

Integrated development plans in Romania: pure formalities or tangible steps towards the design of a new culture of planning?

Main urban and territorial issues.

Romanian cities are experiencing a remarkable phase of transition. This passage can be seen under many viewpoints, the historical background is the change from a centrally-planned to a market-based economy. As this process of change started 18 years ago (with the Romanian revolution and the end of the Ceausescu regime), it still doesn't achieve that "good balance" providing quality of life and tangible example of sustainable development. Romania, among the eastern European countries, still presents substantive delay in many relevant fields. Cities lag behind in infrastructure, services, economy and environmental protection. The quality of life of Romanian citizens is still low under many aspects.

There are a number of factors contributing to the present state of art in the Romanian urbanism and in the way Romanian towns and cities developed during the last 18 years. "Among these factors the most significant are: pre-90's history – the communist regime, weakness of the public institutions and legal framework, education and mentalities, civic apathy, money supremacy and lack of professional deontology (which might be a result of all the other factors)." (Pascariu, G. 2008)

More specifically, it is to notice:

1. A weak planning system with an urgent need of innovative planning instruments (lack of suitable planning tool for managing urban transformations).
2. Political Agendas (at central and local level) that don't consider as crucial the urban questions.
3. A rare diffusion of strategic visioning among politicians and professionals in municipalities
4. Local government reforms in the country (decentralisation, devolution of power, and privatisation) not well defined and often in deadlocks.
5. A scarce effort in introducing more local autonomy, citizen participation and rebalancing of public and private sector roles.

In Romania the processes of urban, social and economical upgrading, already experienced in other CEE (Central Easter European) countries, is still in a not mature phase. Romania overstates with its GDP among the most dynamic economies of the EU, but the GDP's growth rate is decreasing: Economy remains fragile and the political class doesn't give, with its behaviours and choices, reassuring perspectives to investors.

The lack of a well structured system of governance is, furthermore, a great problem. NUTS II regions (eligible regions for EU cohesion policies) have just an administrative status and their representatives are not directly elected.



Nuts II regions in Romania, Source: Inforegio, http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/atlas2007/romania/index_en.htm

A region is constituted by a set of minor regions politically elected; this fact gives the idea of the difficulty to manage such administrative levels. The difficulties encountered in defining the regions have in the background the very complex history of this nation in the last century. Furthermore, questions connected to identity stand in the way of development policies. "The question of identity goes through the Romanian History, a land of great migrations, periphery of western and eastern empires (Roman, Byzantine, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Russian, and Sovietic). In Romania, as in other nations of Central Europe, the cultural identities are subject of continuous choices. Involved by unceasing streams of folks and cultures, [...] Romania is the result of their disintegration, the positive output of a difficult process and a partial integration (Cinà, G. 2005)." However, things are happening and urban transformations are visible. The problem is that these mutations don't respond to a well established perspective: cities strategies are often unclear and propose occasional planning solutions: "Still, after eighteen years of transition towards democracy, the Romanian decision makers do not understand that town planning is a powerful instrument and do not know how to use it for the benefit of their citizens. Most of the latest urban operation works referred to streets infrastructure and rehabilitation of some historical buildings /areas linked to significant electoral periods or to key international events. There is no real strategic thinking, visioning and planning (Pascariu, S. 2008)."

There are a number of major problems, among these it is worth remembering the high number of abandoned industrial areas (high degree of pollution in ground and water), the diffuse distribution of slums inhabited by Roma people all along the urban fringes and a great amount of rural villages without essential services and facilities.

It is possible to individuate three milestones in this last thirty years of Romanian town planning:

1. The last ten years of the socialist regime (principally important for the demolition of part of the historical centre of Bucharest – unique European capital damaged in a period of peace).
2. The post revolution phase, from the 1989 until the access to the European Union.
3. The current phase characterized by the access to the EU cohesion policy funds.

The first milestone is one of the darkest pages of the European town planning history and need a specific in-depth examination that is beyond the scope of this article. The current situation, third milestone, cannot be completely understood without considering another shady page of urbanism that is the *laissez faire* policies adopted in Romania after the 1989:

the second milestone. There has been in these last twenty years a full-blown plunder of Romanian cities. "The local public administrations were not prepared in 1990, to face the demand for expansion and reconstruction and are still unable to fight against speculative real estate development and protect the public interest. This state of art has been fed and encouraged, for the last eighteen years by an uncompleted and powerless legal system, which [...] allowed corruption from upper to lowest level to develop. Real estate "development" became quickly after 1990 a good and rapid way for some people to get rich [...]. The mechanism was simple and unstoppable in general: somebody with a certain influence and relationships was buying a smaller or larger agricultural plot at the edge of a city or town, or somewhere in the middle of nowhere and "transformed" it, by legal means in a built-up area. [...] In most of the cases, these transformations had nothing to do with a development strategy previously agreed by the local authority and by the community. During the last decades, in Romania planning was actually following facts and not the other way (Pascariu, G. 2008)."

The EU cohesion policy: cities as development and growth poles.

The EU 2007-2013 programming period for structural funds, third milestone, means in the Romanian context a very strong intervention on cities and territorial issues. In the rest of Europe, especially in the EU-15 area, the involvement of the Community in urban questions is experiencing the post-Urban phase. After two programming periods (1994-1999 and 2000-2006) characterized by Community Initiatives addressed to deprived neighbourhoods (Urban Pilot Projects, Urban I and Urban II), the EU is no playing in 2007-2013 a significative role in the realm of urban policies, even if for the first time there is a specific objective dedicated to territorial questions. In Romania, to the contrary, the single form of public policy oriented to cities is going to be financed through the structural funds. An entire axis of the ROP (Regional Operational Programme) is committed to investments in cities. The Romanian nation is going to invest in urban area 1,4 billions of euros in 2007-2013; to make a comparison it is worth remembering that the whole Urban II initiative, for all EU member states, amounted to 800 millions of Euros. Urban areas have been divided in two big sets: the development poles and the growth poles. Both the growth poles and the development poles have to prepare a strategic plan in order to access the EU financing. The key concept is the design of integrated development plans (*planuri integrate de dezvoltare urbană*) in urban areas. The main difference lies in the fact that the development poles are going to compete among theme in order to get the financing, the growth poles are granted for sure. It is unclear how the growth poles are going to be chosen. At the present, July 2008, the ROP axis 1 is the only one still to launch among all ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) axis and measures. One of the most difficult things to know is the number and the names of the cities that are going to become growth poles. This decision should be made by the Romanian Ministry of Development in accord with the European Commission, a number of different disaccording versions have been given. The Romanian politicians push in order to have a major number of poles, the EC wants to maintain this number close to few relevant cities. The major problem in this continuous redefinition of the game's rules is that the initial concept of realising integrated strategic plan, centred on urban regeneration approaches and area based initiative (the IC Urban methodology) is becoming a sort of optional. The Ministry push for a major redistribution of the funds, but this doesn't consider the added value of concentrating investments in the real growing urban areas: the behaviour of politics is obstructing a more strategic territorial approach for development. The structuring concept of the ROP/axis 1 requests to individuate in each growth pole a number of "individual projects" (one single project can be financed up to 45 millions Euros), these projects should be coherent within the framework of the IUDP (Integrated Urban Development Plan). The IUDP should be a sort of strategic plan for the cities and the respective metropolitan areas, it should systematize strategic visions for metropolitan areas and solve governance conflicts among the administrative levels. The major problem is that, considering the current state of the art, these IUDPs are just becoming a sort of adhesive that hold together lists of projects

which don't define any form of integration. Moreover, to find a sufficient number of projects having a feasibility study to put on the list is also a relevant difficulty. It is possible to speak about a Romanian paradox: a need of an urgent intervention on the urban areas, a good number of structure funds available for cities and the absence of capability in linking the opportunity and the need! The Romanian political and cultural inheritance is delaying the activation of a "govern of/for territory" that could give expression to cities. Because of the recent political and governmental systems, there is a tendency to centralize the decision-making processes. This inclination is slowing the enormous potentialities of the EU investment through structural funds, in other words it is creating inertia for the benefits of the cohesion policy in urban areas. Controversies and inefficiencies between central system and cities risk to open difficult conflicts to manage. These conflicts are probably going to determine the loss of EU funds. The Romanian planning system is still in definition/evolution, roles and tasks of regions, cities and ministry don't answer to a clear governance framework. Cities normally don't have strategic plans for development and the technical planning tools are just normative and usually don't help in defining a prioritization of projects to finance in the short-medium period through structural funds. This weakness typical of many cities characterize how critical and fragile is the enforcement of the principle of subsidiarity: the smallest competent authority (the local level) is often not able to face immediate needs and design a number of strategic choices for the future. One of the key problem is the difficulty, in this period of transition, to bring the process of decision near to the citizens.

Additionally, it is to consider that the Urban Community Initiatives, with their area based approach to urban regeneration, have been considered since the first steps of the ROP as a model to follow. At the present all indications coming out from the Urban experiences are not taken into account. The integrated territorial approach and is in the IUDPs not a main issue, the only important is to have list of projects ready to be financed. This axis 1 of the ROP has been very promising at its beginning, it seems now that every complex and refined process has become difficult to implement. Key concepts of town planning like integration, concentration have been completely forgotten. The main concern of politics is now to increase the number of growth pole (distributive policy) and elaborate plan for the entire area of the growth poles. The latter point would be not a bad idea if the integration and the design of a sound strategy could be an added value; unfortunately it has been simply meant as the possibility to locate projects everywhere in growth poles. A redistributive and balanced approach for such a specific axis addressed to cities seems to be not the right choice: it is actually the best way to avoid unprofitable choices. This will of making very permissive choices will damage an already compromise situation. The background of this operation in the Romanian cities is not so encouraging, there are serious urban problems triggering serious phenomenons of social exclusion. Pockets of urban poverty are sprawled both in urban and in rural areas. Among these situations of great poverty, it is extremely difficult the condition of the Roma settlements where children and adults often live in inhumane conditions: hundreds of hectares of settlements built with improper materials where thousands of persons live without documents in inadmissible hygienic conditions.

Conclusions

In Romania there are serious urban questions to face, it exists the possibility to use a relevant amount of EU funds to begin to solve these problems, but it lacks the link between opportunity and need.

This opportunity should be used, at least under three aspects:

1. Facing the urban emergencies (socio-cultural, environmental and economical)
2. To redesign the planning system (e.g. bringing innovation in the classical planning tools and enriching these with new ones addressed to manage and to rule the role of public-private partnerships in urban projects)

3. To promote and sustain the design of real strategic plans in the Romanian cities (e.g. to look for real integration in the axis 1 IUDPs is a necessary step in order to shape concrete visions for future development)

This missing link is due to diverse reasons, among these:

1. A planning system based on weak, anachronistic and too normative tools
2. The lack of a mature system for governance: what are the tasks of the different administrative levels and how do they interact?
3. The scarce planning capabilities of many municipalities and the uncontrolled dissemination of building permits.
4. The improper and unjustified delays created by the central level in order to launch the guidelines for the axis 1; additionally the extreme simplifications introduced in the methodology of implementation of the IUDPs both for growth poles and development poles.
5. The urban question seems to be not priority in the political agenda

Many Romanian cities are in difficult conditions. In many neighbourhoods lack the basic infrastructures. These cities suffer the absence of interventions (buildings, public space, and infrastructure) and maintenance in the course of time. It is suffering the city of the late XIX century with its splendid *Jugendstil* villas and buildings, they hidden behind their magnificence broken windows and crumbling plaster. Hybrid and exclusive public spaces, mixing rationalist fountains and other objects in Soviet style with classical gardens and spaces designed following classicistic design, suffer the lack of safeguarding. The *blocs* resist and permit to many Rumanians the access to the ownership of the house, but many of them need urgently refurbishment both in basic infrastructures and in outward appearance. Finally, the new growing city defined by the skyscrapers of banks, insurances and real estate firms, all these buildings share the same characteristics: irrelevant and usual, from the architectural point of view, objects of glass and steel. These buildings disrespectfully cut the city fabric not considering urban plots and *modulor* of pre-existing neighbourhoods. Many new neighbourhoods have been realised for the new richest persons, these are classical gated communities. They advice us about the new Romanian society, that is with a restricted middle class. Cities in which individual desires shape urban forms and behaviours, and actually the possibility to act in this way give us the sense of a nation still in full transition.

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