

Sustainable Regeneration of Urban Built Heritage in Post-Socialist Cultural Context

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Abstract

Built heritage conservation and sustainable urban regeneration of historic towns are influenced by the specific cultural context affecting built urban environment. For historical cities in Central and Eastern Europe, consequences of the totalitarian regime's urban interventions on the collective mentality and built environment are part of the urban cultural context in which the built heritage evolved and must be preserved. Modern technology, specifically related to reinforced concrete structures and architectural form, has reshaped urban space since the beginning of the century. In Central and Eastern Europe, the influence of the totalitarian regime over the built environment is an important element of the identity of space and urban post-socialist society and a defining component of the specific cultural context that surrounds and influences evolution of built cultural heritage. In these countries, the use of reinforced concrete and modernist architecture during a difficult political period affected the society's perception of modern architecture. Is it possible to redeem the meaning of modernist architecture? How can post-socialist society redesign urban space considering the values and the flaws of the modernist architecture to meet the requirements of sustainable design specific to the preservation of built heritage? Based on the specific post-socialist cultural context, this paper proposes a different approach to the regeneration of the central area of various historic towns in Romania based on the integrated rehabilitation and recovery of the two kernels/cores of the central area - civic centre area and historic centre - through culture-led regeneration.

Rezumat

Conservarea patrimoniului construit și regenerarea urbană sustenabilă a orașelor istorice sunt influențate de modul în care contextul cultural specific afectează mediul urban construit. În orașele istorice din Europa Centrală și de Est efectele intervențiilor regimului totalitar asupra mediului construit și asupra mentalității colective constituie o componentă a contextului cultural în care s-a dezvoltat și în care trebuie conservat patrimoniul construit. Tehnologia modernă, structuri și forme arhitecturale din beton armat, a modelat spațiul urban încă de la începutul secolului 20. În Europa Centrală și de Est, influența regimului totalitar asupra mediului construit este un element important al identității spațiului și societății post-socialiste și reprezintă o componentă definitorie a contextului cultural specific ce înconjoară și afectează evoluția patrimoniului cultural construit. În aceste țări, folosirea betonului armat și a arhitecturii moderniste în timpul unei perioade politice

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dificile a afectat percepția societății asupra arhitecturii moderne. Este posibilă reabilitarea semnificației arhitecturii moderniste? Este necesară remodelarea spațiului urban luând în considerare valorile și neajunsurile arhitecturii moderniste în raport cu cerințele de conservare sustenabilă a patrimoniului construit? Având la bază contextul cultural post-socialist, articolul propune o abordare diferită a regenerării zonei centrale în numeroase orașe istorice din România, o abordare bazată pe reabilitarea și recuperarea culturală a celor două nuclee - centrul istoric și centrul civic.

Keywords: built heritage, post-socialist urban cultural context, cultural rehabilitation, sustainable urban regeneration, civic centre, historic centre, modernist architecture

The process of urban regeneration of post-socialist historical cities depends largely on understanding the relationship between built heritage and the urban context as part of the cultural landscape that defines the urban environment of the Central and Eastern European countries. The way in which urban fabric evolved during the reconstruction after the Second World War, continuing with the years of massive urban interventions during the totalitarian regime, is a defining element of the relationship between the built heritage and the urban organism. Thus, the preservation and rehabilitation of the built heritage must consider one of the defining components of this landscape, namely the specific urban context: extensive (sometimes aggressive, decontextualized) interventions on traditional tissue and the way the built heritage evolved and developed within post-socialist city's urban environment. Consequences of the totalitarian regime's urban interventions on the collective mentality and built environment are part of the urban cultural context in which the built heritage evolved and in which the built heritage must be preserved. The reconfiguration of the urban East-European historic cities, during the totalitarian regime, has radically transformed the way of functioning of the system represented by the urban environment, at both the functional and spatial and socio-economic level, and cultural level (with elements common to the urban landscape of the entire space was the Communist-socialist). As a result, a strategy for the regeneration of such cities must consider the post-socialist aspect of the urban space, to ensure sustainable development and effective active conservation of the cultural heritage in the specific urban context of Central and Eastern Europe.

Based on the PhD thesis *Cultural rehabilitation of civic centres. Approaches to urban interventions on Romanian historic cities*², this paper argues that central area of post-socialist historic cities needs a different approach, given the fact that often significant interventions during the totalitarian regime were conducted inside this area, thus resulting contrasting, and conflicted urban environment, affecting sustainable conservation of built heritage inside the urban central area. It is considered the case of civic centres because of the scale of urban interventions and impressive effort to create an image of power using reinforced concrete architecture, in contrast with existing urban tissue and built heritage.

During the totalitarian regime in Central and Eastern Europe public spaces were created to accommodate large forced public manifestations praising the communist regime. In many cases, these public spaces were surrounded by newly built public buildings that would express the power of progress and technological advancement during communist era. These urban spaces – civic centres - were conceived to assert the power of the totalitarian regime and soon became anti-agera spaces inside the cities. (1 p. 71) Among the functions associated with the public space in civic centres an important role was played by culture, specifically „official” culture as a propaganda tool.

² This paper is disseminating results of the PhD thesis *Cultural rehabilitation of civic centres. Approaches to urban interventions on Romanian historic cities*, author arch. Andreea Prelipcean

Therefore, among the public buildings forming the civic centre there is often built a cultural building, such as a Philharmonic, a Theatre, a House of Culture, Palace of Culture etc.(1 p. 72) The latter two functions had relatively flexible interior spaces and could house a wide variety of social and cultural manifestations and are often seen as the trademark of civic centres. Along these cultural buildings there were built a grandiose administrative building - town hall or prefecture -, a commercial complex and of course, a hotel - official accommodations building. (Fig.1)



Fig. 1_Chemnitz central area, cultural building Chemnitz Stadthalle and Mercury Hotel, dating from the totalitarian regime period (Photo: Andreea Prelipcean)

In Romania, civic centres were created in relatively large urbanized cities, dominant for the country districts. Many of these cities are old, historic cities that have kept their influence over a large area throughout time. Typological variety of the new civic centres reflects the wide variety of design solutions dictated by the urban complexity of historic cities (geographic position, historical evolution, existing built heritage – value, expanse, spatial layout of the built heritage etc.) That is why it is difficult to identify similar traits and typologies for civic centres – large central urban structures that were not built according to standardised layouts and plans (as is the case for post-war collective neighbourhoods).

Where a new civic centre has been created inside the Romanian historic cities, the new centre has commonly three major variants of placement inside the built environment:

- a new centre alongside the historic centre - Brăila, Oradea, Baia Mare, Sibiu etc. (Fig.2-4)
- a new centre interleaved within the historic centre - making use of adequate old buildings through functional reconversion - Craiova, Târgu Mureş, Botoşani, Roman etc. (Fig. 5-6)
- a new civic centre over the demolished historic centre, in worst cases. (Suceava, Târgovişte, Galaţi etc.)



Fig. 2_Sibiu, urban central area containing the civic centre (down) and historic centre (up) Image © 2014 Digital Globe, graphic overlay by Andreea Prelipcean

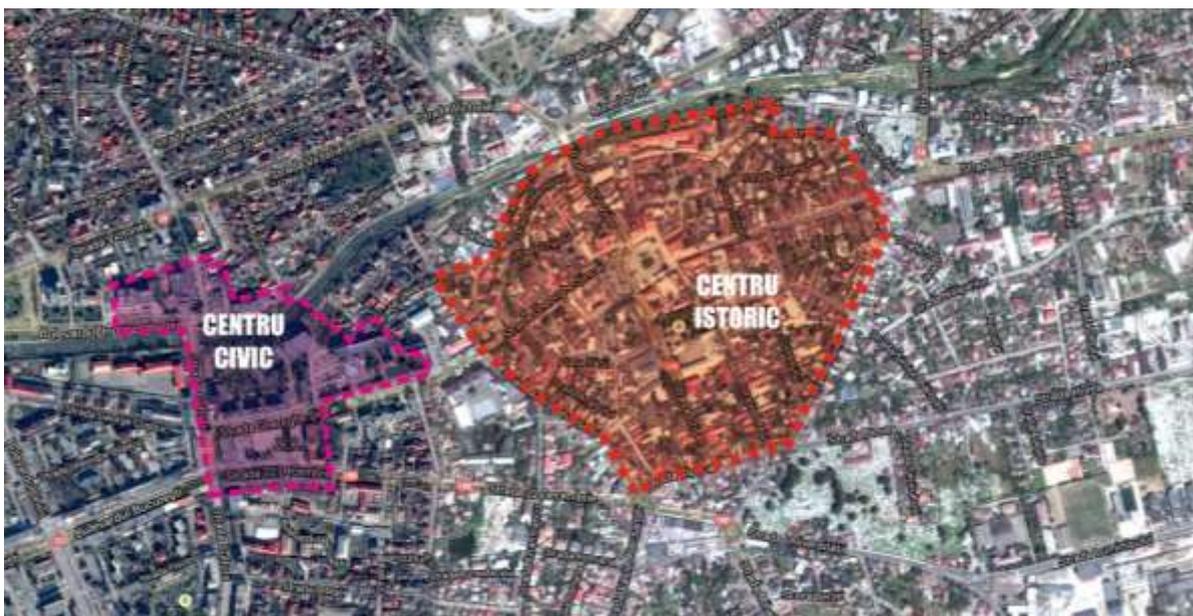


Fig. 3_Baia Mare urban central area containing the civic centre (left) and the historic centre (right) Image © 2014 Digital Globe, graphic overlay by Andreea Prelipcean

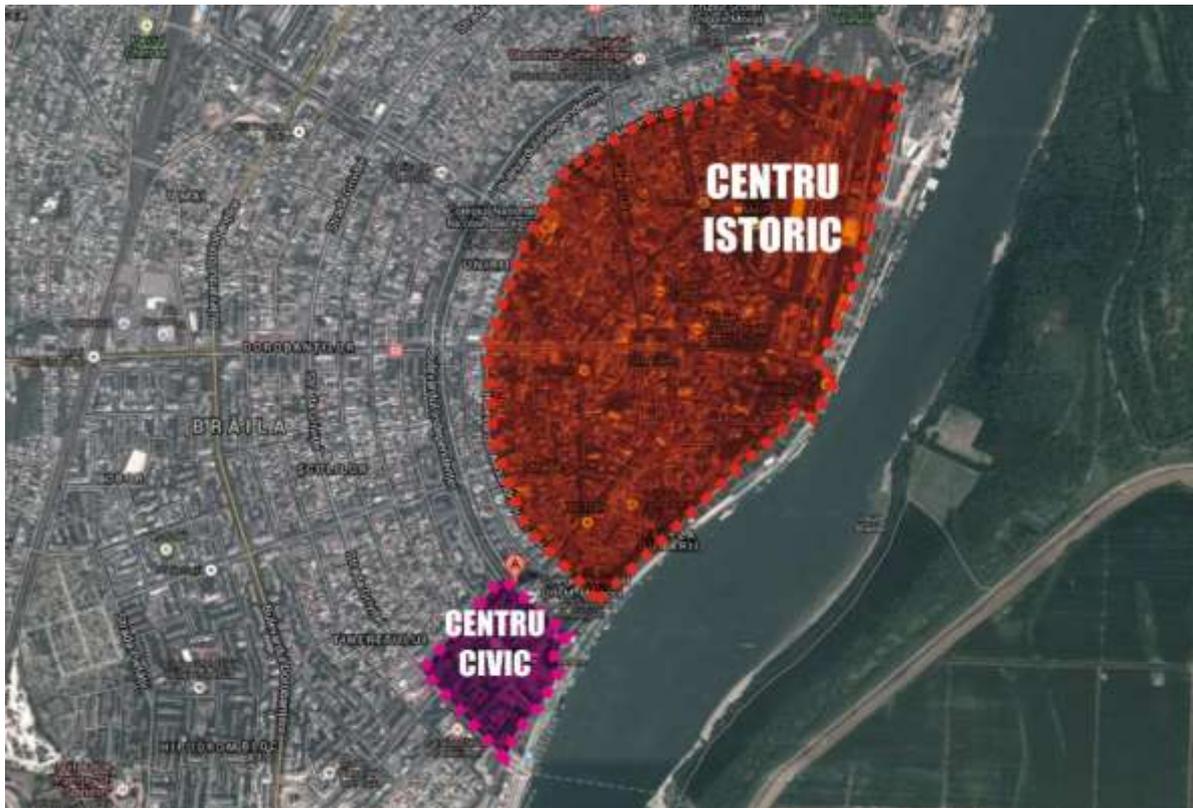


Fig. 4_Brăila, Urban central area containing the civic centre(down) and historic centre(up)
Image © 2014 Digital Globe, graphic overlay by Andreea Prelipcean



Fig. 5_Craiova, urban central area containing civic centre overlaid inside the historic centre Image
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Fig. 6_Târgu Mureș, urban central area containing the civic centre inserted inside the historic centre. Image © 2014 Digital Globe, graphic overlay by Andreea Prelipcean

Several Romanian historic cities that have civic centres placed alongside the historic centres are located inside the Carpathians, in Transylvania. A reason why the civic centre was placed alongside the historic centre in this area could be the evolution of medieval cities around a central square, the density and durability of existing tissue urban and the presence of fortified walls around the old city, due to the way cities were built during foreign occupation - urban layouts and settlement developments derived from the western model of settlements.

Civic centres are very different and similar at the same time, as they were created to serve a precise purpose and function, but their layout adapted to very different urban tissue. But no matter the layout and configuration of the civic centres created during the totalitarian regime, this urban structure generates similar effects on the central area of historic cities; regardless of the position of the civic centre in relation with the historic centre, the memorial connotation is the same – all civic centres were created through partial or total destruction of existing urban tissue, (2 pg. 358-369) and as consequence, much like the post-war collective housing buildings, the civic centres are associated with a traumatic period in history. As such, the perception of urban environment is significantly influenced by the affective memory of the people, having a negative effect on the perception of urban space created during that period. There is one reason why civic centres require cultural rehabilitation, and cultural rebranding in order to positively change the collective perception of post-socialist urban space.

Cultural propaganda and public manipulation through official culture was enacted by creating new appropriate buildings (Houses or Palaces of Culture) or using reconversion of built heritage, to erase from the collective memory undesired historic significance. (1 p. 82) Recycling built heritage through functional reconversion (1 p. 83) was different from what was happening during that period

in Western Europe because the change in heritage value and significance was dictated by ideology and political doctrine and not by economical evolution of urban environment.

Reinforced concrete could be easily considered the trade mark construction material of the modern era. Reinforced concrete allowed the creation of surprising and daring architectural forms and reshaped urban space. It also allowed rapid recovery after the destruction of war in Europe but can also be considered as the "tool of destruction" for traditional/historic urban tissue in Central and Eastern Europe, where large neighbourhoods of collective housing built from reinforced concrete were rapidly built over demolished historic buildings. (2) Also, the technology of reinforced concrete that allowed architectural forms unimagined before, was used to create massive representative buildings inside new urban structures as an „artistic" expression of power and victory of technological progress during a totalitarian regime. (3) Civic centres are large urban structures where modern technological advancements in the field of engineering and architecture allowed the creation of massive, impressive modern(ist) buildings as an expression of political empowerment. The human scale is ignored in such urban structures, architectural form and composition of urban space is dedicated to praise the new era, the technological advancements during a „glorious era". Concrete architectural forms are not related to the needs of the people, but rather to the propaganda needs of the totalitarian regime. Monumental sombre buildings, monumental squares, "cold" and neutral/impersonal finishes are common traits for the civic centres urban space, contrasting with the materiality and human scale of the traditional/historic urban tissue. Modernist movement and the reinforced concrete technology had a major influence on the evolution of urban environment in both Western and Eastern Europe. In Eastern Europe however, modernist architecture sometimes blending nationalized architectural elements served for rebuilding and reshaping urban environment according to the totalitarian regime's narrative of efficiency, modernity and triumph of progress. (3 pp. 492-493) On the other hand, Modernist architecture was also a silent and hidden protest political ideology – proof that artistic movements from the Western (Free) Europe could be embedded in politically required built environment. As consequence, many modernist buildings from Central and Eastern Europe are an interesting and historically valuable addition for the European Modernist Movement. On the downside, given that all modernist buildings have been created during a traumatic political period, post-socialist society tends to ignore and abandon (in extreme cases even destroy/demolish) these buildings as a person would discard and abandon undesired objects related to bad memories. (3 pp. 489-490)

According to M. Czepczynski there is a tendency to publicly promote collective amnesia of the communist period as a mechanism of assertion for the legitimacy of the new political rule (1 p. 109) and as a healing mechanism for collective trauma. (4) The civic centres in historic cities are a sad example of cultural meaning associated to technological advancement. To forget the traumatic period and to erase its memory from urban space, society ignores potential historic and artistic value of modernist architecture and reinforced concrete structures. Even worse, exposed concrete architectural forms are disregarded or even hated in post-socialist society, whilst old buildings and traditional materials make a romantic comeback in urban development. The fascination with historic periods before the totalitarian regime often result in unusual and hybrid urban interventions that ignore the urban context in order to promote national values and traditions and demonstrate nation's resilience over difficult times. (3 p. 490)

For this reason, duality is a functional-spatial feature of the central area of the post-socialist historic cities, a complex problem that is often ignored in the context of strategies and policies for urban development. The presence of the civic centre is one of the reasons that built heritage was sometimes neglected in the post-socialist cities, but is also the reason why the historical centres reclaim the identity value after the fall of the totalitarian regime: the orientation towards preserving and promoting built heritage is due to the fact that the new centre, civic centre, is the palpable memory of a traumatic period, in contrast to the built heritage, which is associated with the image of the period before Communism. There is a contrasting relationship between the civic centre and

the historical centre, both at the level of architectural language and spatial-functional level: heritage won recognition of cultural, economic value and identity role by comparison to the "lack of value" of the civic centre. (Fig.7, Fig.8). In this post-socialist cultural context, active conservation must consider the relationship between central area components – functions, landmarks, public space, built heritage etc. – and it must consider the civic centre as component of the specific cultural heritage, given its influence over urban environment and urban behaviour within post-socialist urban culture. The relationship between civic centre and historic centre within the urban central area becomes the specific cultural context for the post-socialist historic city. From this point of view the built heritage that survived demolitions during the totalitarian regime cannot be disengaged from its context, preserved and promoted by ignoring the surrounding urban transformations. By acknowledging the urban context generated during the totalitarian regime and the transformations of its cultural values the society can (re)build the cultural identity of the post -socialist city.



Fig. 7_Baia Mare central area - disregarded civic centre(Photo: Andreea Prelipcean)



Fig. 8_Baia Mare central area - rehabilitated historic centre(Photo: Andreea Prelipcean)

Cultural rehabilitation is the urban regeneration approach proposed in this paper: regarding the intervention method on civic centre, the term *rehabilitation* is used in the medical sense, together

with the anthropological sense of the term *culture* to suggest the need to heal an important component of the urban organism through *transformation of cultural significance and perception with the aid of cultural components* – activities, values, behaviours, products/artefacts etc. – as interface between people and urban space. In this approach, urban regeneration of post-socialist historic cities must consider expanding the concept of culture to comprise the complex urban context, including the urban transformations generated during the period of the totalitarian regime, as an important element of the contemporary urban culture. Success of recent urban regeneration interventions, based on the capitalization of built heritage in historic centres – considered as cultural value, and cultural product with economic value – could be extended to the civic centres, to amplify and capitalize the full urban development potential of the central area. Promoting civic centres through cultural programmes and activities in a way to solve the fracture in current relationship between the two centres within the central area of Romanian historic cities – a fracture that affects urban space, urban behaviour and urban cultural meaning. As part of urban context surrounding and influencing built heritage, the civic centre becomes defining element for the evolution of built environment and its relationships between urban system components. The status and conservation stage of the historic centre inside the collective mentality and inside the urban environment are interconnected with the evolution of the central area during the period of the totalitarian regime. That is why built heritage considered as part of cultural heritage must be preserved, rehabilitated and promoted also considering the ”communist” heritage as element of collective cultural identity and post-socialist urban culture.

Historic cities with civic centres created alongside historic centres (such as Sibiu, Brăila, Baia Mare etc.) could have an advantage in creating a multifunctional city centre by properly relating and rehabilitating the two centres. Conservation of built heritage in historic centre is limited by the existing built patrimony, and the development of the central area to respond to modern society needs could prove problematic. But if cultural rehabilitation of the existing civic centre is conducted together with the reconciliation of the relationship between the two centres, a new multifunctional city centre could emerge, based on the complementary relationship between civic centre and historic centre. The civic centre could become a spatial and functional extension of the historic centre, able to accommodate modern public functions or large complex functions as business, commercial centres that could not be hosted by the historic centre without compromise. In many cases, even after shifting the centre from the civic to the historic centre, some buildings continued to be used maintaining the same functions, even though their appearance and proper functioning is affected by the lack of interest in current maintenance – hotels, administration buildings, commercial buildings. (Fig.9) Houses of Culture and the public space are the most affected by abandonment and improper use, although these buildings aesthetically dominate the civic centres. (Fig.10)



Fig. 9_Sibiu, civic centre with still active commercial centre and hotel(Photo: Andreea Prelipcean)



Fig. 10_Baia Mare - House of Culture (up) and Sibiu - House of Culture (down) (Photo: Andreea Prelipceanu)

Part of civic centres functions being still active is an indicator for the potential of the urban structure and the ability to respond to modern society's needs and could suggest future interventions for spatial and functional transformations of civic centres. In some cases, symbolic buildings of civic centres undergo reconversion process, and large public spaces conceived to formerly accommodate forced public manifestations - scene for the communist oppression theatre - are converted in leisure spaces and public spaces for festivals, concerts and public manifestations of a new way of life. (1 p. 164) This indicates that civic centres and modernist architecture in Central and Eastern Europe could be reintegrated in the cultural landscape - as a big part of modern urban environment and testimony to half a century of history - through culture-led regeneration and active regeneration of post- socialist historic cities.

Alongside the reconversion a rehabilitation of public buildings, public space plays an important role in the process of transforming the way the civic centre is perceived, used and appropriated by the contemporary society. The fact that public space is the interface between people and built environment is important in rethinking ways to link the two centres in public perception, along with physical repairs and cultural rehabilitation. It is also important to investigate the need to reshape visual appearance of the buildings in the civic centres and consider capitalizing on the aesthetical values of modernist buildings (if there are any) opposed to current tendency to cover and mask socialist architecture in "antique" or traditional decorations (Fig.11) or high-tech finishes (Fig.12) of questionable architectural value. As defining component of the central area, civic centres should be re-integrated and interconnected with built heritage and the traditional urban fabric, thus mending the rupture in urban built environment.



Fig. 11_Modified roof and wooden traditional balcony decorations used to adorne a modernist Commercial complex. (Dumbrava Commercial Complex, Sibiu) (Photo: Andreea Prelipcean)



Fig. 12_Sibiu, urban central area, Ibis hotel(former Continental Hotel, on the left) (Photo: Andreea Prelipcean)

Conclusions

Many post-socialist historical cities in Romania marked by *the duality of the central area* have yet to manage and capitalize on the relationship between two defining urban structures represented by the two cores of centrality, the *historic centre* (old/traditional kernel around which the city developed) and the *civic centre* (new centre built during the totalitarian regime period as means to affirm/secure political power). Although the duality of central area is not specific only to post-socialist historic cities, the way this aspect manifests itself on a cultural meaning level is relevant for the urban regeneration process. The complex relationship between the two centres with distinct cultural meaning influences both the evolution of contemporary cities and the context in which built heritage is protected and evolves, which raises the problem of adapting urban regeneration interventions to the specific cultural context of post-socialist historic cities. Urban regeneration strategies of post-socialist historic cities should be based both on the rehabilitation and recovery/conservation of cultural heritage (urban built heritage, in this case) as well as on the use of social and educational dimension of the culture to reintegrate into urban life areas that suffer from assigned negative cultural significance - is considered relevant the civic centre's example, whose considerable potential is not exploited because of the centre's association with a traumatic period in urban evolution (not limited only to Romania).

The subject of urban regeneration of the historic cities in the context of sustainable development raises complex problems related to the socio-economic constraints and post-socialist cultural landscape of urban space in Central and Eastern Europe. These problems are particularly pronounced and visible in central urban area, where the difficult relationship between built heritage and the built environment created under the totalitarian regime generates conflict in terms of perception of space and urban behaviour related to ruptured urban environment. Reconstructing a sustainable connection based on functional and spatial complementarity for the two centres require reconsidering central area as part of a complex urban organism where its components, internal relations and relations/trade with the city are vital to the evolution of the urban environment. A multifunctional urban centre involves the adaptation of the built environment to the new requirements of the modern society, but the constraints posed by the presence of the built heritage that must be protected and integrated into the urban organism affect the evolution and development of the central area in this direction. The advantage of post-socialist historic towns in this respect is the presence of a spatial and functional reserve near the historic centre (dominated by the presence of built heritage), in the central zone of the city - which, by definition, requires agglomerations and spatial-functional conflicts - in the form of the *civic centre*. The contrast between the traditional urban tissue of the historical centre and the monumental scale of civic centre, where generally there are major public functions, can become an advantage of a complex central area, where new opportunities arise to resolve functional or spatial incompatibility between contemporary society's needs and the fragile built heritage.

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