

Heating Points in Romania – Social Needs between Past and Present

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Abstract

A building is not something one can easily erase and forget about. Even though it can be demolished or converted, it still leaves a mark upon society. For example the communist heating points, built in the urban district areas in Romania, that were abandoned for years, still influence lives whether they are demolished, abandoned or converted and reused. The absence of central heating made people use alternative sources and had an important influence in their living spaces and way of life. People's needs change over time and this is why the built environment has to adapt to the needs of the society, although a central heating point was designed to last a for a long time. No one considered the possibility of its uselessness. The purpose of this paper is to analyze examples of reused abandoned heating points in Romania that have an important social impact and could be used as a starting point to solving the problems that the community has with the lack of centers to help people with disabilities. Until medicine evolves and a cure is found for their problems it is important to have adequate space and qualified personnel in order to overcome physical and/or mental problems. According to institutions that care for people with disabilities, there is an acute lack of spaces designed for this purpose. Can this be a permanent function for the abandoned heating points in Romania? Can one create a pattern of reusing abandoned heating points by converting them into social centers?

Rezumat

O construcție nu poate fi distrusă cu ușurință. Cu toate că poate să fie demolată sau reconvertită, ea tot lasă o amprentă asupra societății. De exemplu clădirile comuniste care aparțineau sistemului centralizat de termoficare, construite în zona cvartalelor de blocuri din România și abandonate, încă influențează viața riveranilor fie că sunt demolate, abandonate sau refuncționalizate. Absența sistemului central de termoficare a dus la găsirea unor surse alternative de încălzire, fapt care a influențat semnificativ spațiul locuințelor și modul de viață al populației. Nevoile oamenilor se schimbă de-a lungul timpului, iar mediul construit trebuie să se adapteze nevoilor societății, cu toate că au fost concepute să reziste o perioadă îndelungată. Nu s-a luat în considerare posibilitatea ca acestea să își piardă utilitatea. Scopul acestei lucrări este de a analiza exemple de schimburi de destinație ale fostelor centrale și puncte termice din România care au avut un impact social important și care pot fi folosite ca un punct de pornire în rezolvarea problemelor pe care comunitatea le are cu lipsa centrelor pentru persoane cu dizabilități. Potrivit instituțiilor care se ocupă de problema persoanelor cu dizabilități fizice sau psihice, există o lipsă a spațiilor care

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găzduiesc aceste persoane. Poate aceasta să fie o funcțiune permanentă pentru CT abandonate din România? Se poate crea o tipologie de reutilizare a clădirilor CT abandonate prin convertirea lor în centre sociale?

Keywords: abandoned heating points, social centers, conversion

1. Introduction – about needs in our society

This article presents the problems regarding the public space of Romania's former communist apartment blocks areas which are facing decline because of the abandoned vicinity (the old central heating plants no longer in use). Its purpose is to encourage the local authorities to think about the possibilities of using the ruins of a heating point as a means to rise the value of a neighborhood.

The title of this article points out the fact that the abandonment of the district heating plants/ or heating points is due, in the majority of the cases, to the changing needs of our society. If, in the communist period people would have accepted the lack of heat in the winter, today one wishes to create a more comfortable living environment. Such a comfort was accomplished when people started to give up the central heating system and convert to individual one for each apartment.

A person's needs change as the society evolves. "Man is a wanting animal- as soon as one of his needs is satisfied, another appears in its place. This process is unending. It continues from birth to death"[1]

As their physiological needs are completed, the social needs are the ones that become important and motivate people. [2]

This is what happened with the old heating plant buildings. When they were not able to provide enough physical comfort, people started to find new ways to improve their lifestyle.

The purpose of the heating plants/heating points was to provide heat to the population living in a neighborhood. This is an important need in society. The desire for better comfort inside their homes led to the abandonment of many central heating points.

In order for a building to overcome the passing of time, and the permanent change in our needs, it has to be able to adapt. As Frank Gehry said, "Architecture should speak of its time and place, but yearn for timelessness". Timelessness can be obtained for buildings without a grand design or an architecture value by giving them flexible spaces and a solid structure.

2. The conversion of abandoned district heating plants/ heating points

If one analyses the former district heating plants buildings, by referring to Frank Gehry's statement about architecture one can easily affirm that a heating plant was designed to withhold time. They were very popular in Romania before 1990, and were built to last (had a good structure), yearning to provide heat to the urban population for many years. They would have done so if it had not been for the lack of investments in new technology and improvement of the quality of the services they offered.

Many studies have been made in order find ways of improving the quality of life in a district.

Jane Jacobs started to criticize the 1950's urban planning policy responsible for the decline of the American districts in 1961 in the book "The Death and Life of Great American Cities". She wrote about old building as being a necessity for cities:

"Cities need old buildings so badly it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them. But old buildings I mean not museum-piece old building, not old buildings in an excellent and expensive state of rehabilitation- although these make fine ingredients- but also a good lot of plain, ordinary, low-value old buildings, including some rundown old buildings." [3]

Edwin Chan and Grace K.L. Lee carried out a questionnaire survey in Hong Kong addressed to architects, planners, property development managers and local citizens and ended up with some important factors for improving social sustainability. One very important factor, amongst other, is the "Creation of Harmonious Living Environment". [4] A harmonious living environment cannot be created obviously if we pass by a ruin every day while going home.



Fig. 1,2 Abandoned heating plant in Alba Iulia

Another study, more close to our period and geographic position, even comes with the solution of proposing community centers as a means for rehabilitation, offering as a case study the case of Bucharest. [5] Here, Ioana Teodorescu talks about the fact that communist districts have spaces that are deserted. Indeed, many spaces between the blocks are left unattended and influence the lives of the inhabitants in a negative way especially if we take a look at the abandoned heating plants or heating points.

The conversion, or the adaptive reuse of a building is the "process by which structurally sound older buildings are developed for economically viable new uses." [6] It has origins in the desire to protect buildings that have a historical importance from demolition. [7]

Even though an abandoned district heating plant/ heating point does not have an important architectural value, it has a deep connection with our history from a social point of view. It provided heat to our living spaces for many years and this should be a reason to think twice before erasing a part of our past. It is easy to make a connection between a heating plant and the

communist period in Romania, but the district heating system is now used in many democratic countries with a great pride.

An industrial building that is not marked as a monument and is in ruins does not have to be considered worthless and be demolished. It can evolve, transform, in order to represent a new age, but keep a slice of the past just by its simple physical presence in the urban context. A building with such an important meaning as a heating plant can be our link to the past.

A heating point has, besides a good structural value, some other characteristics that make it a perfect fit for a reuse: a good position inside the city, a simple façade, no ornaments, big openings that can be easily used to create suitable spaces.

In the article “Broken windows” published in 1982 in the Atlantic Monthly, James Q. Wilson and George Kelling have pointed out that the neighborhoods with abandoned buildings and different ruins are the ones that attract crime and violence.[8] It even became a theory in the United States, the “broken windows” theory. Considering that an abandoned heating point became ruins amongst Romania’s old districts, they can be made responsible for the decline of the quality of life in different places in the city.

According to Joseph Schilling, a vacant building “strains the resources of local police, fire, building, and health departments”[9] It brings important social costs and reduces the value of properties from the vicinity.

3. Is the conversion of district heating plants/ heating points a solution to the lack of spaces dedicated to people in need in the city (social centers) ?

According to the SPAS institution (Public service for social assistance) that works as a service of Alba Iulia City Hall, there are a lot of people in need of help in the Alba district. Their mission is to identify and help them. Besides people with physical and mental problems, there are old people, children with problems at home, women that are abused, unemployed family members and other people that need constant guidance and care. [10]

Since 2007, when an abandoned heating point in Alba Iulia was transformed into a social center for people with disabilities, SPAS constantly tries to find and obtain these type of buildings in order to serve as a helping those in need. [11]

Because of their good structure and strategic position inside the city, local authorities in Alba Iulia city found a solution for giving those abandoned buildings a new purpose: helping people in need by creating social centers for people with different problems. These centers were designed to help children with mental problems, poor children or people with physical disabilities.

Examples of conversions of heating plants into places for the community, for people in need are starting to slowly appear all over the country, proving that local authorities start to consider taking a step towards helping the community. In this way not only those who are the beneficiary of a social center are helped, but also the rest of the neighborhood.

4. Case studies- about needs that change

An important aspect of an architect’s job is to offer a client the best technical and financial solution in order for the project to be a successful one. But what happens after a few years,

when unforeseen elements can make the solution provided to be a solution that does not fit the initial needs? Can the conversion of a heating plant be considered permanent ?

I will provide examples of such projects of conversion of a heating points in Alba Iulia, in order to point out that buildings must be easily adapted to the constant changes of our society's needs.

4.1 The first example is a social center for children with mental problems in Alba Iulia, funded and administrated by a non -governmental organization, with the help and guidance of the SPAS institution.

The center was designed to offer assistance and care to 35 children, but the actual number is 47 children in need that go there regularly. And the demand is growing rapidly. There are no other centers like this one in Alba Iulia, a city with about 50 000 citizens. When the project was implemented, this aspect was not taken into account.

The budget for the initial interventions was not a high one and it could not sustain a major transformation. Below, we can see the floor plans and the section of the actual center, after the conversion. As one can easily observe, the spaces are not the most efficient and do not offer the best solution in terms of use of space. There are rooms with no ventilation, long hallways and rooms that have no purpose, and are not used.

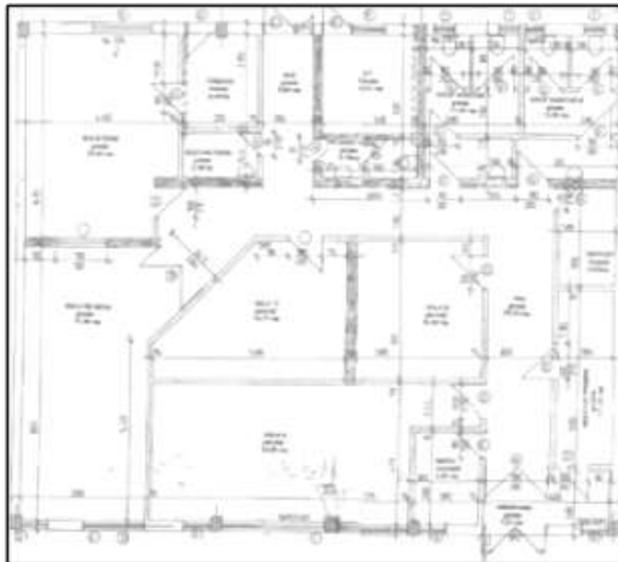


Fig. 3 The floor plan of the center for children with mental problems

Now, they are trying to find a way to gain more space, and even think about adding a new story inside the existing building. Unfortunately, this is not possible due to the low interior height that does not permit such an intervention. This is a common “problem” of many heating plants and heating points in Romania.

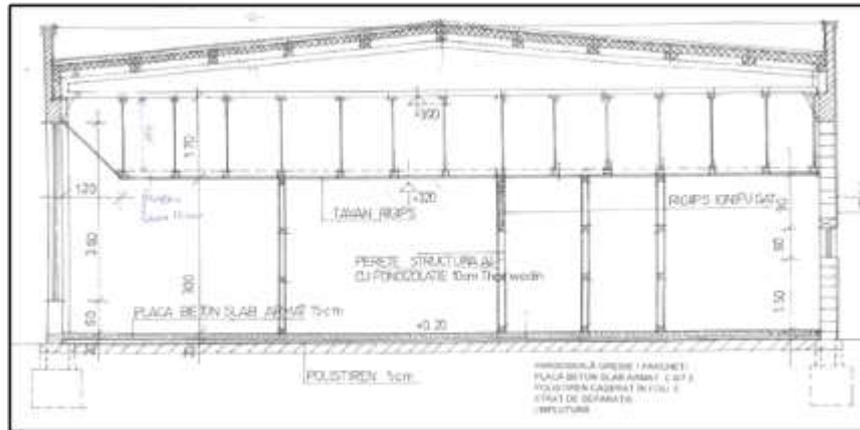


Fig. 4 Section that shows the interior height of the center for children with mental problems

The solution for adding a new story is either going up by adding a new roof, either going down, by creating a new interior structure and digging for about 1 meter into the ground. Of course, these two solutions are too expensive for what the non- governmental organization can afford. This is why in this case, as in many others, the best way to obtain a better use of the spaces is to create flexible ones.

4.2. Another example is a more fortunate one, because it is still at the project stage and there still is time to figure out the best solution in order to avoid ulterior costs. In Alba Iulia, in 2014, local authorities contracted a project to convert an old heating plant into a social center for people with disabilities. It had a very large meeting room/sport room that occupied more than half of the interior space, and too little space for small group activities. The second floor had only two small rooms that could function as spaces for activities for the beneficiaries. Here, as a

This initiative remained at the project stage, because, after analyzing the spaces that resulted, the contractor realized that the whole design theme was not able to entirely, fulfill the needs of the people with disabilities.

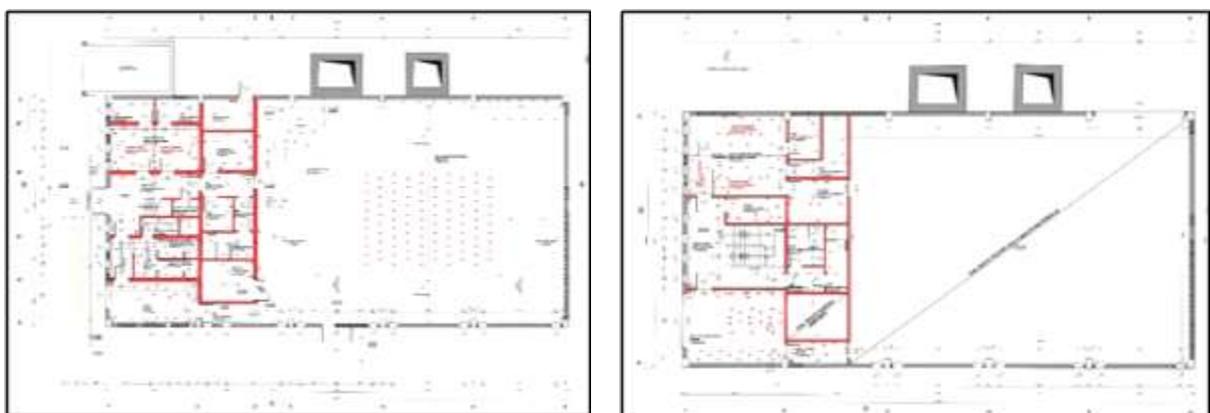


Fig. 5 Plans for the center for people with disabilities (2014)

At this point, the project was left behind and, in the year 2016 a new design theme was conceived. This new theme was more elaborated and more focused on the needs of the people with disabilities. It had many more spaces for different types of activities intended to optimize the beneficiaries' lifestyle and help them achieve a better social integration. Here, they would be able to socialize, to learn how to work on a computer, to have physical activities, to learn

how to cope with their situation and to be able to do basic daily activities such as cooking, writing or even washing.

These seem like simple tasks, but for someone who has a disability it can be overwhelming. Only a person in this position or someone who has a relative or acquaintance can relate to these aspects. This is why, in this project was designed a space for people who are family members or are directly involved in their life to socialize.

Another aspect that needs to be mentioned is the one in which local authorities made a request to demolish the chimneys, an important identification mark that a district heating point has. The request was based on the simple remark that they do not want the new center to be associated in any way to the communist period, period in which the building was created. It is a demand to erase history.



Fig. 6 Plans for the center for people with disabilities (2016)

5. Conclusions

What can be the perfect new use for these abandoned spaces that once used to be an important part of our lives due to their function? Can we even talk about „perfect new use”? Considering their position in the city, in the proximity of apartment blocks it is safe to say that the new function should address the people near. It should be able to improve their quality of life and provide a safe environment.

In order to do so, a very serious analysis must be made to determine the strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and constraints each architectural object imposes. The best solution can be found by involving every party that is affected by such an intervention in the process of design.

An important aspect that should be remembered when converting a district heating plant is to try to create more flexible spaces, considering the fact that many of them serve people, and people’s needs change, as the needs of our society.

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7. Illustrations sources

Fig. 1, 2 Personal archive

Fig. 3,4 Images, curtosy of SC DTS UNIC PROIECT SRL

Fig. 5,6 Images, curtosy of SC General Proiect Studio SRL