

## Romanian Youth Houses Today

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### Abstract

*I frame an investigation of cultural buildings in Romania (especially Youth Houses), insisting, as well, upon the history of this architectural program and also upon its transformation during communism and post-communism. Youth Houses program arouse at prof. architect Emil Barbu Popescu's initiative, originally as a design brief within the university's subject "District facilities and loisir centers", and afterwards as a guide/ regulation for several "Facilities for the youth" (inspired by "Foyer de la Jeunesse"). This established the design brief for "Youth Houses", communicated by The Communist Union of Youth, conducted by Nicu Ceausescu, who also coordinated these buildings. Without the agreement from their original designers, Youth Houses suffered interventions within their architectural appearance. Their functions altered and, at times, turned into casinos, night clubs, trading centers etc. Even though typification constraints vanished, today's architect deals with the incapacity of withstanding the political and economic systems. This issue became a sociological, financial and political matter; architectural and urbanistic reasons are almost not taken into consideration any longer. I also consider necessary a debate regarding the original beneficiary of these Youth Houses – The Communist Union of Youth, but mainly those who currently inherit this patrimony.*

### Rezumat

*Propun o investigare a construcțiilor culturale din România (în special a Caselor de tineret), punând accent în aceeași măsură, pe istoria programului architectural, cât și pe metamorfoza acestuia în perioada comunistă și post-comunistă. Programul Caselor de tineret a apărut la inițiativa domnului profesor arhitect Emil Barbu Popescu, inițial ca temă de proiectare în școală pentru "Echipamente de cartier și centre de loisir", iar apoi ca un îndrumar/ regulament pentru diferite "Dotări de tineret" (având ca sursă de inspirație "Foyer de la Jeunesse"). Acesta a constituit tema de proiectare pentru "Casele de tineret" transmisă către Uniunea Tineretului Comunist condusă de Nicu Ceaușescu și care coordona printre altele și aceste construcții. Fără acordul proiectanților inițiali, Casele de tineret au suferit intervenții la nivelul plasticii arhitecturale. Funcțiunile lor s-au transformat, ele devenind uneori cazinouri, cluburi de noapte, centre comerciale, etc. Chiar dacă impunerea tipizării a dispărut, arhitectul în ziua de azi se confruntă cu incapacitatea de a face față sistemului economic și politic. Problema a devenit una sociologică, financiară și politică; rațiunile de ordin arhitectural și urbanistic aproape că nu sunt luate în considerare. Consider de asemenea necesară o discuție cu privire la beneficiarii inițial al acestor Case de tineret – Uniunea Tineretului Comunist, dar mai ales despre cei care moștenesc astăzi acest patrimoniu.*

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## 1. The cultural program during communism

In Romania, the concept of loisir existed in people's lives from early ages. Soirees, several working circles, circles created within the cultural world – are a few examples which were preceded and lead to the establishment of these culture houses. After the soviet model was introduced, culture becomes mass culture. At this point, the necessity for the development of a spirit of social responsibility is achieved through the conscious acknowledgement of the socialist society's goals.

Exploring the documentary stock of *Arhitectura* magazine, I will expose some of the features which define the cultural buildings stated by the architects involved in their design process.

### 1.1 The Rural Cultural Center

“Represents the cultural life center of the whole settlement. [...] The activity of the club is not spread only within the building, but also in the open air, with cinema shows, soirees, celebrations, sport competitions etc. Hence, it must be surrounded by gardens, parks, sport fields. [...] It must be closely connected to day to day life, quotidian flow of the citizens, it must not be isolated or at a distance from easy access. The realist attitude of the designer stands as a manifestation of understanding the life style of the citizens.” [1:6,7]

“It is the communal institution which accommodates a complex activity, meant to ensure the development of cultural and politic knowledge of working people from the villages.” [2:16]

### 1.2 The Syndical Club

“Its mission is to allow the workingmen and their families to spend their spare time, in an organized manner, being provided with means of entertainment and as well with the possibility of developing their cultural, political and professional knowledge.”[3:50]

“A program specific to human communication and relationships – provides equipment of extensive use which introduces a new concept of the brief and the layout, in order to accommodate: 1. necessities of relaxing, spending spare time in an useful and pleasant manner, stimulating creativity and ingenuity, meeting all hobbies, for the purpose of refreshing working capabilities; 2. necessities of the permanent and recurrent process of education for the purpose of developing true culture for the entire society. Clubs must become strong points of attraction, able to provide a spontaneous, permanent, at all hours, especially for the youth, but without overlooking its official aspect of social contact with the elderly, and especially with those working, taking into account the current terms of reducing the number of working days per week.” [4:37]

### 1.3 Cultural House

“Its main objectives can be resumed with the following: spreading elements of culture from the national and universal thesaurus; accommodating, organizing, ensuring and stimulating the practice of several cultural activities”[5:30]

“Buildings which originally had the purpose of accommodating several necessities of delivering culture to the masses and engaging in all sorts of artistic and technical activities. [...] Its main goal is to accommodate the development of an active and effervescent social life, to act as loisir saloons

for everyday life” [6:79]

“Created with the purpose of fulfilling and accommodating the fundamental need of the cultural-artistic and educational process.” [7:65]

## 2. The Youth House

Also named the Science and Technique House for Youth, the Youth House “is not a building which lives through its appearance or presence within the city, but through the cultural and social liveliness which it produces. They must be buildings which stimulate, instigate, and, in certain circumstances, take the shape of the community they represent. We ought not to have a <standard Youth House>, because the youth have different professional structure, different concerns, spirit, after case.” [8:19]

### 2.1 About competition

In 1981 takes place the competition for “The Youth House”, introduced by *Arhitectura* magazine, which aimed “the stimulation of creativity in order to obtain a studio as thorough as could be, founded on the basis of interdependency of Youth House functions and of dynamics of the activities performed by the youth”. [9:65-76] The writer of the article notices “the early involvement which The Central Committee of the Communist Union for Youth had for quality of architecture, towards the initiatives for functional, constructive and esthetic design of its equipment”. The competition is important for the cultural program, especially for the debates and issues which arose within the jury. For the matter, the very original premises, suggested by the grading criteria, can be doubt. Hence, apart from the criteria referring to functionality and coherence between spaces, technology and new building materials, economic efficiency and architectural esthetic; an “advanced degree of prefabrication and typification is desired”. The main issues brought into the matter referred to:

- the brief contradiction between the proposal for new solutions and the functional schema given;
- the character of the polyvalent hall and its degree of multi-purposing;
- the functional link between the two main areas (the accommodation area and the other cultural-educative fields), as well as the staging posts of the construction;
- the importance, on a local level, of this kind of building;
- the degree of uniqueness and the cultural, civic and symbolic meaning of this kind of building;
- the use of the rewarded projects in order to attain a standard design.

After the jury exposed their opinions, they rightly condemned the idea of typification, but I consider that the lack itself of a real site introduced within the brief, excludes, without fail, the issue of typification. There were no rewards given, but only five mentions among the architects and ten mentions among student architects (the competition addressed those too, but with a simplified brief). What is remarkable is the diversity of the solutions submitted.

Cosma and Elena Jurov’s project suggests an assembly of multi-purpose buildings, incorporating “standard functional blocks” which could later be modulated and adapted depending on subsequent terms (site, financial founding, needed capacity), using in the combination two or all of the three modules: hall, club, hotel. As exposed in its description, Dinu Patriciu’s project “is not an answer to the brief, but a protest against a wrong mentality”, regarding the typification of a project indifferent to the urban tissue it must integrate into and the necessity of different social-human contacts, depending on the life style of the community it speaks to. On the other hand, Dorin Ștefan suggests a philosophy starting from “archetypal structures”, referring to “environment unity” and “concept unity” within the creation of the architectural object. Both projects have in common the development of “an urban space alveole” between the two volumes which incorporate, on one of

the sides, the accommodations units with the afferent functions, and on the other side the other units for shows, culture, education and recreation. Petre Curta and Ana-Maria Niculae suggest, as an alternative, the option of separating the two main areas; with facing accesses towards the accommodation units and the other units. Even though they are connected on the inside, the activities which can take place simultaneously, can be completely separated. Virgil and Stela Florea's project is also based on this principle, except that the performance hall becomes a core which generates the other units necessary to cultural-artistic manifestations.

## 2.2 About sector fields

Regarding functionality, within the structure of Youth Houses we can discern several areas:

- the performance field: structured in multi-purpose halls, in order to accommodate theater, dance, music, cinema shows, etc.;
- the educative-cultural field: containing several technique and craft circle, for hobbies, creative workshops, exposition halls, library, etc.;
- recreation field: for games, sports activities and entertainment, dancing clubs;
- accommodation field: containing accommodation units, food resources and necessary auxiliary functions (including an office of the Tourism Agency for Youth).

## 2.3 About rewarded projects

The following Youth Houses, rewarded during communism by the Union of Architects, are to be mentioned:

- in 1978, Mention – conf. Haralambie Cochei, Ivan Stern for: Youth House in Timișoara;
- in 1980, social-cultural buildings field – Ștefan Lungu, Petre Ciuta, for their contribution to Science and Technique House for Youth in Râmnicu Vâlcea;
- in 1981, social-cultural buildings field – Mihai Botescu, for his contribution to Youth House in Drobeta Turnu Severin;
- in 1985, Mention – Youth House in Galați, architects: PhD. Emil Barbu Popescu, Viorel Simion;
- in 1985, Mention – Science and Technique Culture House for Youth in Cluj Napoca, architect Radu Spânu;
- in 1986, Award - Youth House in Slatina, architects: PhD. Emil Barbu Popescu, Dorin Ștefan.

The most representative is the Youth House in Slatina, which was awarded not only the Union of Architects Prize in 1986, but also Kardajali Special Prize, Diploma of Honor and Silver Medal at Interarch 87, Sofia-Bulgaria. Designed within Communist Union Students Association Council in Romania – Bucharest University Center, the Youth House is remarkable for its judiciously organized interior spaces, relationships between them, and the strong connection with exterior activities (the rooftop of the multi-functional hall is a walking terrace, with platforms for outdoor performance).

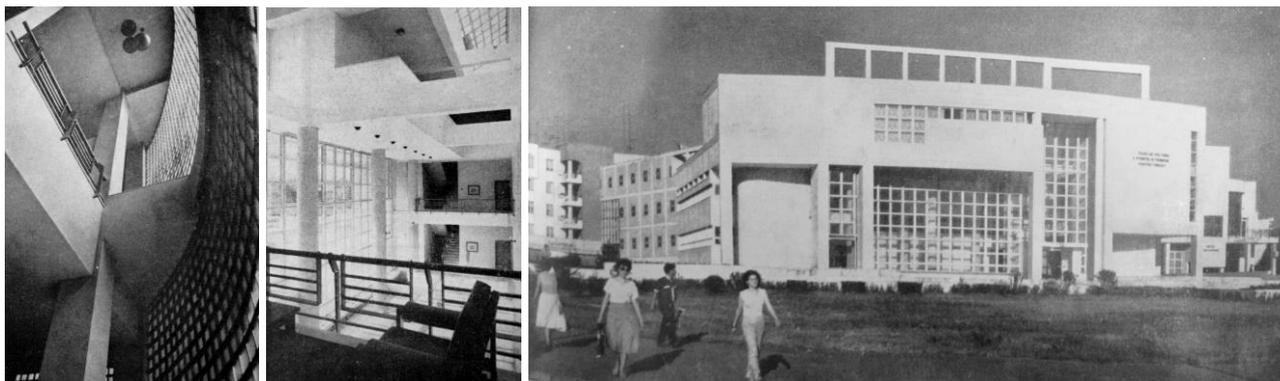


Figure 1. Interior and exterior pictures of The Youth House in Slatina, from 1986 [10:10-17]

“The ensemble we suggested in Slatina pursues to facilitate not only programmatic actions and activities, but also spontaneous human contact, less rigid, bound to take place especially outside the house, in those areas which precede the entrances. This way, we attempted to have no main or secondary facades, to vary the access points and to create volumetric and functional interest surrounding the ensemble.” [10:10-11]

### 3. The heritage of Communist Union of Youth

Communist Union of Youth was the “revolutionary mass agency which brings together large masses of hardworking youth, countrymen, pupils, students and intellectuals, animated by the noble goals of socialism and communism.” [11:2] and takes place under the command of the Romanian Communist Party; with its main goal of “educating the youth in a communist approach” [11:2].

“It would hence lead the way, on the one hand, to massive indoctrination of the youth and, on the other hand, to their involvement, from an early age, in economic activities conducted by the new regimen.” [12:139]

The operating structure of the Communist Union of Youth conformed to the model of Komsomol – the union of youth in The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, introduced in 1918 as All-Union Leninist Young Communist League.

Even though the time of establishment of Communist Union of Youth is not clearly articulated due to the communist attempts of counterfeit and infiltrating into the existing unions of youth, in “the communist historiography, the establishment date was decreed the *General conference of socialist youth* in Bucharest from March 19-20, 1922.” [13:3] From the *Congress of establishment of the single revolutionary union of youth* in 1949 and up to 1965 it was named Union of Working Youth. Within the Union of Working Youth were established in 1949 The Pioneer Organization, in 1957 The Union of Romanian Communist Students Associations and in 1976 Homeland Falcons.

The organization was one of the means of propaganda and control of private and career life of the youth. Hence, the cultural buildings are complementary to this goal, by providing a controlled environment for spending free time.

Just as the Communist Union of Youth reproduced the status of Komsomol, the architectural trends of the ‘50s rely on the soviet pattern. “In this historic moment for the architects in our country, we transmit, on behalf of the *Conference of establishment of the Union of Architects in R.P.R.*, welcoming and friendly greetings. At all times, the soviet documentary materials are on our drawing boards, and soviet textbooks, books and magazines are being studied by hundreds of architects in architecture libraries. This way, we adopt your wide experience, the founding method of socialist realism in architecture.” [14:8]

In August 1988, the last inventory of the Communist Union of Youth heritage took place. Pursuant to this inventory, submitted by Iulian Dascalu (current president of The National Organization for Youth), within the *Communist Union of Youth heritage, between truth and disinformation* [15] conference, the value of goods is estimated to around 1 244 000 000 lei. These were clubs, youth houses, leisure centers and other headquarters; they were divided on a local or central level. On local level, there were inventoried 36 Youth Clubs, 29 Youth Houses, 16 Sports Centers and 10 headquarters (across the whole country, except for Bacau County). Besides these, there are also mention the Touring facilities for youth, administered by The Tourism Agency for Youth (Roșu, Pârâul Rece, Bușteni, Câmpulung Moldovenesc and Costinești).

Based on the decree-law no. 150 from 1990 [16], it is decreed that youth organizations would be established among the counties and the city of Bucharest, and their heritage would be supplied from the goods which belonged to former communist youth organizations. In 1991 The Tourism Company for Youth was introduced (renamed in 1992 – The Tourism and Business Agency), which takes possession of Touring facilities for youth – heritage administered during communist years by the Tourism Agency for Youth.

Regarding these aspects, the county agencies for youth, introduced in 1990, have not yet managed to establish a unitary formation and organization; part of the inherited buildings are functionally abandoned.

#### **4. Institutions which manage Youth Houses today**

What is remarkable is how these transformed after 1990, along with the changing of ownership status, after escaping the patronage of Communist Union of Youth. Hence, I will emphasize several situations, attempting to determine the level of abandonment for these cultural centers:

##### ***4.1 “Private” Youth Houses***

The Youth House in Galați is, presumably, the most concerning situation. After 1990, this came into possession of a local businessman, who transformed the accommodation field in a four star hotel, and the cultural-artistic field into a shopping mall. On the inside, the subdivision was not altered, but the finishes and amenities are very low quality. The second building for cultural-artistic activities, was brutally altered, inside and outside, to serve the new function. The mall went bankrupt in two years; currently the building is abandoned.

##### ***4.2 Youth Houses under County Council Administration***

The Youth House in Giurgiu has never been finished. Along with the falling of the regime, construction was interrupted, and the building has only reached structure stage since 1990. It automatically came into possession of the County Council, which had a few attempts of selling or finishing it. The issues they came across were not only of financial matter, but also legal. Part of the site it is built on is possession of the City Hall. Interests from parties and politicians were above the need of finalizing a youth center, which the city actually needs. The head of the County Council considers that, for the youth in Giurgiu, culture is not a priority.

In Cluj-Napoca, the County Council, which is in possession of the building, decided to start renovations, with the original designer’s agreement. The Science and Technique Culture House is currently a hotel, and the cultural-artistic field has been under renovation for years. With its original design during communism also came a rationalization plan, which has been completely altered. Hence, the main entrance area is currently accommodating a shopping mall.

##### ***4.3 Youth Houses in the heritage of County Agencies for Youth***

Despite the fact that there was established the County Agency for Youth in Teleorman, Youth Houses in Zimnicea and Roșiorii de Vede are currently functioning as private institutions; the spaces have been rented to several commercial agents, and the original function has almost been forgotten by the citizens. In Zimnicea, the person currently using the space believes that there has never been a youth house, and in Roșiorii de Vede, the performance area has become a furniture showroom.

The Youth House in Botoșani is administered by the County Agency for Youth, but due to financial problems, most of the spaces have been rented, and the rest haven't gone under any kind of renovation since the construction. However, it is remarkable that the management body still maintains the cultural character of the building – it still accommodates all sorts of cultural activities for the youth.

The Youth House in Timișoara case seems to be a fortunate situation. Since the establishment of The County Agency for Youth, a few young men managed to organize several cultural activities, and with good management of the income and by renting few of the spaces they succeeded renovating part of the building.

## 5. Conclusions

I recently had the chance to visit much of the Youth Houses; some of them under the administration of The County Agency for Youth, and others in the administration of Public Institution (Municipalities, County Councils). In both cases, the managers were very welcoming and eager to show me the building; most often they knew about the construction history.

For those under the administration of the County Youth Foundations, I felt regret and helplessness because of the precarious financial situation and uncertain legal situation. But the few happy cases (Drobeta-Turnu Severin and Timișoara) have shown that they can survive the fierce battle without compromise.

On the other hand, those in the administration of Public Institutions have managed to attract/receive funds; for this reason some have managed to retain their original function (Bistrița and Mărășești), developing cultural activities yet.

Considering that Communist Union of Youth was under the patronage of Nicu Ceaușescu, these buildings have received special architectural expression, mostly unique buildings and where architects enjoyed greater freedom; the typification not being imposed. So, the network of Youth Houses is the result of the architect thinking during the ante-revolutionary period in a more free vision in terms of architectural concept. On the other hand, the current cultural system needs improvement, and these buildings are an opportunity to reactivate it; consequently to reactivate themselves as architectural objects.

The issue becomes urgent because the passing of time represents a real destructive factor in the condition of these buildings and their development; not only of the Youth Houses, but also the built heritage of the second half of the twentieth century.

The situation of *the recently heritage* – represented by ante-revolutionary building is paradoxical. It is considered too young to be considered and included in the lists of national heritage, and too old to be used to the detriment of new construction.

Resolving this conflict should come to the initiatives taken by the public society, the authorities and the architects:

- the society is not yet ready to understand and to absorb these constructions with political connotation;
- the authorities have not yet well established legislative framework, nor has financial funding for consolidation, reconstruction, preservation and restoration thereof;
- the architects should elaborate a list of measures to assess this heritage, because soon it will be in a position to not have that evaluate, even if it is valuable .

I can not give a verdict, but I consider that the position of mrs. Ana Maria Zahariade, describes the

situation where these buildings are today:

“The decrepit condition or functional obsolescence of many public buildings repels any sympathy, while others linger as relics of a past epoch, awaiting (self-) demolition.” [17:16]

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