

THE EVOLUTION OF CHROMATICS IN BUCHAREST SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY: BACKGROUND FOR DEVELOPING A COHERENT COLOUR CONCEPT

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Abstract

The nineteenth and the twentieth centuries have seen significant changes in the way of thinking and approaching the architectural and the urban space. Colour, in connection with the construction material of architecture, has undergone major transformations in turn. This article aims to investigate the role of colour in Romanian architecture, following the relationship between architecture and colour as reflected in the analysis of the Bucharest urban area, aiming, on the one hand, to establish the factors that influenced chromatic changes and, on the other hand, the determinations that may lie at the basis of the developing of a chromatically coherent urbanscape.

Keywords: urban colourscape, colour concept, urban space, chromatic evolution.

1. INTRODUCTION

The urbanism and the architecture of Bucharest have known since the second half of the 19th century, significant changes that marked the transition from the semi-rural status of the city to the urban one. The second half of the 20th century represented for Bucharest in particular a major and painful transformation: dozens of churches and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of houses were demolished in order to make room for the megalomaniac vision of the former communist leader Nicolae Ceausescu. The Revolution of 1989 was a liberation from the communist regime but, from the urban planning and from the architectural point of view, it was the beginning of a period characterized by a relative lack of rules regarding urbanism and architecture. These issues dramatically affect, especially in recent years, the chromatics of the buildings.

In this context, this article aims to investigate the chromatic transformations and proposing to detect the determining elements in order to trace the essential lines to obtain a coherent chromatic image of the city of Bucharest.

2. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CITY OF BUCHAREST

The documentary attestation of Bucharest dates from the year 1459, but the true origins of the city of Bucharest are not completely known. Some theories regarding the foundation of the city connect it with the story of the shepherd Bucur, the symbolic foundation of the center (Biciuşcă, 2000, p.27), while other theories associate the foundation of the city with Negru Vodă (Colfescu, 2001, p.6), Vlad Ţepeş (Mihăilescu, 2003, p.15) or with Mircea cel Bătrân (Mihăilescu, 2003, p.15).

Pănoiu (2011, p.14) quotes a letter sent in 1476 by the King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary to Pope Sixtus IV in which Bucharest was considered "the most powerful city in the country, strengthened by military artwork and other kind works". In 1659 it became the capital and the single royal residence (Pănoiu, 2011, p.15).

Located at the junction of several trade routes, the city of Bucharest, with a strong commercial character, develops gradually around the Princely Court, through successive additions (Majuru, 2003, p.8), becoming, to the mid of the 19th century "a big city where the urban image could not be observed because there wasn't one" (Potra, 1990, p.206), "nothing preconceived, predetermined or organized" (Cina, 2010, p.57). At the end of the 19th century, however, the principal axes and the street network of the modern city are already drawn.

Beginning with the second half of the 20th century the architecture of buildings changes, culminating in years '70-'80 who bring significant changes both in the architecture and in the street network, causing massive destruction of the traditional urban fabric.

3. BUCHAREST ARCHITECTURE AND CHROMATICS BETWEEN THE 19TH CENTURY AND THE PRESENT DAY

3.1. The 19th century

From the point of view of the 19th century architecture, there are two main directions: the first is represented by the desire of catching up the Western European culture and architecture, especially the French, that became possible on the one hand because of the Treaty of Adrianopol (1829) and of the Organic Regulation published in 1831, and on the other hand, due to the major changes in the Romanian society; the second direction, towards the end of the century, is represented by the desire of building a national identity (Zahariade, 2012, p.15).

Regarding the beginning of the century, the architecture of Bucharest has seen a huge opening towards the French architecture. The influences of the French academic architecture started to be strongly noticed particularly in the architecture and the decoration of buildings. Many architects, French or Romanian trained at Ecole de Beaux-Arts in Paris, designed a series of buildings, especially public buildings, in which the influences of French architecture are highly visible (figure 1). Cina (2011, pp.70-71) noted that "adherence to western architectural models turned into stylistic reproductions, pronounced ostentations of cultural belonging. [...] Emphasis on the decorative element resulted in an eclectic style (pompiere, deco) defined appropriately as French-Balkan." Even at the chromatic level it is visible this desire to align with the Western European architecture: it is used a large scale of pastel colours, the decorations are emphasized by contrast colour. It is a period when Western models are taken word-for-word, almost without any selection. Despite subsequent interventions (Communist era), Bucharest still retains examples of this stage of Romanian architecture.



Fig. 1. Historical centre of Bucharest - natural colours

The end of the century brings in the forefront a search of defining a national identity. It is the moment when a synthesis is done and a distillation process of the architecture occurred resulting in the appearance of the neo-Romanian style. Ion Mincu, the creator of this style will focus on the reinterpretation of the traditional folk architecture values, of the existing Eastern and Western influences in architecture as well as of the symbolic values of colours (figure 2). The new created style can be considered as a return to the real values of the Romanian architecture both in terms of style and colour.

From the point of view of the chromatics of buildings there could be noticed that during the 19th century, the dominant colours are the traditional ones, made with local materials, colours with a certain symbolic value. New colours associated with the new experienced architecture occur in the ambient colourscape without a major change of it.



Fig. 2. Roadside Buffet, arch. Ion Mincu. *The chromatics plays an important role in the neo-Romanian style, remembering the rural architecture and also the oriental influences*

3.2. The 20th century

In terms of architecture, Bucharest remains a mixture of styles (from that of the house at the periphery with strong influences of traditional folk architecture to that of the eclectic houses of landowners and men of substance). Dame (2007, p.97-98) notes for Bucharest, the colour of some existing homes in 1906 (yellow and blue-gray) referring to them as strange, sad or gloomy. The chromatics used for these houses, with no resonance with the traditional local one, leads to their treatment like 'foreign bodies'.

Early 20th century is marked by the neo-Romanian, but gradually the changes in the society generate the restart of a process for reconnection of the Romanian architecture with the Western one, namely with the Modern Movement. "In short, the birth of an artistic avant-garde, the evolution in building technologies and the changes in housing culture were the main factors in substituting historicist architecture with the modern one" (Cina, 2011, pp.122-123)

Chromatics returns to the forefront with the abolition of colours and dominance of white in association with the symbolic value given by the Modern Movement to this colour. Thus the Modern Movement brings in architecture a new thinking on buildings, cleaning their ornaments and colours (figure 3). In addition to concrete, the brick is used for houses, in particular to obtain a chromatic contrast.



Fig. 3. Examples of modernist architecture in Bucharest (left - Aro Building, arch. Horia Creangă; right - Apartment building, arch. Henry Stern)

The period up to the Second World War is very prolific in terms of construction. "Between the two World Wars, nearly all architects adopted modern languages that had often been crossbred with pre-modern ones, mixing neo-classic, neo-Romanian and art deco elements." (Cina, 2011, p.143)

In the years before the Second World War the architecture starts to be politically engaged and will continue to be from now until the end of the 20th century.

After the war, beginning with 1947 when Romania fell under the USSR domination, politics and therefore architecture change significantly: constructions could be mostly performed by the state. From the point of view of the architecture, up to the late 50s, it followed a period in which it was practiced the Stalinist architecture (Cina, 2011, p.212) or "socialist realism" (Zahariade, 2012, p.83). In terms of colour the buildings retain the previous features, but this time serving a political purpose (figure 4, 5).



Fig. 4. The House of the Free Press (formerly known as The House of Scântea, the communist party's newspaper), Stalinist architecture



Fig. 5. Bucureștii Noi District, Stalinist architecture of the '50s (thermal rehabilitated buildings - 2012)

The slight relaxation of the political situation of the 60s and the 70s years generated a more relaxed period also in terms of architecture, which practiced a "tutored modernism" (Zahariade, 2012, p.83).

The earthquake of 1977, devastating for Bucharest, gave to Ceausescu, the former Communist leader, an excuse to change significant parts of Bucharest urban fabric. Creating a national style becomes again an important issue, however, and especially from a political point of view. The House of the People and the entire Unirii boulevard (performed by destroying a significant part of the old urban fabric) had to be a representation of the national style which had to glorify the communist era and to validate it in architectural terms. In addition, under the guise of economic rationale (the increase of the number of inhabitants in Bucharest) the building of blocks of apartments intensifies, Bucharest became, from the chromatical point of view, a gray city (figure 6).

After the fall of communism the colour was the first which bursted (through the rehabilitation of houses' façades performed by individuals) and continues increasingly uncontrollable to this day.

Summarizing, we can say that in terms of colour the 20th century stands mostly under white and gray: the white of modernists and the gray of the communist blocks of flats. Although gray is a neutral colour, its dominance over the chromatic urbanscape is a negative characteristic, being associated particularly with the political domination of communism.



Fig. 6. The communist gray city

3.3. Present day

After the 1989 revolution, architecture began to catch up timidly the differences created by communism. Thus it began to line up with the international styles, materials and technologies both in the architecture of private and public buildings. At the chromatic level however this has turned into a continuous search for various colours as different from the previous unifying gray (figure 7, 8). Outdoor advertising in aggressive colours and using huge size billboards or meshes began to invade urban areas, to obscure buildings in the city so there are areas where you feel living inside a promotion (figure 9).



Fig. 7. The colours of the facades of buildings, after the fall of the communist regime



Fig. 8. The unregulated freedom of choosing colours in Bucharest

The highlight is the rehabilitation of the façades of communist blocks of flats. Here the freedom in choosing colours knew no bounds (figure 10). Colours like purple, orange, red, blue, yellow or deep green non-existing before in the Romanian chromaticscape gradually made way representing evidence of the owners' 'taste' and of the lack of interest for colour shown by authorities and professionals. The application of colour schemes seems to be drawn from a poster layout and the colours themselves are vivid, very strident, dizzying. The city began to look like a lady with improper and excessive make-up.

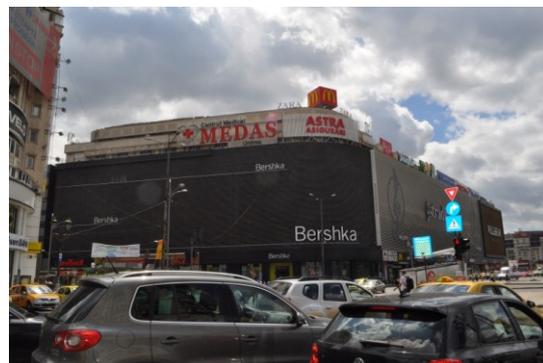


Fig. 9. The buildings act only as the support for huge billboards



Fig. 10. Rainbow chaotic chromatic rehabilitation of the communist blocks of flats

In the Romanian general legislative framework viewed in terms of chromatic ambient, provisions exist, albeit with certain omissions, which set some benchmarks to achieve a relatively consistent approach to the urban space. With regard to the specific framework, this is shaped to some extent but not enough, requiring additions. Moreover, in terms of colours of the buildings there are certain limitations on the use of colour, trying to keep them in the natural colors range, but unfortunately deviations (very many) are not penalized.

At the Romanian urbanscape level, the colour began to be considered as a problem, some local urban planning regulations suggesting the need of drawing up a chromatic study without specifying a methodology by which to achieve this study.

4. SURVEY RESULTS

These findings on the colourscape of Bucharest from the 19th century to the present day lead to some questions: what are the determinants factors of colour in terms of the urbanscape, which are the peoples' favorite colours for the buildings and, last but not least, if there is necessary a control or a coordination of the environmental chromatics.

To answer these questions, a survey was made on a number of 100 people of which 35% were architects and the rest public user of the urban space. This survey mainly investigated people's emotional relationship to buildings and to buildings' colours. The most important aspect is the dissatisfaction of the most people interviewed regarding the regulation of colour, examples raised being on the one hand, the new chromatics of the blocks of flats and, on the other hand, punctual examples of chromatics of buildings in Bucharest.

Although the removal of the obsolete gray existing so far is regarded as a positive gesture, the choosing of colours for the rehabilitation of the blocks of flats has been criticized. Regarding the applied colour schemes these were criticized especially by architects. However, some key elements have emerged from these responses: choosing colours with natural tones and, perhaps most importantly, the need for a coordination of chromatics at the urbanscape level in order to remove the unpleasant colour combinations. Concerning the chromatics as a whole, there can be extracted some factors considered to have a potential in determining it: historical and cultural factors (keeping the original colour in protected areas), economic factors (mainly with residential areas but with increased attention for the chromatic harmony) and representative factors (in public areas but with the same attention to chromatic harmony).

Attachment to a particular type of architecture (eclectic, neo-Romanian, modernism or contemporary architecture) varies among both architects and the unspecialized public. However, it can be seen a tendency of attachment to the contemporary architecture but with a high degree of attachment to neo-eclectic and neo-Romanian architecture.

There have been some reticence as regard to the imposition of a colour in residential areas but in terms of the possibility to choose, from a large number of colours, a colour for each dwelling, on the principles of chromatic harmony, has been accepted at a significant rate. Regarding the effective choice of colours (Figure 11) there is a tendency towards natural colours, predominantly to the light ones. The intense colours are preferred only punctually to highlight certain details and not as the main colours of the buildings.

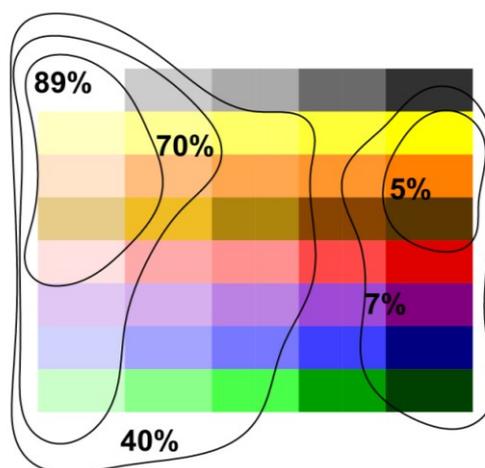


Fig. 11. The expressed preferences for colours of buildings (in percentages).

5. CONCLUSION. A POSSIBLE COHERENT COLOUR CONCEPT FOR BUCHAREST

We cannot speak of chromatics without its support layer, namely architecture. The evolution of architectural styles in direct connection with the evolution of the society and the political environment influenced also the chromatics. However it can be seen that in the case of Bucharest, there was a constant negotiation with the existing background.

The colours are in close contact with all the traditions and customs, while the materials used were mainly determined by the local characteristics. Thus local materials and pigments determined in the past the colour of the built landscape. In the 20th century, new materials, colours and techniques becoming available, the chromatic environmental appearance also changed. But when there were imported both styles and colours the reactions have swung between acceptance, ignoring and rejection.

It is noted that there is a certain cycle in terms of chromatics: there are moments when multiple colours are imported, then follows a period of filtration and of selection, and the selected colours are preferably used, afterwards the cycle is resumed (figure 12). This phenomenon is visible in the 19th century and until the beginning of the 21st century. The current phase is of massive import of colours, the selection and filtration of these imported colours is inevitable: the reactions of people (specialists or general public, user of the public space) began to be increasingly vocal. A selection is required.

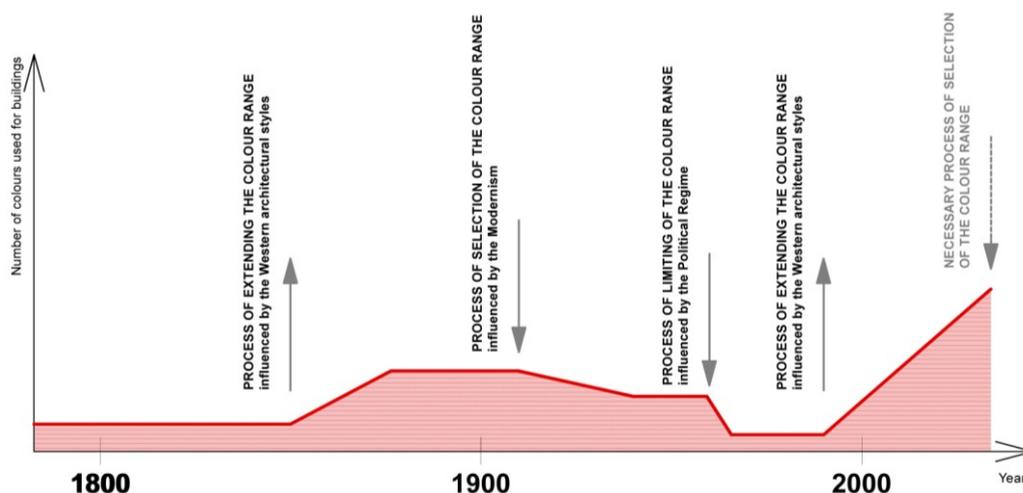


Fig. 12. The evolutive process of colours of buildings in Bucharest

From the analysis of the colours of the existing buildings, it has to be noted that the natural colours (various shades of white, light yellow, light pink, light brown etc.) are present in all studied architectural periods. This is a solid argument for establishing them as a range of colours preferred, over time, by the inhabitants.

How might be created a coherent chromatic concept for Bucharest?

Analysis of chromatic changes in the architecture and in the city as a whole in conjunction with the results of the survey shows that there is a dynamic in terms of colour. However for buildings the dominant colours are the natural ones with high and medium brightness. A detailed colour analysis is needed associated with a citywide colour strategy. Coherence and unity should not be understood as uniformity. Uniformity creates monotony, on the other hand the free choice of colours by every individual has the potential to create chromatic chaos. Factors with potential in determining the colour (historical, cultural, economical, of representation) highlighted by this survey must be considered when sketching the concept. A rigorous colour control at the urban level can be difficult to enforce and even rejected by the population. Creating more possibilities of choice of colours and shades may be the most suitable way.

A unified and coherent chromatic concept should be based on the laws of colour harmony.

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