

ROMANIA AT THE TIME OF CATHEDRALS: PROJECTS FOR THE ROMANIAN NATIONAL CATHEDRAL IN BUCHAREST

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Beside the Western world where we witness many secular functional conversions of worship places, countries which after 1989, came out of atheist communism are characterized by a fever of religious constructions, progressing eastwards, in post-Soviet space.

For numerous times, we already had the opportunity to ascertain that in the social domain, the third law of Mechanics is amended by human nature, in the sense that a force set in motion produces opposing reactions at least equal, if not greater. This is happening in Eastern countries that joined NATO and EU, where being considered somehow competitive to the new dominant ideology, religion used to be oppressed. As an uncle told me, in the 50's, it was obvious that Stalin's religious studies had left materialism as a *shell* (increasingly fragile over time, because of abandoning cybernetics, genetics or because of the individual cult development). This was filled out with the most flagrant idealism, in which the holy spirit was the outstanding party wisdom, the chosen people (the self-critic working class), the confession, the Saviour (the new man who could drag the society after him), the icons (portraits of beloved leaders), the Holy Tomb (politruks' mausoleum), the martyrs (underground militants) etc. Thus, it was natural for churches to be desacralized or even demolished and for the entire world to slant on the opposite side after the collapse of communist regime.

Romania is somehow exemplary, because, from the rural parish buildings and neighbourhood churches, up to large buildings (like bishop or metropolitan seat cathedrals), its whole territory covered with new churches that will long last, even only by virtue of materials used. Traditional oscillation between synchronism with the West and prothocronism requires mandatory solutions, because the initial fervour begins leaving place for anguishes when meeting pious fervour's materializations (including new diocesan cathedrals contests' consequences), in many architectural configurations that appear to exceed, even worse, the *Saint Supplice genre*. The country remains somehow atypical because it does not have, so far, a degree of "diversity" (in the *recent sense* not the common one), comparable with other countries, but this helps even to better see certain problems.

Compared to the modern times, looking forward to the new forms for moment contemporaneousness and universal divinity, our post-modern times (historicist and strictly beyond the current with the same name), raise the cultural identity question (more and more, including most young students, believing in a *National, or ethnic for the minorities, God*). In our opinion, there is also a question of replacement, between "the cultures war" with "the seduction by culture" - that we highlighted in the three great monotheisms' history. Unfortunately, Orthodox Greek-Oriental world severely amends this *seduction by culture*, because, on how "innovative" Byzantine architecture was in historical periods, combining *basilica*

*type with the rotunda, inventing domed basilica or the Greek cross and the three-lobed plans, on so "frozen" it appears today.*

Therefore, even if Romania is characterised by a great multiconfessionality and an open ecumenical attitude, top illustrated by Mircea Eliade, statistically the majority remains of Orthodox Byzantine rite and the idea of a new National/Nation's Cathedral revived. The idea is associated with birth time of the *national state* and some notable steps date from the interwar period, when the issue of transposing from small traditional buildings to adequate grater scale was already set.

Let us remember that F. Ll. Wright said he had chosen architecture after reading Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* chapter "This will kill that", that defines *the cathedral* as "a people's book"...

Let us not forget that the idea of *cathedral building* is often associated with redemption. It is the case of *Sacré-Cœur Basilica in Paris*, "erasing" the defeat of the Franco-Prussian war and the excesses of the *Commune de Paris*, or Guy des Cars' novel *La cathédrale de haine*, that presented the French post-war development with a new Paris cathedral on the site *Tête Défense*, as a landmark of progress on historical axis. Therefore, the resuscitation of the *Nation's Cathedral* idea had to purify the country released from communist regime...

Modern Romania lately joined *the concert of unified/reunited national states* and many authors argued the promotion of sacred architecture in the last century connected to the national idea and to healing processes of repeated traumas that Romania had endured. Do not forget that the autocephalous Greek-Orthodox Church lend itself to this.

A first step took place after the Independency War, through building Orthodox churches in the rejoined territories; territorial unit's "rhetoric" being based on "combinatorial techniques", using architectural elements of Walachia and Moldavia.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with reintegrating Transylvania, religious building would be associated to the Romanian national state ideology, because, unlike the territories under Turkish domination, where monotheism had a certain status, the West practiced discrimination on religious grounds. In this context, started the perceiving of the new state's majority population church, as a national church. Implementing new cathedrals in settlements where Romanians had no city rights meant claiming of a certain ownership. A major issue remains unsolved up to now, consisting of founding monumental and large-scale churches using historical elements usually devoted to modest buildings (not only because of the parish/monastic system and settlement sizes, but also of the Orthodox custom and liturgy in accordance with, believers do not sit down and there is a certain fluency in place of worship).

Paradoxically, decades four and five of the past century, marked by war and occupation, had been those of experiments and field theorizations, extended to George Călinescu's novels, dedicated to a certain architect character, named Ioanide.

Eclectic combinatory of the field would appeal both to Romanian regional architecture elements and to the use of unorthodox international prestigious architectural elements (including rose windows, common in Romanian synagogues).

To note some elements due to concurrence of events, like the expression of the projects for Nation's Cathedral (Fig. 01) and the contest for Odessa (Fig. 02), in the 40's, that banked on the "Roman" inheritance, with a certain clearance against Byzantinism and cvasi-exclusive importance of *Neo-Romanian style*, until then.

Notable for the 40's is the speech of architect Petre Antonescu, including his book *Biserici Nouă* - material presented in The Romanian Academy - who wanted to initiate all types of churches construction updated, also structurally as a result of the recent destructive earthquake.

In the mid-twentieth century, one can speak about "Byzantine", "regionalist", "cosmopolitan" and "anti-modern" orientations in Romanian religious architecture, with different weights and representations.

Post-war years were those of *crossing the desert*, even though construction of parish churches insidiously continued, with more or less locally visible complications and at a conceptual level that did not consider even vernacular. Afterwards, a shock meant set up pretexts for demolitions, due to the catastrophic earthquake of 1977.

Already, in the spring of 1990, under the new conditions, a true effervescence of church construction (over a thousand) began, at first parish and then diocesan, for religious organizational structure expanded, too. We must admit that, generally, other religions and minorities moved faster, some benefiting by external aid and missionary.

Building Orthodox churches was boosted along the way, including as a response and reply to some restitution of churches to the related Greek-Catholic creed, disbanded due to Vatican subordination, after the Soviet occupation.

Besides proper constructions, a theoretical-conceptual consolidation through exhibitions, book and magazine publishing, electronic media and numerous architectural competitions, attempted. Little by little, the competition frequency diminished, according as Romanian decentralization implemented, much resembling to some American films with FBI interventions in cities (the special Committee of the Public Works Ministry proving not to be vigilant enough).

This approach is complicated also by the fact that Byzantine religious architecture, so innovative and with fertile origins, is now fixed in very traditionalist liturgics and especially hierarchical formal clerical view, and sources talk of a real divorce between "architects' fascination to modernity" and church hierarchy's vision. A certain lack of culture, including architecture, also due to last decades' loss of handcraft, has made the most interesting ideas remain generally unaccomplished. Hope is in architecture education, including the Masters and PhD programmes, but probably those in operation will find a country already built and "reinforced in concrete".

After the first ten years elapsed, since 1990, a divorce between clergy and architects would have produced, the first retorting the last, that after all, the church is the "flock of believers" and not the building founded through demiurgic pride, while in reality they have difficulties to liberate of collage.

The new Nation's Cathedral had meant very much hope for everyone and by 1990 became relevant in undertone.

In the period 1995-1996, the theme actually "exploded" in the Romanian society, inclusive by the zeal of the first well-meaning rightwing government.

Over the years, the site successively changed in several areas.

The first was Carol Park / Freedom Park-"Parcul Libertății" (former royal 1906 exhibition and the present monument of communist "heroes"), where it will later return. Here it was an exciting relationship with communist officials' mausoleum, which has occasioned discussions about its possible demolition, its exorcization by including the existing superstructure in the future Cathedral or the case of avoiding each other. The only tangible result has been the priming of a conflict between religious hierarchy together with conservative media and some groups of intellectuals (including former dissidents).

Afterwards, the location in Youth Park-"Parcul Tineretului", away from downtown and former landfill, did not pass the evocation phase, as the case of rebuilding of the Văcărești Monastery, demolished by Ceausescu Administration.

In 1999, Union Square-"Piața Unirii" was subject in a contest of urban planning and logically, an architecture contest would have followed. The jury pre-selected twenty-two of thirty submitted projects, rejected eight and detained ten, giving a 2<sup>nd</sup> prize, two 3<sup>rd</sup> prizes (Fig. 03, Fig. 04) and three mention awards. This indecision half-opened the door for promoting, in time, a solution in low transparency.

In 2002, the first phase of the architecture competition proposed for the cathedral's site a different location, an *island* in Unirii Boulevard-"Bulevardul Unirii" - the axis between the People's House (nowadays Parliament Palace) and Alba Iulia Square. In June, the jury selected three projects that had ninety days to materialize in requested terms. In October the same year, declared winner was the Augustin Ioan team's project (Fig. 05, Fig. 06).

Things have started to postpone, bringing back into discussion other sites.

After 2005, the questioned location of the Cathedral was nearby the People's House (Parliament Palace, Fig. 07). The usefulness of a new competition was denied, including considerations that precedents have consumed resources and have not produced tangible results, making appeal even at volunteering future designers. There was a revival of traditionalist positions, although at some point the new Patriarch evoked St Paul's Cathedral in London, which has a dome with three shells and seemed so exciting to Romanian practice. Insidiously, the necessary town planning documentation developed, the cornerstone was laid and pictures of the new "chalice-cathedral" appeared (in our humble opinion, a favorite leitmotif of many other Christian creeds, including those in Romania). The proposed building works with electronic acoustics and provides visibility by displays at all levels.

Repeated presentation of architecture and urban planning competitions in recent years, that had the "Nation's Cathedral" as subject, already has an anthropological relevance and represented an opportunity to tackle at Project Design Synthesis in F.A.U./U.T.C.-N. (Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning / Technical University of Cluj-Napoca). It was a fascinating experience to see if our students are

able to escape (free their self) from the architectural context in which they grew up and live, and if the work together with the eight teachers at Project Design Synthesis (4<sup>th</sup> year of study) would be mutually fertile (Fig. 08., Fig. 09., Fig. 10).

For any professional vocation-animated architect, such an object issues some crucial questions: is religion universal or national, eternal or temporary, fundamental, historical or contemporary? Designing churches entailed the possibility of creating not only everlasting architectural works (at least by artistic or moral forces), but also literary or idea works. If we do not try, at least in school, such an approach (for our profession remains one of vocation, grouping us in a branch organization with glorious traditions), how will we manage in the much more profane and subjected to many temptations and pressures practice?

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#### PHOTOS

- Fig 01. Nation's Cathedral, Joja and Goga.  
 Fig 02. Odessa Orthodox Cathedral, Joja.  
 Fig 03. Neagu and Babici.  
 Fig 04. Ciolacu.  
 Fig 05. Augustin Ioan.  
 Fig 06. Augustin Ioan.  
 Fig 07. New location of the Nation's Cathedral.  
 Fig 08. Roxana Marcean.  
 Fig 09. Sandu Hangan.  
 Fig 10. Marinescu Vlad.

## PHOTOCREDITS

Fig. 01/02. <http://inoe.inoe.ro/ianus/Augustin%20Ioan%202.htm>.

Fig. 03/06. Augustin IOAN, *CONCURSURI PENTRU CATEDRALA PATRIARHALĂ ORTODOXĂ: 1999-2002/COMPETITIONS FOR THE PATRIARCHAL ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL: 1999-2002*, Ed. Noi Media Print, Bucuresti.

Fig. 07. Bucharest Town Hall - Centrul de Planificare Urbană si Metropolitană Bucuresti.

Fig. 08. Roxana MARCEAN, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning / Technical University of Cluj-Napoca.

Fig. 09. Sandu HANGAN, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning / Technical University of Cluj-Napoca.

Fig. 10. Vlad MARINESCU, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning / Technical University of Cluj-Napoca.



Fig. 01

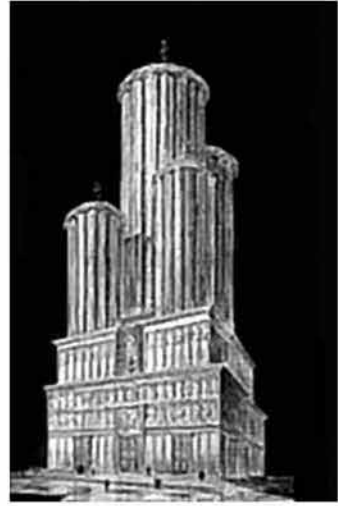


Fig. 02

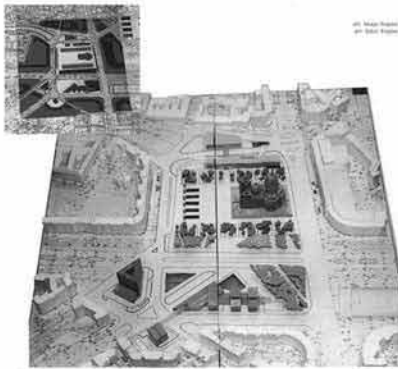


Fig. 03

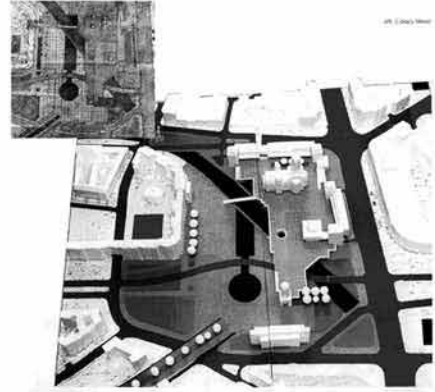


Fig. 04

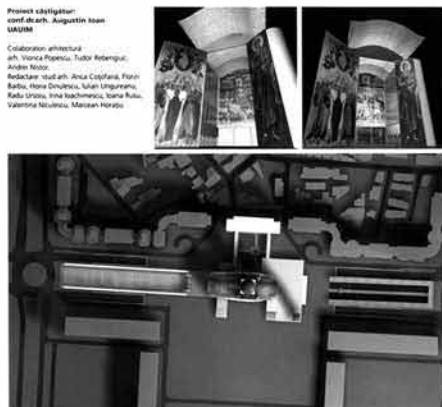


Fig. 05



Fig. 06

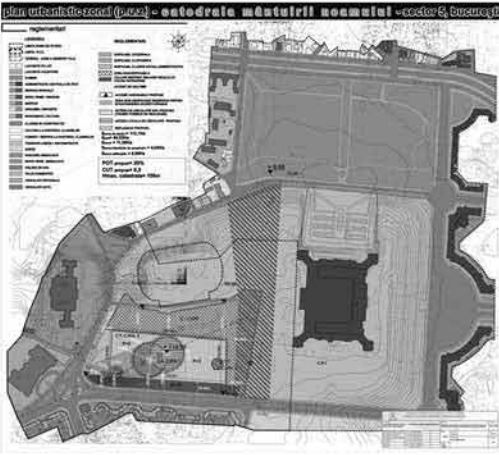


Fig. 07

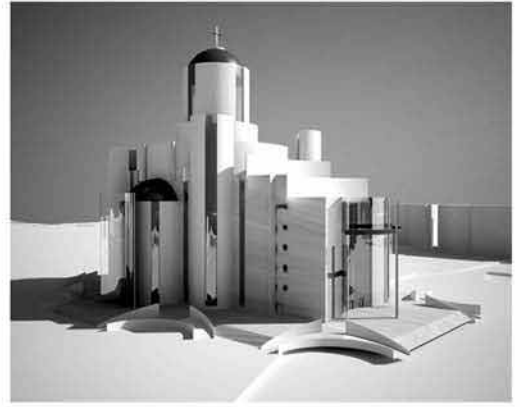


Fig. 08

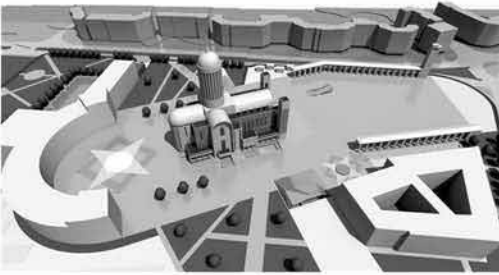


Fig. 09



Fig. 10