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Home and Families in Communist Romania

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DURING THE past few decades the Romanian communist society has been evaluated from different angles, in an attempt to understand and explain how the people lived in socialism. Most of the studies were written in a comparative way: communism versus postcommunism,¹ continuity and change,² old habits, new morals and so on. The massive changes registered at the level of population structure and of the way of life, brought about by industrialization and forced urbanization, led to a vast project of housing construction for the working people in towns and villages. Blocks of flats were the *pièce de résistance* of the golden age, making possible the gigantic project of the country's industrialization. These blocks housed wave after wave of workers, most of them landless peasants who had been displaced from villages and relocated into urban spaces, in their pursuit of a new livelihood or way of life.

It is no news that traditional rural Romanian housing, specific to ordinary people, has been characterized by poverty, overcrowding, and squalor. Irrespective of the ideological over-

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tones of the discourse they adopted, the sanitation reports of the late 19th century showed Romania as a country that was steeped in poverty, inhabited by people who did not value the comfort of a home, content with having a roof over their heads, be it only a hovel, with a bowl of food and a few rags to cover their bodies.³ According to Constantin Bărbulescu, living in overcrowded conditions, in a hovel or in a single room, appears to have represented “a genuine structure of civilization that would hardly be displaced by World War I.”⁴ Even if the dwelling had several rooms, the peasants would only use one, for cooking, sleeping, and making love! They were all huddled together, as attested by a report of the year 1906, which found that at the turn of the 20th century, 82.9% of peasant families lived, cooked and slept in a single room!⁵ After the world conflagration, during the interwar period, probably in line with the new habits acquired in towns, houses partially changed their appearance, as Ioan Scurtu shows in his book dedicated to daily life in interwar Romania.⁶ In 1930, according to the Encyclopedia of Romania, the average number of persons per inhabited building was 4.5 in the rural areas. In other words, the 14,420,718 individuals living in the countryside dwelled in 3,232,434 buildings. The largest congestion continued to be registered in Dobruja, with 5.3 people per house, while in Banat the average was 4.1, followed by Bukovina and Oltenia, with an average of 4.2 persons per building.⁷

An East-European Model of Habitation

AFTER 1990, western historiography brought into discussion an “East-European” model of habitation.⁸ Although Romania does not feature among the countries whose systems of transition to private ownership in the 1980s have been analyzed (Germany, Hungary, Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria), I believe that the elements associated with this pattern are also found, with minor differences, in the Romanian case. According to the theoretical model launched by these theorists, it was a political culture of the collectivist type that gave rise, in the first place, to systems of habitation which, in short, had the following characteristics:

1. the state was the owner and distributor thereof, which meant that homes were built and owned by the state, which distributed them according to necessities (also defined by the state);
2. the centralized planning of production (any decision pertaining to housing was taken at the central level);
3. utilities were free of charge during the period of habitation;

4. the exclusion of market and private property mechanisms—central planning was intended as an egalitarian mechanism for resource allocation, and in order for this to work, the market economy had to be non-existent.

As can be seen, in this model the former socialist states are presented as a monolithic group in which decision making was strongly centralized, as the state was the sole authority capable of solving the problem of housing construction and allocation. Housing and habitation were guaranteed by law and considered, in terms of price and availability,⁹ universal—everyone, regardless of their income, had to have a home, a desideratum that was put into practice: this explains the very high percentage of home ownership in Romania as compared with other states in Europe. A comparative situation from 1996 shows that, unlike the 50% that was specific of most European countries, Romanians owned their homes in 97% of cases.¹⁰

The same authors who have set forth the model of East-European habitation have identified two ways whereby one could get hold of a home: on the one hand, the official, party channel, through which the “beneficiary” of the system or, in other words, any individual who signed up as a member of the party organization and of the trade union automatically also filed an application for housing and, on the other hand, the way out (*exit*, in the original theory), understood as an orientation towards the private sector, whatever that may have meant during the years of socialism.

In Romania, this model did not work exactly the same as it did in the bloc of states included in the aforementioned analysis. The private sector was tolerated after 1960 and then encouraged by the state (Law 26/1966), for reasons that pertained both to financial interests—providing the population with incentives towards the building of dwellings, thus stimulating the use of personal funds—and, especially, to the inability of the state to build at the pace and to the extent of the demand. The need for housing, also fuelled by unprecedented industrialization, played a particularly important role in defining the rapports between state and private ownership: the housing fund that had come into state ownership through the process of nationalization had ensured only part of the necessary housing resources; later, when demand exceeded supply and the authorities realized that it would be impossible to build housing for all the working people, various enterprises and, then, individuals were co-interested—the state providing them with credit facilities, as we shall see below.

There are a considerable number of studies that have analyzed the phenomenon of habitation in communist Romania, concluding that if not in equal, then in varying proportions, the exodus of former agricultural landowners from the villages led to a ruralization of towns. These individuals, who had been *disinherited* overnight, brought with them, to their new destinations, certain behav-

iors, attitudes and rules that were specific to the natural environments in which they had reached maturity. There have been documented diverse situations in which the peripheries of towns looked very much like villages, where, next to blocks of flats, there were jam-packed poultry cages, cattle stables, and vegetable gardens.¹¹ Cramping the dowry chest of farmsteads within the boundaries of communist sanitation standards gave rise to the most peculiar and unfortunate aspects of the Romanian socialist urban landscape.

Seen and analyzed postfactum, the displacement of traditional housing patterns and the massive relocation of the rural population to towns can be examined from at least four vantage points: the official standpoint (of the communist state, which developed systematization plans, generating and supporting the construction of apartment blocks that would provide “accommodation” to those transplanted into towns, to work in various factories and plants); the viewpoint of those who were dislocated (dispossessed peasants, who left the village for the city, young people who went there to study, etc., people for whom an *apartment* meant, at the time, a reachable target); the perspective of those included in the “urbanization plans”—those whose houses were to be demolished to make room for the future workers’ neighborhoods) and, finally, the perspective of those who did not experience communism first-hand but who, from the safe distance of the years that have lapsed since the fall of the regime, have launched the so-called theories of “the country’s ghettoization”!

Housing Standards and their Evolution

IN THE immediate aftermath of the war, the construction of individual houses and small-size blocks of flats continued in Romania. As a result of the massive process of internal migration caused by industrialization, the communist state began an extensive program of apartment block building, which, according to some authors, can be divided into three stages: 1948–1968, 1969–1979 and 1980–1989.¹² During the first stage, housing did not represent a priority issue for the new regime, most of the urban plans continuing those from the interwar period and envisaging the construction of low-height blocks of flats, with a customary 3-storey structure that could occasionally feature a maximum of 4 levels, with small back gardens and walkways between them, built within a system of districts.¹³ Plurifamilial homes were in fashion. After 1952, the construction of blocks of 6 or maximum 10 storeys began in Bucharest, under Ministerial Council Resolution no. 2448. The practice soon spread to all major cities.

Specialists consider that apartment-block districts were the most successful socialist constructions, claiming, in support of this idea, that the architects of this period were, still, those who had built during the interwar period, and that the separation from the interwar, classicist city was not yet ostensive; as conclusive evidence, they cite the fact that these apartments were still in high demand.¹⁴

In 1962, the authorities took up from the Soviets the concept of micro-rayons, a concept that entailed housing facilities, public and social utilities, to which was added the easy access to industrial areas.¹⁵ Systematization sketches took the place of systematization plans, and the availability of nationalized land enabled the development of *savage* urbanism on the outskirts of towns and cities. These compounds of apartment blocks did not involve demolitions but exceeded the traditional confines of cities. Moreover, the year 1966 was a turning point in the history of Romanian housing construction, sanctioning the existence of privately owned apartments and the increased level of comfort they could offer. This was the “prevalently qualitative” period of housing construction.

Between 1950 and 1960, modular design still referred to various types of constructions: apartment blocks that could meet the “most urgent demands,” private houses, brick buildings, prefabricated buildings, etc. Two-bedroom apartments represented the symbol of the period; rarely were provisions made for the construction of apartments with three or more rooms. The design of prefab apartments strictly complied with regulations governing habitable space, so that the usable area would not exceed 38 sqm. In 1956, a two-room apartment looked like this: “Entrance hall, living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom and toilet. The hall is fitted with a recess for a coat stand, a large wardrobe and a small closet (for brooms), both built-in. The living room has a small balcony (a so-called French window) that lets in light and opens onto the surrounding natural landscape. This room can accommodate a dining table with chairs, a sofa (as an extra bed), a set of armchairs and a small chest of drawers. In the bedroom, in addition to the two beds, the bedside tables and the dressing table, there is also a crib and three wardrobes.”¹⁶

This apartment was supposed to meet the needs of a family with one or two small children, the two rooms being constructed and furnished “flawlessly.” By contrast, the kitchen and the dependencies left something to be desired, as the text reveals: “There is absolutely no pantry space and there is no room for a cupboard in the kitchen.”

After 1970, due to the inability of the state to continue building at the previous pace and prices, there occurred a transition to the system of housing construction based on the partnership between tenants and the cooperatives that had construction rights, with the aid of state loans, most of them granted with a guarantee from the company employing the loan applicant. After the entry into

force of Laws 4 and 5 of 1973, the state took up the annual construction of a set number of apartments, which it would subsequently rent, the rest being put up for sale, fostering thus the development of private property. Apartment prices had changed several times over the span of these 10 years, the selling price for a two-room, first category apartment reaching 98,000 lei in 1977. That same year, a one-room, 37-sqm apartment would sell for 63,300 lei, while a third category, 21-sqm flat was priced at 34,150 lei.¹⁷ This was the period in which blocks higher than 10 storeys were built and three-room apartments outnumbered those with two rooms in the total number of apartments that were built.

The third stage developed after 1980, when, given the decrease in spaces available for construction and the rising demand for housing, chaotic building with poor quality materials began. The “Investment Law” of 1980 (Law 9/1980) prohibited any deviation from the standard modular design of apartments. Apartment blocks cropped up wherever there was available space, including in the old city centers, much to the detriment of traditional housing restoration and historical center protection projects.

Mention should also be made of the fact that that during the first two stages, the state built relatively little from its own funds, an analysis conducted by Ștefan Noica demonstrating that, at least prior to 1965, these housing spaces had been built from private funds or with the money of the population. The explanation Noica provides is that those who had saved some money before the war, taking advantage of the facilities offered by the state in terms of credit, had built massively until the sixth decade.¹⁸ Between 1956 and 1960, there were constructed 757,000 homes from personal funds, predominantly in urban areas, compared to 104,000 homes built from the state fund. In the period 1966–1970, a balance was reached, with 333,000 homes from state funds and 315,000 from the funds of the population, while from 1971 to 1990, the contribution of the latter type of funds to housing construction registered a dramatic downfall. Between 1976 and 1980, 755,000 homes were built from the state fund and a mere 85,000 from private funds, construction from private funds declining to only 30,000 homes between 1986 and 1990.¹⁹

After the conversion of the former owners into tenants and the adoption of the Soviet architectural model (the “architecture of socialism,” designed to “alleviate the plight inherited from the bourgeois-landlord regime of exploitation”), the main concern of the state, which faced an ever growing demand for housing rentals, consisted in regulating the distribution and use of the habitable area. The first regulations were laid down under Decree no. 78 of 1952, whose provisions are detailed above.²⁰ As of this moment, the surface that a family of three could legally own was reduced to 24 sqm, to which, under Article 10, there could be added a bathroom, a kitchen and a toilet. These calculations included

both the actual rooms and the transition spaces (hallways and service rooms). The habitable area per person was established at 8 sqm and became a sanitary norm. Any surplus of space would draw the attention of those entitled by law to allocate housing and automatically became subject to a new distribution.

Decree no. 68 of 1975 established the habitable and usable area of apartments built after that date from state housing funds: a one-room apartment could have a maximum habitable area of 16–18 sqm, a two-room apartment could not exceed 28–30 sqm, and the surface of a three-room apartment went up to 40 sqm (the usable areas were 27–36 sqm in the first case, 47–51 sqm in the second and 60–65 sqm in the third case). Four and five-room apartments were more spacious, with usable areas of 77 and, respectively, 94 sqm.²¹ Privately owned dwellings, built with the help of loans from the state, had to comply with the ground-floor/first-floor principle and surfaces could be extended indefinitely.

In 1976, new housing prices were set, as were the standard finishings included in the price. For instance, for a two-room apartment with a maximum usable area of 55 sqm, a sale/purchase price of 98,760 lei was set. This was adjusted according to the construction material, the type of dwelling, the floor on which the flat was located, the degree of seismic risk in the area, etc.²² The standard amenities included in the price are probably well known to everyone who bought or lived in a modular apartment built after 1975. Let me repeat them here as they appear in the law: walls painted in watercolors, oil-based or alkyd paints for the carpentry, gridiron structures and radiators, 1.5 m-high tile plating in the bathroom and three rows of tiles for the kitchen backsplash, wood flooring or PVC carpets in the living room, terrazzo-floored staircases, bathrooms, toilets, kitchens, loggias and balconies, toilet fixtures: a 1,500 or 1,700 mm long bathtub, a 550–600 mm wide sink, a toilet, a shelf, a mirror, pegboard hooks, a towel rail and a toilet paper holder in the bathroom! In addition to the outlets for each room (double sockets in the bedroom), also provided were a mail box, pantry shelves, telephone and radio-TV appliances, as well as a lamp with a switch, in the bedroom! In three- and four-room apartments, there was an additional bathroom which, in five-room apartments, was fully equipped (if a scientific approach of the kind undertaken here were to permit the irony, we ought to say that the floor drain—a luxury habitation item under communism, according to Decree no. 447—could only be found in 5-room or larger apartments! Because the state thought of everything, each block was endowed with a launderette, which, in turn, was equipped with a washing trough, a soaking tub, a sink and a laundry boiling cauldron!).

A typical apartment had two rooms and annexes.

Beyond Theory, the Practice of Habitation

IT HAS often been said that the functions of housing were amputated in communism and reduced to that of rest and relaxation. Apartment block districts have been perceived as bedroom districts.²³ Miruna Stroe speaks about the dilemma of apartment construction under communism: architects had been conditioned to design exclusively modular housing in the design institutes²⁴ and precipitous industrialization put pressure on finding solutions for the “accommodation” of the successive waves of workers who were brought into towns.²⁵ A major fault line was widening between the architects’ solutions and the newcomers’ perception of these homes: on the one hand, architects ensured—after Soviet models, in the first instance—the minimum needs of the anonymous inhabitants, while these inhabitants had to adapt to a way of living that was radically different from the traditional one.²⁶ The result of this discrepancy between expectations and the actual situation was the adjustment and use of the living space according to the needs and possibilities of each and every one. In light of all the evidence available to me, I believe that the changes concerning habitation under communism could generically be expressed through the phrase *taking space into possession*, since the newcomers appropriated, “domesticated,” customized the standardized space. Marius Kivu provides several examples of the “personalization” or, as he calls it, the “individualization of the intimate space of an apartment”: decorating the walls with stucco, wainscoting or mimicking paneling by painting the walls with oil paint, painting doors in other colors, closing up the balconies, triple glazing the windows, etc. Moreover, padded entrance doors made an appearance as a way of flaunting one’s social status; in Kivu’s opinion, they were symbolically equivalent to the black Dacia car.

The census of 1966 had already evinced the ample dimensions of the Romanians’ relocation in towns and cities: over 60% of the respondents had been born in other places than that of residence and had moved to the city between 1950 and 1966. The 1977 census detected a “village-city” migration flow of 78.4%, the reverse, “city-village” flow being obviously much lower but not insignificant: 21.6%.

Homes and Housing in Communist Romania

A PREVIOUS RESEARCH, conducted on a sample of 1,082 individuals from urban and rural environments (based on questionnaires referring to the quality of life, circulated in 1980–1981) revealed that those who were

most willing to move, regardless of the environments, were the youth, which was only natural if we take into account all the arguments presented above!²⁷

How did these people live? It should be noted, above all, that according to the respondents' statements, 65% of these families consisted of parents and their children. This percentage remained essentially unchanged irrespective of the habitation area, the same proportion of nuclear families being registered in urban and rural milieus. At a general level, there were no significant differences in terms of the habitation regime, living in a house with a yard being preferred, at a difference of a few percentage points, to living in an apartment, in a block. When the geographical environment is introduced in the analysis, however, we find that a particular type of housing was largely characteristic of a particular type of environment. Living in a house was specific to rural areas (75.5% of the respondents stated that they lived in a house), but apartment blocks were not uncommon in this environment; 23.8% of the rural residents who filled in the questionnaires lived in apartment blocks at that time. Villa-type residences were encountered in only two cases. As expected, the majority of the people from towns and cities lived in blocks of flats, in a proportion of 62.8%, but houses with a yard also had a significant presence, 36.4% of the respondents stating that they lived in a house. In the urban environment, living in a villa applied to only 6 people.

Not surprisingly, the percentage of tenants who rented state- or privately-owned residences was higher than the percentage of those who owned a home. Nearly 65% of the respondents from the rural areas were self-avowed owners of their homes, while in cities private-owned property reached a rate of 40%. Tenants renting state-owned residences amounted to 53% of cases in the urban areas and to 25% in the rural areas, this gap being probably due to the availability of leasable state-owned property in towns and, especially, to the financially more advantageous conditions there, in the sense of lower rent. At the same time, given the circumstances of this period, what is noticeable is that the percentage of home ownership in the urban environment was relatively high. Unfortunately, we do not have data that might attest the manner of property acquisition and we cannot estimate how many of these homes were bought or inherited. However, considering the fact that of all the cities where the questionnaire was circulated, only Oradea was an urban center with a considerable tradition, we can advance the idea that some of this private property had been the result of intergenerational conveyance. The relation between the environment of origin, marital status and ownership status is very interesting; 66.7% of the married persons from the rural areas declared that they lived in a privately owned house, the unmarried and divorced individuals living in rentals. In urban areas, the proportion of married people with privately owned residences dropped to 40%;

60% lived in rental, mainly state-owned homes (53.2%). 56% of the divorced persons lived in rented apartments and 44% owned a home.

It is possible that single or divorced people who stated that they owned a home referred, in fact, to their parents' home, which they considered, according to older customs, their own personal property. For example, a young, 19-year-old female worker who reported that she owned a five-room house was one of the 5 respondents who declared that they had five or more rooms. It is unlikely that this was the *de jure* status, because the girl said that she lived with five people and that her monthly income ranged between 1,500 and 2,000 lei.

If we focus on the structure of the home, we find that, on average, the two-room apartment and houses with two or three rooms were typical of the period and of the persons included in this sample. In the rural environment, most houses had three rooms (39.4%), followed by houses with two rooms (31.7%). Four- and one-room houses were few—14 in the former case, 10 in the latter situation. Only five respondents said they lived in houses with more than five rooms and no villa was reported in the countryside. There were also apartment blocks in the rural areas, as a consequence of the systematization law: the professionals who lived in these rural blocks had been assigned, under governmental order, to fill various vacant positions in the area. Almost 60% of the apartments in the rural localities had two rooms, 25% were three-room apartments and only 15% were apartments with one room.

In towns and cities, habitation was concentrated in apartment blocks, but houses were also numerous: 449 respondents said they lived in an apartment block, whereas 258 declared they lived in a house with a yard. 49.3% of the people living in blocks occupied two-room apartments, 32.7% lived in three-room apartments, 10% in one-room apartments and only 7.8% in four-room apartments. A single respondent said that his family lived in more than five rooms, in a villa.

With regard to those who lived in a house in the urban areas, it may be stated that the population was concentrated in two- and three-room houses in relatively equal proportions, 37.6%, and that the number of those living in a single room was slightly higher than the number of those who occupied four rooms—12.9% as compared to 10.3%.

Overall, it appears that an increase in family size was not accompanied, as one might think, by an increase in living space; on the contrary, most of the families comprising more than five members were concentrated in two- or three-room dwellings, as were those consisting of two, three or four persons.

Housing Facilities

IT SHOULD be noted that the aim of the questionnaires distributed in 1980–1981 was to document the quality of life in Romania. To this end, the questionnaires also contained a series of questions regarding the quality of various goods, services, living conditions, etc. and the degree of satisfaction derived from them. Moreover, a set of questions about housing facilities allows us to assess the de facto situation in the year 1980.

More than half of the respondents were satisfied with the state of their dwellings. 10% believed that the state of their homes was neither good, nor bad, while 23% deemed it to be satisfactory. This response can be interpreted in two ways: positively and negatively. A research undertaken in 2009 on the problem of the elderly, in which I participated directly, revealed that the respondents perceived the positive overtones of the word “satisfactory” and, although in many situations the contrary was found to be the case, the interviewees declared themselves to be content, pleased that things were actually not worse.²⁸ Similarly, it may be ascertained that at least some of the respondents considered this positive nuance of meaning when they referred to the “satisfactory conditions” of their homes. I was interested in finding out whether there existed significant differences between male and female perceptions of home and what these differences were. It was surprising to find that male respondents positioned themselves, to a greater extent, on both sides of the hierarchy, for, compared to the women, there were both more men who were satisfied and more men who were dissatisfied with the state of their homes. More men than women reported that the state of their home was very poor, poor or relatively poor, and it was men again who were more satisfied with the state of their home: 264 men, compared to only 227 women, considered that their housing conditions were good; 25 men, compared to 19 women, deemed them to be excellent. Of course, the sample structure can also be invoked, since it consisted of 53.9% men, but we should note the intriguing difference of perception on their residence, which we cannot explain satisfactorily in the absence of additional data. Whereas for the positive values—good and very good, excellent—we could invoke the less domestically-bound nature of men and, hence, their lesser degree of involvement in house-related problems, which might have determined them to be content with less or not to be fully aware of the problems pertaining to their own home, we cannot invoke the same explanation for the significantly higher proportion of expressed dissatisfaction.

The degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with one’s home also depended on the manner of using the annexes. It is well known that the communal use of kitchens or bathrooms was one feature of life under communism. Even in major

urban centers, there were built 4-storey blocks, arranged around a courtyard, with 2 or 3 apartments per floor having access to a single bathroom.²⁹ Over 70% of those who answered this question used their own kitchen, 8.3% had no kitchen and 20.7% shared a kitchen with others. By contrast, the percentage of those who did not have a bathroom was more than double the percentage of those who did not have a kitchen: 20.7%. Corresponding to this situation, there were fewer people using a shared bathroom—17%, and of individuals having access to their own exclusive bathroom. Pantries, closets, balconies and basements were, in varying proportions, subject to different exploitation situations, as can be seen above. I attempted to discover the prevalence of the main annexes, the kitchen and the bathroom, according to the area of residence. The rural areas were under-represented in this sample, but we can get an idea regarding this matter. Kitchens were, to a greater extent, absent in the urban areas, the number and percentage of those in the villages who did not have a kitchen being very small. Moreover, the respondents from the countryside had kitchens for their exclusive use to a greater extent than the respondents from the cities. However, when it came to bathrooms, the situation was unfavorable to the village, to the rural environment, where 30% of the respondents did not have a bathroom, compared with the 20% who lacked this fundamental facility in cities.

A survey conducted in the late 1960s by the sociology laboratory affiliated to the Modular Construction Design Institute showed that practically no space was used exclusively for the purpose for which it had been designed: the kitchen served as a dining space and as a place for doing homework; the living room (dining room) could be transformed overnight into a bedroom; the bedroom served as a working room and so on.³⁰ In fact, in the period after 1980, given the worsening living standards, one of the annexes, the kitchen, was to concentrate the presence of the entire family and most of the activities carried out in the home. To a greater extent than the living room, the kitchen rallied together the family's daily manifestation of sociability.³¹

The research team also focused on the outfitting of the home with long-term housing facilities: a refrigerator, a washing machine, appliances (such as blenders, toasters), a radio and a TV set, a tape recorder, a cassette player, a record player, a telephone, a bicycle, a motorcycle, a car and, the last on the list, a library. In the latter case, the suggested response options were: up to 100 books, up to 1,000 books and over 1,000 books. Although the number of valid answers varied from case to case, it appears that the object most frequently present in the household was the TV set, followed by the radio, the refrigerator and the washing machine. Over 75% of those who answered this question said that they had a library, most of them a small library comprising up to 1,000 titles, about 25% having fewer than 1,000 volumes and only 39 people declaring that they

owned over 1,000 titles. Car ownership was reported in less than 30% of cases, attesting the fact that at that time cars still belonged to the category of luxury products.

IN CONCLUSION, it can be stated that, overall, despite the limitations and constraints imposed by the regime, people reported that they were satisfied with their homes, which they endeavored to outfit to the best possible degree of comfort. There were, of course, significant differences between homes in cities, mostly represented by apartment blocks, and those in villages, where ground-level houses remained the staple mode of habitation. For many of those who lived during the communist period, taking possession of an apartment in a block in the city was one of the signs of success in life, synonymous with climbing the social ladder. If the apartment was located in a famous city and in a good neighborhood, it was all the better for its owner. There were, however, huge discrepancies between those entitled to receive apartments: while many exceptions were made for those positioned at the top of the social hierarchy, both as regards the housing area and the facilities and the rent payment conditions, the people at the base of the pyramid had to accept whatever the system offered them, always cherishing the hope that something better would come their way. To end this study on the same paradoxical note, I should draw attention to the fact that demand for apartments built during the communist years still exceeds the demand for new constructions on the housing market. Despite their “matchbox” appearance, they are deemed by many buyers to have been built with higher-quality materials and, therefore, superior to the newer apartments. In addition to this, they have the extraordinary advantage of being situated in the central areas of the districts, even in the city centers, unlike the new districts that are being developed on the outskirts, in peri-urban areas. These are peripheries with changing boundaries, which have kept expanding since the 1950s. At one point or another, many of the current districts will have been born out of the dust-filled suburbs!



(Translated by CARMEN-VERONICA BORBÉLY)

Notes

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2. Luminița Dumănescu, “Consideration on the Process of Family Transformations in Communist Romania,” *Transylvanian Review* 21, Supplement 3 (2012): 558–568.

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17. A more detailed analysis of the evolution of house prices, of the normative regulations applicable in the field of housing construction and of the evolution of the number thereof between 1952 and 1989 in Noica, 125–150.
18. *Ibid.*, 140–141.
19. *Ibid.*, 141.
20. Decree 78/1952.
21. Decree 78, article 10.
22. State Council Decree no. 447/31 December 1976 governing the setting of reserve prices for real estate.
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24. The Modular Construction Design Institute operated throughout the communist period.
25. Miruna Stroe, “Aspecte comparate ale arhitecturii locuirii în fostele țări comuniste,” Ph.D. thesis, Ion Mincu University of Architecture, Bucharest, 2012.
26. *Ibid.*
27. The study is based on the interpretation of 1,082 questionnaires concerning the quality of life, part of a national survey carried out by the Romanian Academy in 1980 and 1981. Cătălin

Zamfir published in 1984 the results of the survey: indicators and sources of variation for the quality of life (in Romanian), based on the interpretation of 3,000 questionnaires. Those 1,082 questionnaires used to document the book Luminița Dumănescu, *Familia românească în comunism* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2012) were discovered in Cluj-Napoca and they have not been included in the Zamfir analyses.

28. Project “Situția vârstnicilor în România: Cazul Podișului Someșan,” implemented by the Center for Population Studies at the request of UNFPA Romania, 2009.
29. See Cesereanu, 33–55.
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Abstract

Home and Families in Communist Romania

Approaches to the subject of family life under communism cannot overlook the problem of housing and habitation during this period. During the early years of communism, a flat in a block, in the city, was the dream of all the young people who did not own anything. In the 1960s, these blocks gave many the possibility of having a home. Post factum, that is, after 1990, the opposite trend, of escape from such blocks, began to emerge and apartments built during communism began to be labeled as “matchboxes,” offering improper housing and living conditions. Notwithstanding all this, the ambivalence of Romanian society persists and is stronger than ever: a large part of the population seeking housing continues to prefer purchasing apartments in old apartment blocks, which, ironically or not, are considered to be qualitatively superior to the new ones, as builders have recently often compromised on minimum quality standards. How can this ambivalence be explained? Some possible answers can be found in by combining the historical sources with a survey carried by Romanian Academy in 1981–1982 in some Romanian cities and villages.

Keywords

families, communism, Romania, housing, habitation