

Florești - An Overview

Paul Mutică¹

Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning
72-76 Observatorului Str., Cluj-Napoca, Romania

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Abstract

Though the general demographic context in Romania is in great decline, with the current resident population being 15% less than in 1992, there are some settlements that registered an unprecedented and seemingly unnatural growth the past few decades. Florești, closest commune to Cluj, is one such example. From a backwater village of 5000 people to an official 30000 inhabitants suburb (with actual numbers closer to 50000), Florești has grown tenfold into the largest rural settlement in Romania, despite most inhabitants being actually urban dwellers, commuting to Cluj. Yet this exponential growth, culminating the last few years, and doubled by land value increase is not synonymous with a similar increase in the quality of life factor, it would seem. Usually perceived as chaotic and dystopic, Florești is definitely a product of the real estate market, coupled with the inefficiency of local authorities to impose a coherent set of urban rules or a vision. At least this is what is generally known at first glance about this odd phenomenon still in the making. This paper will try to promote an in-depth analysis into how did this original type of habitation come into being and how is it perceived both from the outside (namely from neighboring Cluj) as well as from the inside, from the point of view of some inhabitants who recently moved here.

Rezumat

Deși contextul demografic general din România înregistrează un declin consistent, populația cu reședința în țară fiind cu 15% mai mică decât în 1992, există unele localități care au înregistrat o creștere fără precedent și aparent nenaturală în ultimele decenii. Florești, cea mai apropiată comună de Cluj-Napoca, este un astfel de exemplu. Dintr-un sat din 5000 de locuitori într-o suburbie oficială de 30000 de locuitori (cu cifre reale mai apropiate de 50000), Florești a crescut de zece ori în cea mai mare așezare rurală din România, în ciuda faptului că majoritatea locuitorilor au activități urbane, mergând la locul de muncă în Cluj. Cu toate acestea, creșterea exponențială, culminând în ultimii ani și dublată fiind de creșterea valorii terenurilor, nu este sinonimă aparent cu o îmbunătățire proporțională a factorului calității vieții. De obicei perceput ca fiind haotic și dezolant, Florești-ul este cu siguranță un produs al pieței imobiliare, coroborat cu ineficiența autorităților locale de a impune un set coerent de reguli urbane sau o viziune. Cel puțin aceasta este ceea ce, în general, se cunoaște la prima vedere despre acest fenomen ciudat încă în curs de desfășurare. Această lucrare va încerca să promoveze o analiză aprofundată a modului în care a apărut acest tip de habitat original și cum este el perceput atât din exterior (din Clujul învecinat) cât și din interior, din punctul de vedere al unor locuitori care s-au mutat recent aici.

Keywords: Florești, Cluj, suburb, habitation

1 PhD architect, associate professor at Technical University of Cluj-Napoca

Four out of five European citizens live in urban areas and their quality of life is directly influenced by the state of the urban environment [1]

1. Introduction

As the resident population of Romania is steadily registering a decline every year and has gone below the 20 million threshold for the first time in five decades [2], most rural and small urban settlements in the country seem to undergo a brutal shrinkage. In this context it is particularly interesting to note some exceptions that seem to stubbornly ignore this trend.

Florești, currently the largest rural settlement in Romania, is one of the most famous study cases for the recent period and has registered an incredible increase in population from 5616 in 1992 to 28163 in 2016 which makes it one of the densest rural settlements with an average of 98,33 people/ha, comparable to the 102,05 people/ha of neighboring Cluj-Napoca itself [2]. This is particularly substantial if corroborated with a far less spectacular population growth in the city core itself.

And this is only half the picture as many actual residents of Florești officially have their residency in Cluj, sometimes in their parents' apartments, so as to benefit from admission to local schools and kindergartens for their own children. Others are undeclared tenants that live in Florești and commute daily but are very hard to account for as their stay is temporary and choose not to declare their residency for different reasons. It is therefore estimated that the actual population is anywhere between 40000 and 50000, making it comparable with the largest residential neighborhoods established in the communist era like Mănăstur or Mărăști.

Also notable is the increase in habitation units from roughly 2300 in 1996 to 17981 in 2015, an effective eightfold increase which now means Florești has 16% the total habitation units of Cluj [2]. Last year Cluj County topped Bucharest in newly authorized habitation area, reaching more than 1 million square meters of dwellings for 2016 [2], most of that being accounted for in the suburbs surrounding the city of which Florești is by far the largest.

This paper will try to give a short glimpse at this phenomenon from several distinct points of view, in close correlation to the development of Cluj-Napoca, which Florești is intrinsically connected with. As such, demographics is only one part of the bigger picture and, although highly relevant in itself, cannot provide an explanation for this apparent population and real estate boom outside a larger context.

2. Aims and methodology

As stated before, in order to understand the real causes of what is called the Florești phenomenon, we must take into account several aspects from different area studies, including sociology, economics, anthropology, physical and human geography.

The suburbs of Cluj and their configuration have been the subject of several recent doctoral studies [3], [4], [5] in sociology, for example. Besides the social aspects, economical and political factors play a crucial role in the rapid expansion of Florești as it is mostly considered a by-product of real estate speculation and local authority indulgence. Also the emergence of public policies regarding the Cluj Metropolitan Area starting from 2008 [6], [7] and their application or failure play a crucial role in understanding the full picture.

As such, the proposed methodology concentrates on answering several questions regarding Florești. First of all, the causality is very relevant and one can ask *how did Florești come to be?* Naturally the suburb cannot be separated from the metropolis and it would seem residents in nearby communes all commute to Cluj on a daily basis.

Secondly, *what is the current aspect of Florești?* At first glance it seems almost the result of a success story by real estate developers and is certainly presented as such but at a closer look several aspects hint to a less desirable situation. Physical factors including density and accessibility all point to a chaotic sprawl.

Furthermore, *how is it perceived by locals and outsiders?* As architects, it is very tempting to judge the quality of a settlement by its aspect alone but social relations created among dwellers point to a different albeit not opposite perspective. A series of interviews along a ten year span, including the first attempts by the Superbia team [8] could give an image of the complexity of the situation.

As conclusion, a last question would be *what subsequent problems does Florești have?* and how can they be tackled in the near future? From traffic to politics and a lack of vision by local authorities, it seems the largest overall concern is uncertainty of what tomorrow might bring.

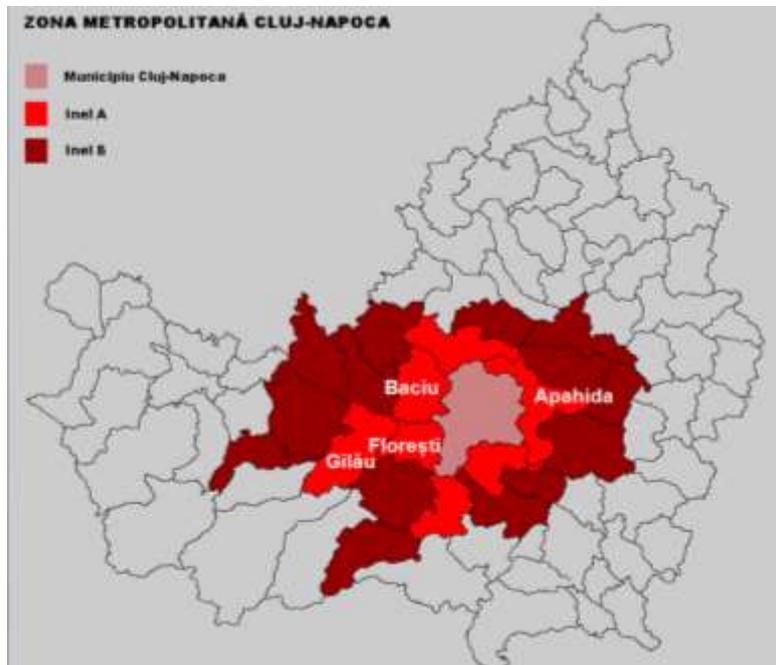


Figure 1. Cluj Metropolitan Area and the four most populous communes, clustered around the city core, along the East-West corridor (adapted from wikipedia.org)

3. Findings and interpretation

3.1. How did Florești come to be?

As a direct result of Cluj' success story as one of the most attractive cities in Transylvania, Florești cannot be understood separately. Indeed, following a stagnation period until 2004, the economical attractiveness of Cluj for developers registered a slingshot effect, making it the second largest city in the country, rivalling Bucharest in appeal for the young generation.

However Cluj is constrained in development by physical limits of hills and natural forests guarding it both on the Northern and Southern sides, meaning that it can only expand eastwards or westwards, along the Someș river corridor. This has already happened since the communist era when Mănăstur was established in the west and Gheorgheni and Mărăști in the East. Nowadays this tendency accentuates even further and Florești is the closest western neighbor so it is only natural that most of the development would take place in this area [9].

Furthermore, the accelerated growth of the city and the ensuing traffic problems along an already clogged infrastructure of streets made the municipality a lot more circumspect towards grand developments, especially following 2004. This led to the exponential increase in land value within the city limits and made the neighboring communes that were more open to compromise a heaven for profit hungry investors.

If prior to 2004, most developments in these unofficial suburbs were undertaken by future homeowner residents themselves, after a while, a second generation of developments ensued, on a much larger scale - the residence trend which implied larger, sometimes identical villas quickly built on former agricultural land for one purpose only - to be sold for profit. Yet even this endeavour proved to be short-lived as even higher profits could be made by building collective dwellings [10]. This snowball effect is unfolding even today and was only kept in check for a very short while by the financial crisis of 2008 as statistics have shown an even more rapid development in the recent years, with 20000 more official residents between 2008 and 2016 alone [2]. As such the crisis might have made Florești an even greater investor target because of harder real estate loan conditions that made Cluj even harder to buy into by the young generation.

3.2. What is the current aspect of Florești?

One of the major problems seems to be the total disregard for the quality of life of the future inhabitants by both investors and the local authorities. Whereas the first are driven by the logic of speculative profit, the second could be accused of inaction and turning a blind eye to excesses. For example the all too easy transformation of former arable land into buildable plots has been mostly condoned without emphasis on street infrastructure or the minimal amount of public area or amenities. Narrow, often 3 meter wide streets service thousands of inhabitants without even a formal sidewalk [11] and cause tremendous amounts of traffic at rush hours, especially since their structure is fishbone like, without alternatives for residents [12]. Streets have damaged pavements or none at all and are often hazardous for passing cars and pedestrians alike.



Fig. 2. Caricature of traffic problems generated by suburban sprawl residents commuting daily to the city, (Leon Krier, *The Architecture of Community* [13])

The public to private space ratio is much smaller than what Leon Krier found to be the ideal norm of 20-25%, another proof of inappropriate and chaotic partition of former agricultural land into buildable plots [14], [15]. The quality of the built environment itself is also lacking, both for the cheap building materials employed and from an aesthetic point of view [16]. Overall, the image is one of indifference at best.

Most of these aspects, like the condensed evolution, high density and social homogeneity were found by Kiril Stanilov to be similar among recent suburban developments in Central and Eastern Europe [17]. However it would seem that most Romanian suburbs, Florești included, are not experiencing a speed of decentralization or a lack of administrative separation as most of these entities are still under direct control of local town halls, not of the metropolitan administration as elsewhere in CE and EE [17].



Fig. 3. Satellite view of Florești showing the transition from agricultural plots to high density collective habitation units with very narrow streets between them (google maps)



Fig. 4. An overview of Eroilor Street, Florești. Stark contrast between high density collective housing and nearby empty fields (Ziarul de Cluj)

Finally, because of the lack of amenities, the inhabitants are totally dependent upon the city core not only for work opportunities but for educational and recreational purposes as well. This translates into the current aspect of a satellite settlement, clustered around the western entrance to the city. Real estate value is higher the closer you get to the border of the city and lower as you further away as this translates into higher commuting time every day. Commuting parents start their day one hour earlier as kids need to be taken to school also in advance and traffic jams are most common [12]. One obvious example this year is the matriculation of more than 270 children in preschool at Onisifor Ghibu National College in Grigorescu, one of the closest to Florești.

3.3. How is it perceived by locals and outsiders?

From the point of view of neighboring Cluj, especially the inhabitants of most affected neighborhoods like Mănăstur and Grigorescu, Florești is undoubtedly a nightmare. Several corridors of traffic towards high employment areas like Tetarom make travelling on some streets tedious for locals. Pollution and noise pollution are also high though very little attention is paid to them by anyone but the residents who complain in vain. The situation cannot be amended until the metropolitan administration actually forms a viable general strategy and is given management rights in Florești as well. So far this is nowhere near completion [18]

On the other hand, the perception from inside is more nuanced. A lot of people complain about the aforementioned reasons that are a nuisance for them as well. Yet one thing is for sure, most residents have assumed moving here and most knew the conditions to begin with, although negligence from local authorities is by no means excusable. In a series of interviews taken by the *Suburbia* team, we find different perspectives, ranging from disappointment and anger to pleasant surprise [8].

Some residents, especially the first batches that moved in during the early 2000's, have testified to being included in online communities of neighbors that openly discuss daily matters and take decisions together [19]. Many people admit the problem of public space, namely the poor conditions of dirty and unpaved streets, of overcrowding, no public illumination and lack of intimacy but tend to forego that in favour of their own small plot of land. Most of them denounce the greyness of former communist neighborhoods and their experiences when they lived there earlier as tenants in apartment blocks. Presumably, compared to those neighborhoods, like Mărăști, Florești seems to be more homogenous and even allow them to mingle with similar people.

Many people living in the initial residential areas, made up of individual houses attest knowing and visiting their neighbors on a weekly basis at least. It is always good to have somebody, maybe a colleague, a friend or simply a good neighbor to leave the children with for a few hours, they say. The same does not happen in collective dwellings, however where spatial proximity does not guarantee social interaction [20].

4. Conclusions

Florești, like other suburbs of Cluj including Apahida and Baciú, is a product of real estate speculation and a culpable lack of intervention from local authorities which both point to a power vacuum at the metropolitan scale. Despite the demographic figures and land value indicating an exponential increase, quality of life does not figure as a primary factor in this development.

Whereas it cannot be argued that chaotic development in Florești is a serious concern for the citizens of Cluj, increasing pollution and traffic, some of the younger residents that recently moved to Florești have managed to find a certain degree of peace and prosperity here. Yet even they feel threatened by the continuous expansion that can always mean a decline in quality of life through more crowded developments. In the end the question remains what and if something can and will be done in order to preserve if not improve local conditions for the inhabitants and if the future will bring relief or, on the contrary, even more strain on them.

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