAGINARY OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN THE CONVERSION OF THE FORMER CARBOCHIM INDUSTRIAL PLATFORM IN CLUJ-NAPOCA

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**ABSTRACT.** This research investigates how the gentrifying actor Rivus, a real estate project that encompasses the urban regeneration of the former Carbochim industrial platform, reinforces the middle-class imaginary in Cluj-Napoca by manufacturing consent through its communication strategies. The study examines how the urban regeneration project influences public perception of the middle class and legitimizes the middle-class imaginary by exploring the instrumentalization of nature, cultural identity, practicability, unity, work, and innovation in Rivus digital narratives. Through qualitative content analysis, the research examines a series of materials from the Rivus project's social media platforms to identify recurring themes and discursive patterns. The research results illustrate Rivus' strategy of helping to construct, strengthen, and reinforce the idea of the middle-class imaginary, capitalizing on the real estate and innovation ideals characteristic of the city of Cluj-Napoca. By doing this, the project not only normalises and complies with the neoliberal views of prosperity and those entitled to it but also undermines the inequality, exclusion, and social costs associated with gentrification. As a consequence, based on the Rivus project case study, the current paper identifies and highlights some of the techniques used by real estate developers in modeling the middle-class imaginary and its public acceptance.

**Keywords:** middle class, neoliberalism, gentrification, Cluj-Napoca, manufacturing consent.

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## Introduction

Urban development is not only about a simple modification of physical spaces, but also about an alteration of social hierarchies, power dynamics, and the way urban resources are allocated. In Romania, especially in Cluj-Napoca, gentrification has intensified at a rapid pace over the last twenty years. Although the gentrification processes in Romania have been approached from diverse angles in academic research, the specific study of the Rivus urban regeneration project, the largest urban regeneration project in Romania, remains neglected.

The real estate project exemplifies how urban regeneration initiatives go beyond interventions at the material level and are transformed into tools with cultural, social, and ideological impact. The communication strategies employed by Rivus reinforce the middle-class imaginary by curating an image of Cluj-Napoca designed to elicit consent from the middle class and its imaginary. Therefore, the analysis of this real estate project is essential for understanding the concrete ways in which urban transformation initiatives alter the perceptions, attitudes, and values of the inhabitants.

Gentrification is a multidimensional process where social, economic, and cultural transformations are interconnected. In addition to the changes in urban infrastructure, gentrification also consists of building narratives that legitimize the presence of middle-class residents, marginalizing people who are not in the group (Ley, 1994; Watt, 2008). An essential factor in this process is the middle-class imaginary. Therefore, the values, aspirations, and lifestyle of the middle class are presented as normative, desirable, and achievable, fabricating criteria of who is perceived as a legitimate urban resident and under what conditions (Watt, 2008).

Media and communication strategies form key mechanisms by which the middle-class imaginary is built and presented (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Tolfo & Doucet, 2020). Urban regeneration projects manufacture consent regarding urban transformation and shape its desired appearance through media and various channels of communication and advertisement (Gonzalez & Waley, 2012; Guerrero, 2021). Framing gentrification as effective, necessary, and innovative completely ignores its social, cultural, and economic consequences, such as rising housing prices, increasing inequality, and displacement (Watt, 2008). Therefore, the symbolic dimension of gentrification cannot be separated from its material consequences, the first one being a factor that impacts perceptions of the process of gentrification and also one that creates exclusion patterns in the city (Atkinson, 2003).

This research provides a first case study of the Rivus urban conversion project. Consisting of both the most wide-ranging mixed-use urban regeneration project in Romania and the urban regeneration project with the highest investment in the country, Rivus serves as a unique research opportunity for comprehending how such projects manifest themselves at a material level, but even more importantly, at a symbolic level. The study aims to address the gap in the academic literature, analyzing the project not only as a real estate project, but also as a cultural, social, and political phenomenon that plays an active role in fabricating and legitimizing a vision of the middle class of Cluj.

In addition, this study is based on an interdisciplinary perspective that combines sociology and communication sciences. The analysis and understanding of class dynamics and social imaginaries are achieved through the sociological component, while the examination of the way media narratives and communication strategies shape perceptions and manufacture consent is done through the communication sciences component. By combining these approaches, the research analyzes how Rivus consolidates the imaginary of the middle class in Cluj-Napoca and fabricates public consent for it, thus transforming the urban regeneration project from the material plane into a symbolic one that legitimizes the middle-class domination in Cluj-Napoca.

This study provides a first case study of the Rivus urban conversion project. Given its distinctive magnitude, size, and cost, Rivus serves as a unique example for researching how massive projects like this manifest themselves at a material level, but even more importantly, at a symbolic level. The study aims to bridge the gap in the academic literature, analyzing the project not only as a real estate project, but also as a cultural, social, and political phenomenon that plays an active role in fabricating and legitimizing a vision of the middle class of Cluj.

Last but not least, by placing the real estate project at the intersection of urban regeneration, media, and social stratification, this research contributes to the field of urban sociology with an interdisciplinary perspective. Spotlighting the way in which Rivus fabricates, normalizes, and reinforces the imaginary of the middle class, the paper shows how the process of gentrification is not only correlated to economic and spatial conditions of the individuals, but also to political and ideological inclinations. Through its communication strategies, Rivus transforms urban regeneration into a means of legitimizing urban transformation as a project focused on the middle-class aspirations and desires, fabricating and manufacturing consent of the middle-class imaginary of Cluj-Napoca, framing gentrification as beneficial, innovative, and inevitable, all while avoiding the exclusion, inequality, and social and economic costs of the residents of the city.

## Literature review

### *Gentrification*

Gentrification is defined mainly as the sum of physical, economic, cultural, and social transformations that result in displacement (Atkinson, 2003). One definition that presents gentrification in this manner is:

an economic and social process whereby private capital (real estate firms, developers) and individual homeowners and renters reinvest in fiscally neglected neighborhoods through housing rehabilitation, loft conversions, and the construction of new housing stock. Unlike urban renewal, gentrification is a gradual process, occurring one building or block at a time, slowly reconfiguring the neighborhood landscape of consumption and residence by displacing poor and working class residents unable to afford to live in "revitalized" neighborhoods with rising rents, property taxes, and new businesses catering to an upscale clientele. (Pérez, 2004: 139)

In addition, gentrification can also be defined as a "process involving a change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a high socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital" (Clark, 2005: 258). Thus, the researcher includes businesses, corporations, governments, and individuals as potential "gentrifiers".

The current neoliberal urban policies not only fail to address urgent issues with significant ramifications but also create an environment that intensifies the ignored problems. Part of the criticisms of these policies in the context of gentrification is: the lack of concrete measures on the level of poverty, the prioritization of the private system over the state, the displacement and devaluation of certain areas based on the profile of their inhabitants (Davidson, 2018; Hepburn et al., 2023; Hochstenbach & Sako, 2021). Thus, the current urbanization policies put at the forefront the interests of real estate developers, corporations, and capital owners in general, against the needs of existing residents (Davidson, 2018; Hepburn et al., 2023). Urban regeneration projects based on this type of policy lead to the displacement of low-income communities toward peripheral areas (Hochstenbach & Sako, 2021; Smith, 1996). At the same time, by devaluing certain areas of the city and turning them into potential reinvestment projects, urban neoliberal policies create the ideal conditions for gentrification (Atkinson, 2003; Crack, 2005). As a result, neoliberal urbanization policies became complicit in the creation of "urban wilderness" and the formation of public consent that gentrification is the only solution to "taming" the urban (Smith, 1996).

### *Cluj-Napoca city*

Since the early 2000s, Cluj-Napoca has experienced continuous investment growth (Florea & Vincze, 2024). The year 2017 represents a peak in the establishment of new companies, with 45% more firms being founded compared to the previous year (Petrovici & Codruța, 2020). The significant growth was a result of the introduction of the “Start-Up Nation” programme, with Cluj-Napoca being the city with the most submissions in the country (ibid). Even though in 2018 the population of the Cluj metropolitan area represented only 2% of the country’s population, the number of commercial companies in the area constituted 4% of the total in Romania (Petrovici & Codruța, 2020). Thus, in the Cluj Metropolitan Area, over 21 thousand commercial companies were active (ibid), meaning “48.2 firms per thousand inhabitants, much higher than the national average of 27.7 firms per thousand inhabitants” (ibid: 11). Emil Boc, the mayor of Cluj-Napoca Municipality from 2004 to the present (except for the period between 2008 and 2012, when he held the position of Prime Minister of Romania), stated that the Cluj Innovation City project was launched by the Cluj-Napoca City Hall in 2007 (European Committee of the Regions, 2017a). Over half a billion euros were invested in the project, resulting in a “city within a city, a kind of Cluj Silicon Valley based on research, development, innovation, and IT” (ibid). In 2014, the redefinition of Cluj-Napoca as Romania’s “Silicon Valley” became increasingly visible (Dobre, 2014; Florea & Vincze, 2024), with a clear desire to transform the city’s image into a Romanian Silicon Valley. Gradually, through media narratives, policies, and discourses focused on business and innovation, the city’s image has been consolidated based on the values and imagination of this city (Coroș & Coroș, 2010; Florea & Vincze, 2024).

A key factor in the city’s branding process was the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) sector (Petrovici & Codruța, 2020). Thus, in 2014, the Cluj IT Innovation Cluster project was launched by individuals from the business environment, the public administration environment, and the academic environment (Florea & Vincze, 2024). As a result, residential real estate development began to focus precisely on members of the ICT sectors and their needs (Petrovici & Codruța, 2020). The ICT sector has become a major hub not only in the city’s infrastructure but also in its development strategies. The local mayor describes the relationship between the local public administration and the ICT sector as follows: “We have two strong IT clusters in the city and we are using them (...) to shape the innovation strategy, the IT strategy for the city (...) to bring all the resources together to have a single strategy” (European Committee of the Regions, 2017b).

The private sector is both an essential pillar in creating the smart city brand and a priority member within the context of the city's administration, urbanization, and public policies (PRIA Events, 2017). The mayor states that the city of Cluj-Napoca is based on the vision of a smart city, where connection with innovation, research, development, and IT are the most important" (European Committee of the Regions, 2017a; European Committee of the Regions, 2017b). Innovation is both a central element in creating the Cluj-Napoca brand and a primary reason that motivates the city administration's adoption of various measures or actions. Boc describes two of the public administration's priorities aimed at stimulating innovation: attracting as many foreign investors as possible and "smart collaboration with all the city's main stakeholders" (European Committee of the Regions, 2017b).

### ***Gentrification in Cluj-Napoca***

Cluj-Napoca is the city with the most expensive real estate market in Romania (Investropa, 2025). In 2018, 52% of the total profit generated by the entire economic sectors in Cluj-Napoca was a result of the services sector, 13% of this amount representing profit produced by the real estate sector (Petrovici & Codruța, 2020). Although the real estate category had the lowest number of employees in the services sector (2,127 employees, with the average being 9,135 employees), it recorded the highest profit per employee in the services sector (284,523) and the second highest profit in relation to any economic sector (ibid).

The significant increase in housing prices in Cluj-Napoca coincided with the moment when the ICT sector began its rapid expansion (Dubois & Sanna, 2023). Between 2015 and 2020, housing prices recorded a 76% increase (Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, 2022). Currently, the average price per square meter in Cluj-Napoca has reached approximately 2900 euros (Investropa, 2025), a scandalous price considering that the net minimum wage is 2575 lei per month (Ministry of Labor, Family, Youth, and Social Solidarity, 2024). The discrepancy between the two in Cluj-Napoca, compared to other cities in Romania, is alarming. In the capital of the country, Bucharest, where salaries are higher than in Cluj-Napoca, housing prices are 20%-25% lower, and their increase has not been as dynamic as in the case of real estate in Cluj-Napoca (Dubois & Sanna, 2023).

A consequence of the high cost of housing in Cluj-Napoca is the marketing of the city as an attractive location for investment. As a result, individuals are encouraged to rent out their second or third property, or to purchase a new property with the subsequent purpose of renting it out for additional income.

In addition to the high prices mentioned as an incentive for investing in Cluj-Napoca, the attitude of the City Hall leadership regarding cultural heritage and industrial platforms represents another way in which the city is promoted as an ideal location for investments. This attitude is conspicuous in speeches and statements made by the city mayor, who consistently chooses to distinguish the city from the industrial platforms within it, the factories, and the lands on which they are located (European Committee of the Regions, 2017b; PRIA Events, 2017). Emil Boc justifies the removal of the socialist-era industry from Cluj by stating that “we did not have the opportunity to sell our assets, so we had to change our strategy” (European Committee of the Regions, 2017b).

The hostile attitude of the local public administration is also noticeable in the projects approved, endorsed, or even co-financed by the City Hall. After 2015, the number of new real estate projects and their emergence increased at an accelerated rate (Florea & Vincze, 2024). For instance, in 2015, the former Napochim factory was transformed into the Scala Center; in 2017, the former Ursus Brewery platform became Platinia Mall, with other Platinia buildings in Cluj to be associated with it; in 2019, one of the plots of land belonging to the former Clujana factory became Riverside Residence; in 2020, the former Feleacu factory became CBS Apartments Feleacul Residence (ibid). The examples provided represent only a part of the city's real estate projects, but they serve as an indicator of the importance and protection that the local administration gives to former industrial platforms and the locality's heritage.

In 2022, the Rivus real estate development project was publicly announced, with urban plans already approved by the Cluj-Napoca local council (Ghira, 2022). Rivus is an urban redevelopment project on the former Carbochim industrial platform. It covers a vast area of 14 hectares (Agenda Construcțiilor, 2025), which includes 5 hectares of urban gardens, an office building, residential apartments, a performing arts center, 400 shops, and more (Rivus, 2024a). The project stands out because it is the largest urban regeneration investment in Romania, with an investment of half a billion euros (Rivus, 2024b). The Carbochim factory is still active and is owned by Iulian Dascălu, the initiator of the Iulius Group and its affiliated companies (Ghira, 2022). The factory was moved outside the city, and the land was sold to Rivus Investments, owned by Iulius Group (ibid; Turp, 2024a).

### ***The middle class***

Marxist theory divides the population into social classes based on their role in the economic process of producing goods and services, which determines the position of the classes and the relationship between them: the bourgeoisie and

the proletariat, or the workers, capitalists, and owners (Marx, 1975). The European bourgeoisie of the 19th century was characterized by a comfortable, consumerist lifestyle that involved adherence to social status and norms (Troc, 2019). This style combined knowledge, emancipation, and entertainment (Hobsbawm, 1987), while social classes were seen as rigid entities with regulated privileges for their members (Carrier & Kalb, 2015). On the other hand, Weber introduces the idea of social stratification, defining social class by combining status class, dividing them into upper, middle, and lower classes, thus indicating an individual's position in the economic market and their life chances for accessible goods or services depending on their class (Weber, 2010). He also proposed the theory of the radicalization of polarization and the simplification of the social class structure, according to which capitalism results in the forced absorption of intermediate groups into a homogeneous and militant working class (Wacquant, 2019).

The middle class emerged in the context of the modernization and industrialization of Western societies (López, 2012). According to Birdsall (2010), people living on the equivalent of 10\$ or more per day and who are at or below the 95% limit of the income distribution in their own country constitute the middle class in a developing country. Today, the global middle class is also relevant, consisting of individuals from developing countries with living standards close to those in the West (Koo, 2016).

Currently, the middle class makes up more than half of the global population of individuals, primarily in developing countries (The Economist, 2009), but researchers say that it is shrinking. This means that a smaller number of the population earns the "traditional" income for the class, experiencing declines between 1971 and 2011 in the United States of America (Kochhar, 2018), with the total aggregate income decreasing from 62% in 1970 to 42% in 2020 (Kochhar & Sechopoulos, 2022). There is a significant income disparity between classes, with 47.5% of global wealth held by just 1.5% of the population, equivalent to 214 trillion dollars (UBS, 2023).

In his study, Troc (2019) views the middle class both as "a myth, an ideological ideal, and a social entity under construction" (ibid: 93). He notes that in Romania and in other countries from the former communist bloc, the transition was not made toward a capitalist society, but toward a free market economy, reestablishing and expanding fragmentation within society (Troc, 2019). Thus, in contemporary urban environments, the opportunities certain segments of the population have due to objective material processes determine both individuals' degree of access to resources and inequalities in society, as well as phenomena like polarization and segregation (ibid).

### ***The middle class in Cluj-Napoca***

The city-level interviews conducted in Troc's written work (2019) revealed a conformist lifestyle among Cluj's middle class, integrating the class ideal: excessive work, risk-taking, spending leisure time at the mall, going to the gym, and the perceived pressure to marry and have children. They also share common ground with the working class in terms of religion or ceremonial customs such as marriages and baptisms, being culturally conservative, holding traditional values, and supporting right-wing political parties (ibid). Troc describes their lifestyle as contradictory, juxtaposing their individualism with the felt need for community in the context of middle-class suburbs and the ideal of homeownership (ibid).

Regardless of their social class, individuals share the desire to live in a modern, developed, and safe city where they have the security of their own home, access to educational and employment opportunities, and leisure activities, all within a family-friendly environment that embraces nature, sports, and culture. Further, the middle class has additional demands centered around mobility, comfort, and consumption: access to private healthcare clinics, coworking spaces, shopping centres with specialty cafes, fitness centers, restaurants, high-quality private educational institutions for children, efficient travel in traffic by personal car, and easily accessible parking spaces. Urban projects, well-maintained pedestrian areas, and clean parks are highly valued, enabling a comfortable life spent with family members in the heart of the city.

Today, living and working in Cluj implies high-quality private services, numerous neoliberal investments in the city, an ultra-developed real estate market, a high number of entrepreneurial initiatives, multiple corporations, and a very active construction sector. At the same time, the lives of residents born in the county or in the vicinity of Cluj-Napoca Municipality have undergone significant changes in the last 30 years, with some of them being economically and socially vulnerable today, even facing the imminent danger of displacement, as is the case of Pata Rât:

No one knows where the name Pata Rât comes from; it doesn't appear on any map, but it means the location of the landfill on the outskirts of one of the richest cities in Romania, Cluj-Napoca. Here is where the authorities pushed the poor. In one of the largest ghettos in our country, where over 70% of the population is Roma, nearly 2,000 people, including hundreds of children, live their daily lives. (Călian & Rostaş, 2019)

A study presents a comparison between the binaries of inferiority and superiority between the Canton colony, near Pata Rât, and the nearby Maurer Panoramic real estate project, highlighting racialization, urban branding, and the contrasts of the neoliberal city of Cluj-Napoca (Vincze & Zamfir, 2019). The problem is the affordability of the new cost of living in the city, overpopulation in specific neighbourhoods, institutionalized racism, limited or unstable jobs, and the risks associated with the city's gentrification, driven by a wide range of neoliberal investments.

### ***Gentrification of the Iris neighbourhood***

Various neighbourhoods, especially peripheral ones, have suffered as a result of the gentrification process. In the Iris neighbourhood, gentrification is evident due to its strong impact on various segments of the local population. The previously industrialized neighbourhood has been gradually transformed through multiple real estate development projects. At the same time, the gentrifying actor Rivus is planning the largest transformation of the former Carbochim industrial platform. The former Iris factory met a similar fate:

Founded in 1920, it once exported throughout the East, as well as to the West. However, after 1989, the factory met the fate of many other enterprises: it was privatized, no investments were made in retooling, it reduced its activity, and went bankrupt. Currently, in its place is a residential complex of the same name, with ten-story buildings, commercial spaces, and offices. (Gizdavu, 2025)

In Cluj-Napoca, especially in the Iris district, the understanding of residents' perspectives and the impact generated by real estate projects is completely neglected in favor of capital and those who own it. Valentin Rațiu, coordinator of the "Cluj Metropolitan Green Ring" research on behalf of Active Research, believes that Cluj's gentrification can be well exemplified by the specific case of the Iris neighbourhood:

What surprised me a lot is the way the neighbourhood is gentrifying. (...) is the only neighbourhood in the north where incomes are very close to the average. If 10 years ago, when I first went there to do questionnaires, poorer families lived on Byron Street, now in those studio apartments you also see younger people with higher education and better-paying jobs. (ibid)

Furthermore, projections for the low-income population in the neighbourhood indicate a typical case of gentrification through the inability to pay for rented housing, resulting in people being displaced to the outskirts of the city in favor of investments that will take over Iris and increase the cost of living:

The future looks bleak from the perspective of the Rivus construction because (...) it will lead to an increase in rents, which will particularly affect vulnerable families on Byron Street who rent 11-square-meter studios and will soon no longer be able to afford even that. (ibid)

The Zonal Urban Plan (PUZ) has received a favourable opinion from the Cluj-Napoca City Hall for another project that would transform another industrial area. This concerns the Sanex platform area at 1 Beiuşului Street and a private investment of 213.6 million lei, which would transform the area into a mixed urban complex with collective housing, a shopping center, office spaces, and services" (Silea, 2024). Similar to Rivus, the project would consolidate and accelerate gentrification in even more areas of Cluj. In this way, Iris will lose its identity as a representative working-class place and transform into a neoliberal hub" for the middle class.

### ***Manufacturing consent***

The concept of manufacturing consent, introduced by Noam Chomsky in 1988 as a form of propaganda, explains how the discourse of capital owners shapes public perception favorably in order to implement specific projects (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). More specifically, the media conforms to the demands of investors, multiplying their messages through key phrases and words or by reiterating glorified ideas or meanings that underpin the project, artificially manufacturing opinions, behaviors, or values desired by capital holders. The aim is to integrate the investor into the institutional structure (ibid) in a non-transparent manner. This is possible due to the lack of objectivity among media actors within the context of a rigid system without alternative standards of rigor in journalism:

The elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news objectively" and on the basis of professional news values. (...) the constraints are so powerful, and are built into the system in such a fundamental way, that alternative bases of news choices are hardly imaginable. (Herman & Chomsky, 1988: 62)

The Rivus project encompasses all the fundamental elements of propaganda, as theorized and defined by Herman and Chomsky (1988), which utilize capital and power to shape the choices, opinions, and interests of the mass media:

a) the capital owner profits from propaganda; b) paid advertising is a significant source of income for the press; c) mass media copies the information provided by the investor(s); d) criticism of mass media; e) the marginalization of critical voices as a mechanism of control (ibid).

Specifically, the media's promotion of Rivus presents ideas taken directly from the project sources, repeated multiple times with no criticism, indicating discursive propaganda with the intention of creating media consensus within public opinion. Rivus project manager Sorin Guttman stated that the project "adds 14 hectares to the city, which until now were inaccessible to the community" (Cîmpean, 2024). A press release stated the idea of "returning to the city a grey area that was previously completely inaccessible to the people of Cluj" (News.ro, 2024). These were reported in the media as "returning 14 hectares of former industrial land to the city" in publications such as Ziarul Financiar, Forbes, Hotnews, Romania24, Radio Cluj (Agenda Construcțiilor, 2025; Alecu, 2024; Cluj24, 2024; HotNews, 2024; Ionescu, 2024; Media 9, 2024; Romania24, 2024; Șuşanu, 2024; Turda Info, 2025; Turp, 2024b).

In the meantime, local voices from Cluj speaking out against Rivus are being silenced or ignored by the authorities, maintaining the city's pro-free market, anti-communist status quo, where there is a lack of interest from the authorities and submission to private capital. Rivus has sparked numerous reactions and criticism among activists, experts, and residents of the municipality, ranging from the failure to meet the minimum 30% green space requirement in the General Urban Plan (Transilvania Press, 2024), which is being covered by calculating green spaces over the underground, to the pollution generated by the demolition of the former industrial platform, the impact on the biodiversity along the Someș River, and the traffic that will be generated by the complex's operation (Gizdavu, 2025). Furthermore, issues raised also included gentrification (ibid), the rising cost of living in the city, particularly housing prices, as well as the inaccessibility of spaces within the complex for all citizens, given the luxurious nature promoted by the project and the type of culture and art accepted and promoted within the complex.

Despite the existence of critics from the Cluj community, the media is actively participating in the media consensus surrounding the project, motivated by the massive investment of capital in Cluj, as well as by the power and influence of neoliberal economic actors. Simultaneously, the Cluj-Napoca City Hall is becoming a private actor, offering preferential treatment and prioritizing private investors. The manufactured consent in relation to the Rivus project, as well as the positioning of the local administration, led to the exclusion of a significant number of people from the Iris area, by replacing former existing

opportunities and services with ones that are inaccessible to those who do not belong to the middle class. Consequently, the Rivus project not only changes public opinion and attitude toward urban regeneration processes, but also toward the middle-class s imagination and dream.

## Methodology

Our research focuses on how urban regeneration projects in Cluj-Napoca and their communication strategies contribute to the consolidation of a middle-class imaginary. We chose the Rivus project initiated by IULIUS and Atterbury Europe as the research topic as it is the largest urban regeneration project in Romania, located on the former Carbochim industrial platform. It is described as “the mixed project with the greatest functional diversity in Romania” (Rivus, 2024c). Our research focuses on the ways in which the middle-class imaginary is consolidated and reinforced on social media platforms through manufacturing consent, starting from the following research question (RQ): “How does the Rivus project contribute to the consolidation of a middle-class imaginary in Cluj-Napoca through its social media communication?”.

To answer this, we used content analysis as a research method, tracking a total of 145 materials posted on the Instagram page of the real estate project (@rivus) over the course of 17 months, specifically those posted between August 2023 and December 2024. We chose to limit ourselves to the Instagram platform because most of the posts made by the communication team of the Rivus project are identical regardless of the platform. Based on the existing research on the subject, we created the analysis grid through which we observed the following variables related to the communication of Rivus in the social media space: nature, cultural identity, practicability, unity, work, and innovation.

The “nature” variable was coded as present in the following circumstances: a) the mention of words symbolizing nature, such as “trees”, “greenery”, “garden”, etc., in the text, and b) the visual representation of nature. The “cultural identity” dimension was coded as present if: a) the material contains words like “Cluj”, “Cluj-Napoca”, “from Cluj”, etc., and b) the visual representation of the city. Regarding the dimension of “practicality”, it was coded as present in the context where, regardless of the form of communication, the project was presented as offering something practical. The unity variable was coded as present when the material transmits, regardless of form, directly or indirectly, that the project provides unity, for example, the existence of shared spaces. The variable “work” was positively coded in the following scenarios: a) terms like “labor”, “work”, or similar forms are mentioned in writing, b) terms like

entrepreneurship” are mentioned at the text level, c) labor is visually represented by an office, laptop, construction site, etc. The “innovation” variable was coded as present in the visual representation or through text of a space, object, or action that was innovated by the Rivus intervention.

## **Results and discussions**

### ***Nature***

Nature, within the context of gentrification and urban development projects, is more than just a form of urban design. It becomes a symbolic tool that helps sell and propose a particular version of the good life associated with middle-class aspirations. In addition, nature is used in the dream narrative of the middle class as a symbol of escapism, control, and self-care (Zukin, 2014). More than half of the materials investigated ( $\approx$  approximately 65%,  $n = 94$ ) use nature as a means to promote the Rivus project. In most of the materials analyzed, nature is carefully curated, “wild” nature being transformed into a domesticated, tidy, and consumable nature. This phenomenon reflects what Zukin (1991) calls the “aestheticization of everyday life”. Some examples of the practice of manufacturing or “training” of nature in the urban regeneration project are project renderings that show structured, well-defined, and arranged green areas. We can find the following quotes that signal the curating of nature in the project: “This process involves the conversion of abandoned industrial spaces, the arrangement of green spaces, as well as encouraging entrepreneurship and local creativity.”, and “Parks and green areas are not just an aesthetic addition, but an extension of healthy lifestyle.”.

We observe in the Rivus materials how nature is reimagined and commodified to align itself with the aspirations and imagery of the middle class. Additional examples illustrating the nature function in the project are “Green as far as the eyes can see (...) Quiet (...) An oasis of tranquility in the nursery”, “The 5.2 hectares of green spaces will be an oasis of tranquility and relaxation.”, “(...) this space becomes an oasis of tranquility, with the sound of flowing water and the beauty of nature around.”, and “(...) turn the Someș bank into an urban refuge.”.

Related to gentrification-based urban developments, nature often plays a major and ideologically charged role, being political and interconnected with the dream of the middle class (Zukin, 1991; Zukin, 2014). In the case of Rivus, the project actively builds a narrative in which nature is central to a “good life”, marked by balance and health. Representation leads to the justification of the gentrification process and the creation and propagation of the dream of the middle class.

### ***Practicability***

In urban sociology, practicability refers to how space, time, and daily routine are organized to allow for the most comfortable and obstacle-free life with effective mobility, reduced stress, and maximized comfort (De Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 2013). This concept is not neutral or universal, but reflects middle-class priorities such as predictability and time management, functional aesthetics, quick access to various facilities or services, and urban dynamics that are ordered and goal-oriented. The Rivus project's complex will include facilities such as 400 stores and a Fresh Market, advertised in various forms, making the number of promotional materials emphasizing the project's practicability significant ( $\approx 39\%$ ,  $n=56$ ). Part of the examples are: Educational, sports, cultural and entertainment activities for families with children and adolescents are at the heart of the project", [Rivus] Is a combination of efficiency, fun, relaxation and time for oneself", Rivus combines refinement and functionality in a modern and sophisticated space.", and The project is bike friendly, so you can explore the urban garden on two wheels or go to the mall for a shopping session."

In our analysis, we noticed that Rivus often calls for accessibility and social inclusion as key points of the project, found the above-mentioned in quotes, such as: in a part of Cluj rediscovered, inclusive and accessible to all." and The former Carbochim industrial platform will be the place where innovation will meet nature and create a space for the whole community.". From the way in which accessibility and social inclusion are used in the given context, we infer that these concepts do not refer to the true definition of terms, but to a variant that applies to a specific group of middle-class people who can afford certain services and opportunities offered by the project. Approaching the terms of accessibility and social inclusion from a perspective aimed at the forefront of the middle class has the effect of strengthening both the imagination of the middle class and the manufacture of consent in relation to the project.

### ***Cultural identity***

Developers of gentrification projects, especially those who build in post-socialist spaces, sell more than just real estate. They conceive and promote a specific image of prosperity, define what a good and valuable life looks like, and sketch what kind of people have access to live in specific spaces, all of which are based on the cultural identity of the space (Sykora & Bouzarovski, 2012). Based on the literature at the beginning of the study, we notice that the city of

Cluj-Napoca is associated with values such as education, entrepreneurship, innovation, and development. Thus, the culture and cultural identity of the city reflect the middle class and intertwine with its imaginary. Consequently, the gentrification of the city also proposes an ideological transformation, in which the identity and lifestyle of the middle class are fabricated as part of urbanism.

In the case of Rivus, the Cluj cultural identity plays a vital role in how they promote the project and the values behind it. All analyzed materials mention the city in any way (100%, n=145), either by terms such as “Cluj-Napoca” and “from Cluj-Napoca” [*clujeni*], or by (or together with) hashtags such as: #partedinCluj, #wearecluj, and #clujlife. The Rivus promotion evokes the identity of the city, while aligning with the values that constitute the identity itself. A few examples are: “Together we continue to build the story of Cluj.”, “We keep the identity of the place and offer it a new meaning that vibrates with the spirit of the Cluj-Napoca community.”, “For 16 years, we, IULIUS, have also been a Part of Cluj, and we want to continue the story, dictated by the voices of the Cluj community, where people have written chapters for the story of the city.”, and “Get ready to become part of the cultural story of the city!”.

### *Unity*

In Rivus's communication strategy, the element of unity plays a subtle but powerful role in building and legitimizing a specific vision of the middle-class dream in Cluj-Napoca. Although the spheres of cultural identity and unity may seem similar at first glance, they manifest differently in the urban regeneration project. The component of unity is present in more than a quarter of the materials analyzed ( $\approx 37\%$ , n=54), being promised and described by Rivus in one of two situations; it either alludes to the concept of a common goal around the same ideals through shared spaces or the real estate project begins to be humanized as an entity that actively participates in the community and has common goals with them. The second scenario is the most common one, Rivus being depicted as a dystopian member of the local community with a unique purpose: protecting the development and connection of others, sometimes taking on the role of community representative. Some of the examples are: “it is our turn to make the community happy through a new project.”, “The new project concept has at its core their people, desires, expectations, and passions.”, “Be part of the Rivus story, be part of Cluj!”, “Together, we create a warm and welcoming community.”, and “[Rivus] where family and friends come together for unforgettable moments.”.

The unity proposed by Rivus formulates a specific way of belonging, one that is educated, aspirational, and aligned with the city's values and the values of consumerism. This version of unity becomes a "cultural" glue for the current and emerging middle class. It is stated that the lifestyle proposed by the project is not limited only to material conditions, but also to belonging to a specific community of people, made up of people who share the same values, tastes, and aspirations. Rivus imagines a class-based community collective and its associated aspirations, suggesting that unity is only suitable for those who meet certain material and social conditions.

### ***Work***

The dream of the middle class is reinforced by the idea that the only barriers standing between individuals and achieving success are hard work and self-sufficiency, making the socio-economic, political, or cultural factors irrelevant in attaining this goal. In most cases, Rivus portrays work as a symbol of meritocracy. In the examined materials, work is present in less than a quarter of cases ( $\approx 17\%$ ,  $n=25$ ). There are two scenarios in which the project uses the work element: a) it emphasizes how Rivus facilitates an ideal work environment (a scenario used in the majority of circumstances), and b) it shows the level of labor resources that have been utilized towards the completion of the real estate project. Some examples meant to illustrate the first scenario are: "With the move of the Carbochim platform, came the modernization of the new platform (...) but also a more friendly workspace.", "This architectural gem will soon become a vibrant entrepreneurial hub, the place where ideas come to life and the future is being built.", "(...) vibrant entrepreneurial hub (...) these buildings will be revitalized to support creativity, innovation and collaboration.", and "(...) this space will become a place dedicated to new ideas and entrepreneurship.". For the second scenario, the quote "Before the holidays, everyone works hard, even the machines on the construction site!" and the multiple visual representations of the construction site are particularly noteworthy. As can be seen in the examples provided, white-collar workers are the central focus of the real estate project. In contrast, blue-collar workers are used as intermediaries who facilitate the lifestyle promised by Rivus to middle class white-collar workers.

In addition, the first scenario not only expresses a favorable work environment proposed by Rivus but also appropriates the values attached to labor through the middle class's perspective. The project manufactures consent for this appropriation and a distorted view of labor, while also presenting itself as a result of meritocracy, becoming, in its own way, an entrepreneur, innovating and providing opportunities for innovation.

## ***Innovation***

Similar to work, innovation in the middle-class imagination is connected to the ideal that any individual, regardless of the socio-economic, political, or cultural factors to which they are subjected, can create something innovative if they really want to and take concrete actions in that direction. In the context of the city of Cluj-Napoca, innovation is not only a signifier of hard work and success, but it is also a prominent pillar in Cluj-Napoca's brand. Thus, innovation and the process of working go beyond mere economic labels, as they are fundamentally ideologically loaded and contribute to the formation of socio-economic classes.

Innovation is a component repeatedly employed in the materials analyzed ( $\approx 64\%$ ,  $n=93$ ), urban regeneration being the central element through which the real estate project presents itself as an innovator. Some examples of the innovative character of the project are: "We give a new life to the Carbochim platform through an urban conversion project", "the old Carbochim arcade hall will be converted into a performing arts", "part of the history of Cluj by developing the largest investment in urban conversion in Romania.", "The IULIUS Project, Part of Cluj, will open a new chapter in the history of the city, transforming an industrial area into a vibrant hub of energy and innovation.", "The new project targets the Carbochim platform, which will become a major urban conversion project, landmark for the Romanian market.", "A reinvented space: Where only shades of grey and unforgettable stories remain, Rivus flourishes.", and "(...) bringing an innovative concept to RIVUS!".

Moreover, Rivus represents a global vision of modernism, one that aligns with the branding of the tech hub and the Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe, already associated with the city. This framing makes innovation more than a technical aspect, transforming it into a moral and inspiring characteristic. Therefore, for Rivus, innovation constitutes a symbolic tool used to build and legitimize a specific vision of urban life and the middle class.

## **Conclusions**

The present research studied themes related to the issues of gentrification, the middle class, neoliberal urban real estate and development, online promotion, and real estate investment in Cluj-Napoca, around the Rivus investment project. Starting from the research question (RQ), "How does the Rivus project contribute to the consolidation of a middle-class image in Cluj-Napoca through its social media communication?", the study used content analysis as a research method and the analysis grid as a tool, consisting of six relevant dimensions: nature, practicability, cultural identity, unity, work, and innovation.

The results indicate the use of key topics relevant to the middle class in Cluj, intended both to attract the Cluj audience and to create a good image in the community, utilizing manufactured consent in both mass media and social media communication. Nature (65%) becomes a symbol of escape, control, and self-care, commodified and domesticated to fit the ideal of the class imagination. Practicability (39%) indicates an appeal to accessibility and social inclusion through the project's facilities, paradoxically conditioned by belonging to the middle class. Cultural identity (100%) is found in all the Rivus posts analyzed, highlighting Rivus's identification with the city's values (entrepreneurship, education, innovation), and their use to ideologically transform the middle-class lifestyle. The unity (37%) refers to belonging to an educated and superior community of people with good material conditions, with Rivus even assuming the role of a member and representative of the community. Work (17%) is approached through a meritocratic lens and highlights the project's focus on the middle class and white-collar workers. Innovation (64%) is associated with the city brand and transforms value into a symbol used to legitimize a comfortable, luxurious, relaxed urban lifestyle.

Therefore, this study reveals how the Rivus urban regeneration project participates in the symbolic construction of a middle-class imaginary in Cluj-Napoca, transforming post-industrial space into a consumable vision of urban progress. By strategically appealing to nature, practicability, cultural identity, unity, work, and innovation, Rivus does more than just sell houses; it legitimizes class-based patterns of urban transformation. By unpacking these communication strategies, the present research contributes to a broader understanding of urban transformation, not only in its material state but also in its symbolic one.

The future perspective for the city of Cluj-Napoca is concerning, considering the numerous real estate investment projects and the risks associated with the city's accelerated gentrification. Consequently, the study urges a closer and more detailed examination of the ways in which projects, developers, and real estate agencies manufacture consent regarding the middle-class image and the gentrification process itself, especially in the context of former industrial sites. Additionally, we recommend that future research on this topic focus on the discourse of public authorities and the media subject to private capital.

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