

BOOK REVIEWS¹

***Locuințe pentru muncitori și funcționari. Casa Construcțiilor și parcelarea Vatra Luminoasă (1930-1949).* Andrei Răzvan Voinea, Irina Calota, Editura Asociația Zona, București 2021**

***Idealul locuirii bucureștene: familia cu casă și grădină. Parcelările Societății Comunale pentru Locuințe ieftine - București (1908-1948),* Andrei Răzvan Voinea, Editura Asociația Zona, București 2018**

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'A suitable model for the Romanian lifestyle: the family with a house and garden' (2018) by Andrei Răzvan Voinea is a remarkable study that documents the activity of the 'Municipal Company for Low-cost Housing' over four decades and focuses on the attempts of local authorities to solve the housing crisis that emerged in Bucharest at the beginning of the XXth century. At that time the city underwent a growing industrialization process and generated a vast influx of population from the rural hinterlands that were integrated into the industrial economy of the city. We know for example from a study - 'Pulmonary tuberculosis among the working class in our country', written in 1907 by Ecaterina Arbore, an important socialist activist and healthcare specialist, that the living conditions of the people employed in the capitalist industries were extremely poor and that the workers were exposed to dangerous hazards both inside and outside the factories.

This book documents the poor health condition of workers in Bucharest at the beginning of the century and the relationship existing between the high morbidity rate and their impoverished houses. The author shows through the analysis of various medical reports, news-papers, books written in that period, etc. how gradually a social and medical expertise emerged that was increasingly advocating for the construction of affordable housing as a tool to address these complex social problems. The 'Municipal Company for Low-cost Housing'

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appeared as result of this growing concern for the health-care and housing of poor workers. It managed to build over 4.000 homes spread in 25 housing estates and it initiated a vast scale process of urban-planning in Bucharest. The managers of this company were connected to similar projects in Europe and were taking part in various international congresses where new architectural concepts were discussed - among them the idea of a city-garden for workers that could both provide for affordable homes and a healthy environment. The study analyses in a very meticulous way the main actors involved in the articulation of these social policies - workers, medics, engineers, architects and politicians - and the role each played in actually implementing the project. The wonderful research behind this study gives the reader a great insight into the problematic social world of the interwar period and the way authorities and specialists dealt with the issue of housing and class-formation.

After a careful examination of more than 2000 wedding records of people living in these lotissements and several interviews with the current inhabitants, the author is able to show in a very clear manner that the 'Municipal Company for Low-cost Housing' failed in achieving the goals of their founding charter and did not manage to generate housing for poor workers, neither did they improved substantially the lives of the people living in slums, whose dramatic health conditions triggered this project in the first place. An impressive number of houses were in fact allocated to the middle class. Office-clerks, professors, officers in the army, middle managers, etc. were among the beneficiaries of these subsidized houses. This argument is important because it reveals that even the very weak forms of welfare-policies that existed during the inter-war period were in fact diverted towards the middle-class. The author shows how this issue was publicly debated and the criticism it generated on behalf of the socialist press that was deeply concerned with how the capitalist state reproduced its privileges and exploited the working-class.

Also, it is very interesting to follow the debate around the political implications of the 'city-garden' and the way the planners sought to avoid through this type of architecture the formation of vast agglomeration of workers. This is mainly why the solution of appartement buildings seemed a bit dangerous: it created the pre-condition for a communist ideology to spread much swifter among workers, according to city-planners. The author alludes to Foucault's bio-political studies and urban health policies and interrogates the usefulness of these housing projects: were they a strategy for the governmentalization of a growing and 'dangerous' urban population or did these policies truly sought to alleviate the dramatic social conditions of many workers? The author makes a strong case that during the inter-war period we need to connect the housing policies with specific interests of the governing structures. An important research

avenue that could be further explored (the author hints at this in the beginning of the book) is how the specific architecture, room arrangements, flows of space were designed in order to discipline a distinct type of citizenship. It encouraged the transition from an extended 'traditional' family to a 'modern' one and rationalized family activities in a certain manner that were suitable for the new urban life. It would be very interesting to go further with this analysis and analyse how the new architectural designs and policy of space structured new forms of social practices.

The architectural analysis of the lotissements planned and executed by the 'Municipal Company for Low-cost Housing' is compelling, but what makes this research very relevant is the wonderful reconstruction of the social history of these urban areas and the insight it provides into all the debates existing within the local administration regarding these projects. The book has appeared in a very good graphic form with many vintage and contemporary photographs, illustrations, architectural plans and original posters which enable the reader to understand better how this housing project was actually developed. In addition to being a very rigorous researcher, the author has also the ability to narrate the architectural transformation of these spaces and show how valuable these projects are in terms of patrimonial heritage.

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'Housing for workers and civil servants. The Construction Company and the Vatra Luminoasă lotissement' (2021) is the second book published by Studio Zona and is authored by Andrei Razvan Voinea and Irina Calota. The book focuses on another social housing project, called 'Vatra Luminoasă', implemented during the interwar period in Bucharest by a state company (Casa Construcțiilor) which was established in 1930. This study is important because it focuses on a housing project that emerged as a result of the pressure exerted by the growing number of workers and socialist activists who lived in very poor conditions in the capital of Romania. Similar to the previous housing company analysed by Andrei Răzvan Voinea, this one was as well designed to generate affordable houses, but it failed to do so. In this case it is interesting to follow the various ideological narratives that drove the implementation of this project, from a right-wing eugenic emphasis on enabling a clean and sanitary environment for building a nation to a left-wing emphasis on the social rights of the working-class.

This case-study is also relevant because it sheds new light on an important debate that existed among inter-war Romanian leftist movements, which persists up to this day, that between moderate Austro-Hungarian socialists that wanted a gradual transition from capitalism to socialism and radical Bolshevik socialists that aimed not at transforming the system from within, but at revolutionary action. The authors show how this housing project emerged as a means to pacify socialist movements through building affordable houses for both manual workers and office-clerks, but also through co-opting socialist leaders in working in the state company that was in charge with the implementation of this housing project. The moderate socialist faction has seen this as an opportunity for the socialist leadership to gain institutional expertise regarding how the system was working, which could become instrumental for future socialist governments. But this involved collaborating with nationalist and pro-capitalist parties and so generated a lot of criticism on behalf of the other more radical socialist factions. With historical hindsight, we have now a better perspective on the limited impact the Austro-Hungarian socialists had on improving the worker's housing conditions in their collaboration with the political and economic establishment.

The book written by Andrei Răzvan Voinea and Irina Calota provides a very well documented insight into the administrative difficulties this housing project encountered and the different levels of political decisions to which each phase of the project had to be submitted. This brings an important critical contribution to the study of the Romanian administrative system during the interwar period, and it allows us to have glimpse into an area that was little researched in the Romanian social history, namely that of bureaucratic formations of the inter-war State and the way in which welfare institutions did actually function. Also, the research focuses on the architectural debates (neo-Romanian or Modernist) regarding how to design and build this neighbourhood and discusses the genealogies of this housing project and its roots in similar projects from Austria, where the socialist movement managed to generate an impressive amount of housing projects.

The last chapter of the book focuses on the people that received houses in this neighbourhood and the various leftist leaders that benefited from these generous social policies. This has a double function in the overall argument of the book. The first one is to show that socialist leaders were also by-passing legal procedures and waiting-lists and that there existed an informal mechanism of distributing the resources of the state to those close to the power-structures. This is important because it gives one possible explanation for why both housing-projects presented in these books failed to be allocated mostly to workers, as these projects were originally indented, and how was it possible for them to be

appropriated by the middle class. The second one is to present a small segment of the social history of this neighbourhood and the role it played in various events that were important for socialist parties: starting with the formation of coalition of parties that opposed the incumbent fascist party, continuing with the arrest of the head of the government and Nazi-ally, Ion Antonescu, and finishing with inauguration of a building of apartments for the workers of former Malaxa factory which inaugurates a new strategy of social housing which will be developed by the Workers' Party / Communist Party in the coming decades. All these events took place in the 'Vatra Luminoasă' neighbourhood and are meant to show that this area played an important role for the socialist movement. This argument of the book could have benefited from a more in-depth approach, as it stands the evidence relies mainly on outstanding events and nominal mentioning of some of the socialists that lived there. To what extent did the housing project from 'Vatra Luminoasă' played an important role in the debates, plans and strategies of housing policies drafted within the socialist movement? Was this seen as something that could be replicated by a possible socialist government? Was the expertise accumulated here in anyway used in the housing projects that the communist regime later implemented?

The authors rely in their work on diaries, memories, photo-archives, city-council minutes and a vast quantity of archival documents and try to reconstruct the social conditions and significant events that took place in the 'Vatra Luminoasă' neighbourhood. One interesting case-study is that of Ioan Hudiță, who was a university professor and had an important position in the National Peasant Party and was among the people that received very easily through his connection a house in this beautiful neighbourhood. The authors reconstruct from his diaries not only the special arrangements that were made for him by his friends working in the ministry, but also his thoughts, emotions and memories related to moving to this new neighbourhood and the way this new social space was experienced by the middle class. This adds to the complexity of this insightful social history.

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Both of these studies are important because they enable us to analyse in a longer time-framework the issue of social housing and compare the capitalist regime of welfare policies with the socialist one and the impact this had on the working-class. From 1918 to 1945 we have three decades of capitalist development in greater Romania that aimed to enhance the living conditions of a very precarious working-class. This period was followed by four

decades of socialist state planning which had a tremendous impact on housing; the various communist governments had as one of their main priorities building as many apartments for the working-class as possible. The post-socialist period inaugurated a new stage in terms of housing policies: the emergent capitalist state gradually ceased to be involved in this sector and it gradually left the construction and distribution of housing to the market. This created the premises for housing to be transformed from a social right to a profitable commodity on which real estate entrepreneurs could cash in. The Romanian real-estate and construction sector became in the last decade also an important destination for foreign direct investments because of the high revenues these business sectors generated for trans-national capital.

The studies produced by Studio Zona are very relevant because they allow us to put in a wider perspective the issue of affordable housing and welfare policies. The period analysed by these two books reveal how in spite the good efforts of local and national state representatives during the interwar capitalist period, had a limited impact on solving the housing crisis that emerged during the industrialization of Romanian cities. Also, the studies show very well that most of these housing projects were diverted from their original purpose and were allocated to the middle-class, much as it happens today with the few state housing projects (ANL) that are developed.

In spite the fact that the socialist period is often ridiculed and criticized for its tedious and uniform architecture, we can see, in comparison with the period covered by these studies, how emancipatory they were in many regards. During four and half decades the socialist state built a great number of affordable apartments and distributed them to the working class. It generated also an economy that enabled decent wages and decent living standards for many poor workers. The socialist state-planning strived also for an integrative concept of living: kindergartens, schools, small recreational parks, playgrounds, gardens, shopping centres, etc. were a prerequisite for many of the neighbourhoods built during this period. These stands in stark contrast to the anarchic way of building during the post-socialist period in which no regards have been given to the social utilities and public spaces of the new neighbourhoods. During the early post-socialist period capitalist investors sought to maximize the revenues for each built square-meter and absorb the available space to build as much as private-use as possible, while leaving the public infrastructure to the decaying and bankrupt local state. The capitalist planning of the space becomes this way and extractive way of planning: the aim is to maximize the profit by selling private units to private users while externalizing the cost to public spending. The two books under review show that during the interwar period there was an effort to develop similar public facilities and institutions within the neighbourhoods. In the

case of 'Vatra Luminoasă' this was to a certain degree achieved, but in the case of the lotissements built by 'Construction Company' the social infrastructure became a constant problem. The biggest achievement of this period is the implementation of the garden-house concept which enabled each family to have a small garden which could be used either for recreational activities or, most of the time, as a resource for vegetables. In spite the anti-communist narrative that are informing some other studies on urban-planning, the socialist period tried to de-privatize and generalize these types of spaces and make them available for a wide public use, especially in its early stages of development. These commons are today under threat by an ever-growing capitalist real-estate sector and the private accumulation of space.

The books written by Andrei Răzvan Voinea and Irina Calota bring an important contribution to the history of planning and architecture in Romania. But even more than this, both books are an important contribution to social history of affordable housing and are very useful to sociologists and anthropologist that are researching present-day housing projects and the dynamics of real-estate capitalism.

