

BLOCUL — An Ethnography of a Romanian Block of Flats

Maria Șalaru
St Cross College
DPhil in Social and Cultural Anthropology
University of Oxford

Supervisor: Dr Inge Daniels

BLOCUL — An Ethnography of a Romanian Block of Flats

Based on a long-term ethnography inside a block of flats in Piatra-Neamț, Romania, this thesis explores how individuals, through everyday creative engagements with their apartments, try to come to terms with the uncertainties of a rapidly changing society — one caught between the vulnerabilities of both socialism and capitalism. It examines the inhabitants' capacity for self-organization, with a focus on the daily life of a block administrator overseeing the maintenance and repair of his ageing building. By paying close attention to a range of infrastructural elements often taken for granted — from water taps and boilers, to balconies and windows — my research offers new insights into how people negotiate complex relationships of trust and suspicion in the light of degrading infrastructure. Within the context of increasingly decentralized resources, I also demonstrate various difficulties involved in sustaining day-to-day practices of energy-saving, and discuss the block inhabitants' multifaceted understanding of the "common good". Finally, I emphasize how apartment renovations are fuelled by motivations that are at once aesthetic and functional, and thus problematize the distinction between these two categories that has dominated anthropological studies of the built environment to this day. My thesis contrasts the well-established literature about the home — that pays attention to aesthetics and identity at the micro-scale of the domestic space — with recent studies about infrastructure that typically examine macro-scale, functional reasons for urban transformations. Overall, I argue for a more prominent role for the study of home infrastructures in anthropology, while also contributing to debates about housing and energy policies.

Maria Șalaru, St Cross College
DPhil in Social and Cultural Anthropology
Trinity Term 2017

Table of Contents

Introduction **10**
The Setting *16*
Methodology *23*
Theoretical framework *32*
Anthropology of the home 33
Anthropology of infrastructure 39
Chapter breakdown and key findings *41*

The House and the Block **47**
Socialist enthusiasm for the block *51*
Contrasting discourses about houses and blocks of flats *56*
The Petruca family — the story of a house in the Mărăței neighbourhood *63*
The construction process *67*
Initial problems and degradation *71*

The Administration Room **81**
The block administrator *84*
Calculating the block's expenses *86*
"Infrastructural" Big-Man *90*
Trust and suspicion *94*
The decline of the welfare state *100*

The Water Tap **105**
Water — a "luxury" good? *107*
Water infrastructure during socialism *109*
The breakdown of water infrastructure *112*
Hot and cold water 117
Suspicions about the water quality 118
The absence of inhabitants and its infrastructural implications 128
Water contamination in the city *129*

The Wall Insulation **135**
A constructor's perspective *138*
City Hall's perspective *143*
Insulation in the H2B block *153*
The dangers of thermal insulation *163*

The Heater **169**
Heating in H2B *169*
Together, separate 172
Keeping the entire building warm 176
Decentralisation of heating *178*
Energy poverty *182*
Cold in the 1980s *184*
Wool and wood *189*

The Staircase 197
Maintenance of common spaces inside the building *202*
The entrance stairs *203*
The elevator *204*
The front door *209*
The garbage disposal *215*
The playgrounds *222*

The Window 227
Windows and renovation *243*
The balcony *251*
The size of the apartment and the balcony *254*
Vertical communication *261*
The Window and the Draft *265*

Conclusion 270
Contribution to anthropological theory *275*
Dissemination and impact *280*

Epilogue 284

Bibliography 298

For Rosemary Orr

Acknowledgements

This research would have been impossible without the help I received from many people.

First and foremost, my supervisor Dr Inge Daniels has shaped my project deeply and has provided unconditional guidance and support, from conception to completion. I hope that in my academic path I will meet more people like her, who have a true passion for their work and a generous spirit. I look up to her like no other.

Three incredible women have made direct and invaluable contributions to my thesis: Irina-Elena Nicolescu has made beautiful illustrations for the beginning of each chapter; Adela Iacoban has made incredibly detailed architectural renderings of the blocks' facades; Ileana Szasz has edited the footage I filmed during my fieldwork and helped me turn it into a full-fledged documentary. I cherish all the discussions I've had with them throughout the project and hope I will have the chance to work with them in future projects.

In Oxford, Prof Marcus Banks has helped me in the final stages of editing the documentary and the DDD (Drinks Dinner Discussion) evenings have particularly helped me in developing two chapters, *The Water Tap* and *The Heater* – I am very grateful to all the people who contributed to those discussions. At the ESRC Doctoral Training Centre, Dr David Mills has instilled confidence and a passion for interdisciplinary research, while Ivo Gruev and Laura Molloy have encouraged my work and have become dear friends.

Outside my department, I have encountered many academics who have inspired me and who have brought my critical thinking further. I am deeply grateful to Dr Hannah Knox at University College London, Prof Simone Abram at Durham University, Dr Julien Dugnoille at Exeter University, Dr Lonia Jakubowska at University College Utrecht, Dr Liviu Chelcea at University of Bucharest, Dr Oana Druta at Eindhoven University of Technology.

In Piatra-Neamt, I would like to thank Gheorghe Bud for his patience and rich knowledge which have been at the core of my thesis. Through his encouragement, I also met the wonderful inhabitants of the H2B block of flats, which I am forever indebted to for their trust and insights. I am also grateful to Nelu Dumitrascu from the State Archives, for pointing me in the direction of rich and relevant documentation. Thanks are also due to Gheorghe and Coralia Bunghez, Gheorghe Naghi, Victor Purice, and many research participants I have encountered during my fieldwork who have surprised and humbled me with their generosity.

It's said that it takes a village to write a thesis, and indeed many friends have helped me one way or another: Stan van der Burght, Lauren Rigter, Iulia Strat, Sophie Buchel, Alex Eastwood, Naomi Peters Rit, Irina Ciobanu are all treasures I don't take for granted.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my warm and loving family. My parents, Mioara and Ioan, have been my personal and intellectual motivation for this study, and my most precious reminder of where I come from. My husband, Samuel, has been my first and most critical reader, my source of both humour and power, my illustration of what makes a beautiful human – he has built the foundation for both my love for this project and for a happy life.

This work was supported by the Clarendon Fund and the Economic and Social Research Council.

Introduction

On the 3rd of April 2015, I was visiting Mr. and Ms. Anton, a retired couple who lived on the 3rd floor of the H2B building on the Traian Boulevard, in Piatra-Neamț. Ms. Anton was terribly annoyed that the water tap was running on maximum, and disturbing our conversation: "It's been running for half an hour, both here and in the bathroom. Ms. Filip from the 6th floor, on our section of the block, is undergoing pipe reparation, and the water needs to keep on flowing. I understand that, but who will pay for all this water I'm wasting now? Why would *we*, on the 3rd floor, need to keep our taps on, in order to seal a pipe on the 6th floor?" As I was heading out, Mr. Bud, their neighbour and the block administrator, rang the bell. He had many papers and keys in his hands and looked dreadfully tired and worn out. Living on the 5th floor of the same section, Mr. Bud had to deal with a broken ceiling — which had lowered considerably, swollen with water. He was there to tell them that they could turn off the water tap, now that the repair work was finished.

As he was explaining the physics of why their tap had to be turned on (due to the principle of communicating vessels), his phone rang: another neighbour, Mr. Mamulă, was asking him why his heater was not working. Mr. Bud tried to explain to his neighbour that he might have had a leak in his heater, but that it had nothing to do with the fact that he needed the water flow from his bathroom to be interrupted during the repair work for Ms. Filip. He explained this a couple of times, his voice getting higher and louder, until he turned purple red and interrupted the conversation, bursting into tears. Mr. Anton invited Mr. Bud in, who told us that he had been patient with Mr. Mamulă, up to the point where Mr. Mamulă yelled at him, saying he was an engineer, not an uneducated shepherd. This fight was the 'last drop' in a day which had started early in the morning. His wife was upset, his neighbours were upset, so he decided to stop picking up his phone to buy himself time and deal with all the repair work.

A few days later, Mr. Bud shared a folder full of paperwork with me, including informal invoices for the pipe repair. It was often impossible to get an official invoice for work like this, because it would be threefold the cost. Most maintenance thus took place through informal notes, which would be hard to register with the accountant. This meant that Mr. Bud had a hard time recuperating the money he took out of his own pocket for communal work from his fellow inhabitants. The day before, the repair man had asked for 180 lei (£30); Mr. Bud was able to bring it down to 100 lei (£17), but with an invoice that forced him to pay taxes. Also, for the four days of plumbing problems, he had had to deal with some of the most difficult people in the block: Ms. Filip filed an insurance form, asking the Association to pay for the damage — with what money? For all the work, he had covered the whole cost, not to mention paying for the damage in his own house. All in all, there were people in the block who had not returned investments made four years before — if his wife knew how much he invests in the block, she would kick him out!

Mr. Bud was not the only one to be disappointed. Because the damage had taken place between the 7th and the 6th floor, the repair work had to be approached from both apartments. Ms. Tomin, on the 7th floor, had no visible leakage in her apartment — why did they have to take her bathroom apart as well? Shortly after the water incident, I visited her to help her with baking *pască* before the Orthodox

Easter — she wanted to make seven cakes for all her dear ones, but she was overwhelmed with the effort it involved, and was relieved to hear that I was able to help. I arrived at her house at 4.00 p.m., only to find her exhausted. She had not slept since the incident, because she had workers in the house until 1.00 a.m. at times, and she had to clean up after them. She was irritated with both the effort, and the huge amount of cash that she had to invest in the repair, to ease her 6th floor neighbour's damage.

Such a disruption of peace and quiet was not dissimilar to other blocks in Piatra-Neamț. Ageing pipes would often break, highlighting the state's failure in providing quality housing, and the various regimes of knowledge needed by the inhabitants in order to fix the infrastructural faults. Mr. Bud, a retired engineer who had led one of the largest sections of the Săvinești Industrial Complex, had such knowledge, with all its ramifications: technical knowledge (that allowed him to fix the problem), financial knowledge (that allowed him to reach as low a cost as possible), social knowledge (that allowed him to negotiate his neighbours' frustrations). He single-handedly managed the maintenance of the building. Hence, in the spaces in between the apartments, I had found an institutional vacuum in which residents self-organised to maintain their building and manage social relations. This stirred my curiosity in understanding the block of flats as a whole, from its construction during the socialist period to the present day struggles to prevent breakdown and disarray.

Using the H2B block of flats in Piatra-Neamț as a case study, my thesis explores how inhabitants' through everyday creative engagements with their apartments, try to come to terms with the uncertainties of a rapidly changing society, caught in between the vulnerabilities of both socialism and capitalism. It thereby aims to sheds light on the relationship between individuals and the post-socialist state, as seen through the lens of contemporary architecture and infrastructure. By following the daily life of the inhabitants of H2B, I examine how the building's infrastructure encroaches on both living conditions and the social relations between neighbours. Infrastructure, in this case, is not just a backdrop to social activities. On the contrary, it is a troublesome participant: in order to prevent or to alleviate breakdown of ageing buildings, inhabitants are left to their own devices. In their common strive for a good life, neighbours are thus forced to come together and cooperate in caring for and maintaining infrastructure on a daily basis.

Early in my research it became clear that ongoing anxiety about their material environment made many of the ageing inhabitants nostalgic for the socialist period. While socialism had many flaws in their eyes, it also offered them the safety of housing and cheap utilities. During socialism, for instance, paying for water consumption was never worrisome — each block had a meter, and the payment was equally divided among inhabitants. As pointed out by one research participant, the amount was insignificant, in stark contrast to present-day worries about the high price of water. If we combine the suspicion that other neighbours are taking advantage and using more water, with the emergence of water meters on the market, it does not come as a surprise that most Romanian inhabitants decided to install water meters in their homes, in order to pay for their exact consumption. In parallel, aided by the de-centralization of the heating provision, inhabitants installed individual apartment boilers, in order to pay exactly for how much heating they consume. At the level of building administration, a similar process took place: the previous Inhabitants Associations (IA), which contained between 5 and 20 blocks of flats and were directly administered by City Hall, turned into Owners Associations (OA), which were given the freedom to self-organise, and consequently split up into smaller and smaller units, often containing only one building — as is the case with H2B. Most inhabitants viewed these

phenomena as a reaction to the state's loss of control over basic services. Ironically, perhaps, the authority of the previous regime is now more apparent in its absence in the eyes of my research participants, as property rights in the infrastructure that sustains the city switch rapidly between public and private management, and accountability becomes murkier by the day.

The ability for infrastructure to both produce as well as destabilise a sense of certainty and a collectively held confidence in norms has been studied in a post-socialist context (Alexander, 2007; Collier, 2011; Humphrey, 2003). Writing on Kazakhstan, Alexander notes that in the soviet social context "the flows of water and electricity were manifestations of continuing bonds and renewal between a paternalistic state and its citizens" (Alexander, 2007, p. 73). Alexander found that for all the inadequacies of the socialist system, there was a common understanding of what constituted the relationship between people and authorities: a relationship that stood for both a social contract and the means to a communist future.

Similarly, the crucial role of city infrastructure in actually materializing and constituting national, economic and social spaces has been analysed by Stephen Collier (Collier, 2011) in Russia. Collier highlights that every detail of urban infrastructure — from a piece of pipe to a family dwelling to a cluster of apartment blocks — was to partake in assembling "the Soviet social" (Collier, 2011, p. 85). The residential cluster, including apartments, courtyards, shops, and service points, was conceived of as a whole, designed to induce more collective forms of everyday behaviour (Crowley & Reid, 2002, p. 15). Collier also sheds light on the particular importance of utilities networks in the Soviet and post-Soviet Russian context: the bitter cold and reliance on a co-ordinating institution to provide heating and warm water.

Humphrey's work on soviet infrastructure and its post-soviet existence similarly focus on how the withdrawal of the state from the management of infrastructure has exposed a "psychological-ideological landscape, which has specific post-soviet contours" (Humphrey, 2003, p. 104). As utility services falter through underfunding and poor maintenance the soviet power of modernising, their fragility and vulnerability are revealed; no longer "an index of modernity", they become a sign of decay. Additionally, as services are privatised or manipulated by political elites a sense of 'social upheaval' or 'moral loss' is experienced (Humphrey, 2003, p. 92). For all three of these authors, at the end of state socialism, these bonds between the state and citizens are made visible as they are being reconfigured.

With the end of centralised planning and command, it has fallen to each new Republic, city and person, to find new ways of living in and reading their built environment, of recognising what constitutes a legitimate order. Indeed, the collapse of the Soviet Union shattered an overarching ideological framework, an economic structure and a system of relations between people, their natural and built environment (Alexander, 2007; Humphrey, 2002). Not unsurprisingly, it has thus been widely argued that the regime change catalysed swift, ideologically motivated transformations to the built environment (Burawoy & Verdery, 1999a; Fehérváry, 2013). This was achieved by eliminating symbolic references to the socialist state, communist ideology, and Soviet occupation in public space — statues of Marx and Lenin were removed and streets were renamed (Burawoy & Verdery, 1999a, pp. 39–40). In my thesis, I argue that this process of remaking urban space and landscape under post-socialism is not as comprehensive as is sometimes portrayed in the literature. In Piatra-Neamț, the "Chemistry"

Boulevard might have been renamed "Eminescu", after the national poet, but the great majority of my research participants still called it by its old name.

Aside from nomenclature, I found that a more gradual unmaking of the material world of the socialist state was also taking place. The maintenance of socialist-era buildings, both civic and private, deteriorated as state funds evaporated and unemployment rates rose. In my thesis, I demonstrate how, in this context, inhabitants appropriated their apartments in ways which contributed to these large-scale changes. This is to say that, among the other visible changes to the city, some were literally made from the inside out, as apartment privatisation gave residents the right to make alterations as long as they did not interfere with the structural integrity (and often, even if they did). The break-up of material and administrative continuities thus left inhabitants groping for ways to deal with the ageing mass of suddenly troublesome material elements, such as pipes, heaters, elevators or water taps.

In this context, the theme of *loss* ("pierderi") often emerged during my research: loss of heat (both during the transport to the house, and inside the building), loss of water (on the pipes or to unfair neighbours who give the meter reading incorrectly), loss of quality (of water, of building materials, of food, etc.), loss of social welfare, loss of emigrating family members. Loss was considered a given and was met by my participants with the all-pervasive "Asta este" ("It is what it is") — a phrase that was becoming emblematic of a time in which nothing can improve. The profound disappointment with the current regime, in contrast to the great hope following the fall of socialism in 1989, was expanding to all areas of everyday life. It came as no surprise to many of the inhabitants of Piatra-Neamț that they couldn't access rehabilitation funds, that they couldn't trust the water quality, that they had to bribe the doctors each time they needed to go to the hospital, that their fellow family members were looking for a new start somewhere else.

In this context, *loss* necessarily leads to *absence*. Following the loss of local industry and the heavy emigration of the working population, blocks of flats were left half empty at certain moments of the year, especially in poorer areas. The absence of inhabitants had multiple implications: fewer people to invest in the maintenance of the common areas or to pay for the common utilities (especially for the elevator, which is the costliest expense), fewer people to turn on their heaters and contribute to the overall heat levels of the building (which now had many cold spots) and to circulate the warm water through the entire building. For the buildings, this brought about profound infrastructural issues: for instance, the temperature difference between different apartments of the building created mould problems; the leaks that took place while one was away would be discovered only when the damage was considerable, etc. It is in this close relationship between the social phenomena (such as the heavy emigration) and their concrete material manifestations (such as the infrastructural issues of mould) that my thesis situates itself, using Piatra-Neamț as a case study.

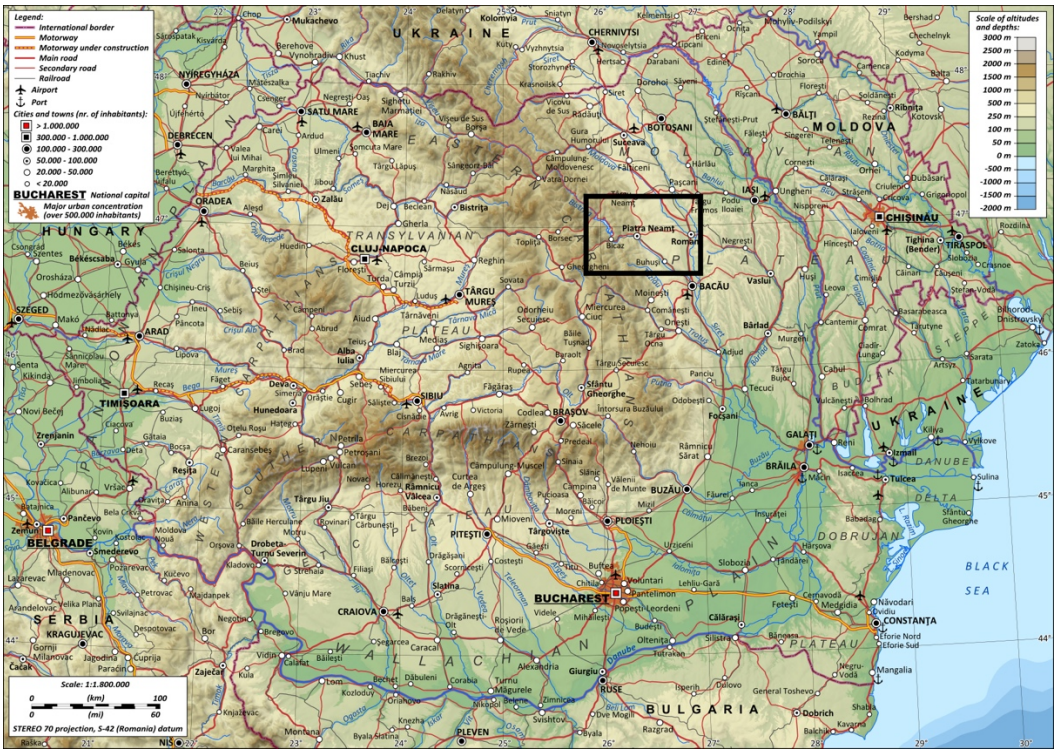




The Setting

> "Landscapes can be deceptive. Sometimes a landscape seems to be less a setting for the life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents takes place."
>
> John Berger, *A Fortunate Man* (1965)

Piatra-Neamț, a small medieval town in the North-East of Romania, is surrounded by three hills: from the top of the Pietricica hill (630m), one sees Cernegura (851m) on the left and Parcul National Cozla (651m) on the right. In between these three hills, the city has seen many changes, from its foundation in the 14th century until now. Founded as a market town, Piatra-Neamț has been the centre of economic activity in the wood industry since the 18th century[1]. The 19th century sees the advent of railways and small industries, and so the city expands threefold, reaching 17,765 inhabitants in 1899. The first half of the 20th century sees a slower increase in population, also due to the World Wars: from 25,000 people in 1930 to 25,100 in 1948. The socialist period that ensued brought profound changes to the population numbers and the morphology of the city. Following new industrial activity (especially chemistry and heavy metals), the city became a target for the rural population that came to work in the new socialist industrial centres: the population increased from 32,648 in 1956, to 45,925 in 1966, to 58,100 in 1977 and finally, 123,175 in 1992 — the peak of the city's population. Since territorially, the city didn't change much (being limited by the three hills above), the increase in population brought about the necessity to provide housing. Tellingly, 81% of the city's population was housed in the 32,000 newly built apartments during the socialist period.



[1] The intensified activity brought about an increase in population, from 1248 inhabitants in 1774 to 2020 inhabitants in 1790.

After the fall of the socialist regime in 1989, the local industry declined to a great extent: as a telling example, the Săvinești Industrial Complex, which used to encompass about 30,000 workers, only had about 200 when I visited it during my fieldwork, and was threatened with closure. With an unemployment rate of 17.1% at the beginning of the 2000s, the city started losing its population drastically, becoming one of the many shrinking cities in Romania (Constantinescu, 2012). In 2011, the local census counted 85,055 inhabitants (Apăvăloaie, 2005), but these numbers are hard to pin down: a lot of inhabitants either leave seasonally, or remain registered with the municipality just in case their plans abroad don't work out. Urban research has focused extensively on big urban concentrations which are the hosts of large amounts of incoming population, thus putting a strain on the local architectural and infrastructural resources. In contrast, my research emphasises the importance of middle sized cities facing major post-industrial unemployment, as they are experienced by a greater majority of citizens (Ringel, 2014). In these shrinking cities, there are plenty of housing resources, but few people there to enjoy them or take care of them.



From right to left: The Old Church, The Tower of Stephen the Great, (15th century), The Fine Arts Museum, The Youth Theatre (1938)

Piatra-Neamț is not only a shrinking city, but also an ageing city — the generation that moved into their apartments when they were first built has remained in the city for the most part, whereas their children have often left the city. Because it is not a university city, it sees its students leave to larger cities in Romania for their studies, only to rarely return and build a life in their home town. As a research participant in their late 20s told me, Piatra-Neamț is the place you move back to when every other plan fails. It is the place where people of my generation return to for holidays, to visit their parents, and to enjoy the beautiful nature surrounding it. Having left the city when I was 18 to study in The Netherlands, I too visited it occasionally, only to see it transform drastically: the blocks of flats,



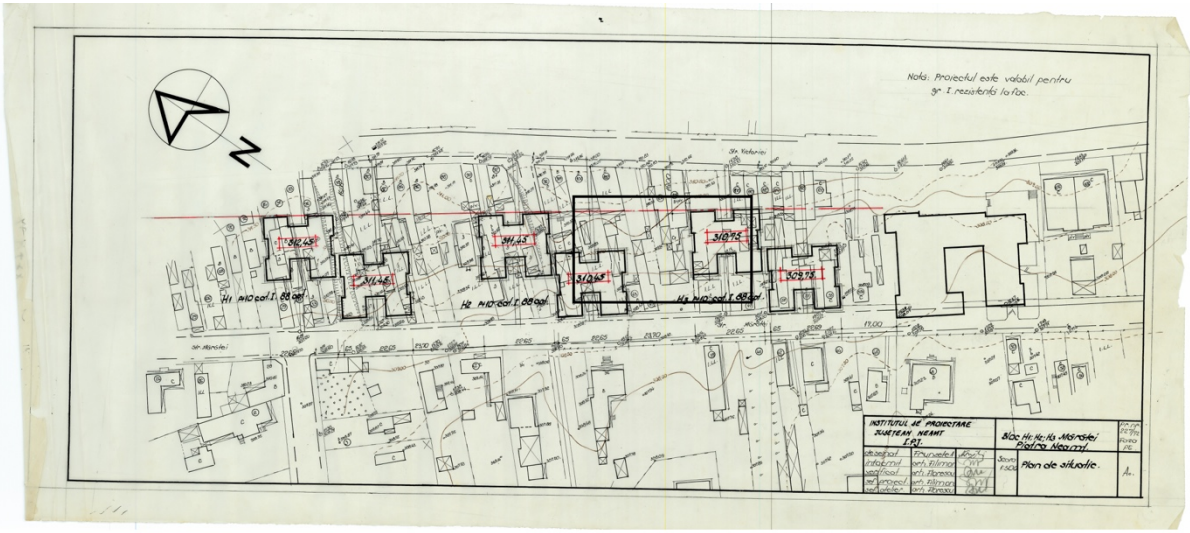
1998



2012

celebrated throughout socialism for their emancipatory potential and link with modernity, were degrading in time.

In a photograph that I took in the late 1990s, one sees two blocks of flats on the Traian Boulevard, south of the Pietricica Hill (highlighted in the map above). From their construction in 1974, they had gone through multiple changes: some inhabitants had closed their balconies, adding windows and frames of various qualities and designs, while others left them open, as they were initially intended. In 2012, the same buildings evolved even further: they gained a colourful layer of polystyrene, aimed at wall insulation and energy conservation. In 2009, the EU adopted a wide-ranging package on climate change that member states must achieve by 2020 including a twenty percent cut in domestic energy consumption. To promote energy-efficient housing, the Commission has initiated national and local co-financing schemes worth more than 120 million Euros. Among them, the Energy Efficient Building European Initiative (E2B EI) was specifically created to "improve the energy performance in buildings".



Architectural drawing of the H2B location, 1974

City councils throughout Romania started to implement E2B EI right away: the EU provided 50% of the funding; the Romanian government, 30 %; the inhabitant was left with 20% to cover. Between 2010 and 2012, the City Hall of Piatra-Neamț commissioned a few rehabilitation works, especially on the main boulevards of the city centre. Having said that, most inhabitants did not manage to access the funds, which quickly ran out. Still, seeing that their neighbours, who had managed, were paying considerably less, they took initiative and started contacting construction companies themselves. The contracts were often established with individual apartments, without getting permission from the State Inspectorate in Constructions or City Hall. This way, the city's urban fabric gathered layers and layers of polystyrene, one more colourful than the other. Whereas the Romanian legislation framed the rehabilitation projects in terms of both "increasing the energetic performance" and "ameliorating the urbanistic appearance of the cities", as the EU policy trickled down to the local level, and the markets got a taste of the potential of this new material, polystyrene was becoming pervasive, and un-aesthetic, as can be seen in H1A, the block on the right of the frame. Although the photograph was taken in 2012, it remains in this state to this day, with the insulation work unfinished and the layer of polystyrene uncovered, and left to soak in all the rain, as the following photo well illustrates:



H1A



H2B

In contrast, H2B, the building on the left was entirely insulated, using materials of good quality, which remained in the same state until 2014–2015, during my fieldwork. The building's inhabitants hadn't accessed the EU funds either, but had successfully come together in raising the money for the insulation work. In my research, I followed the trail of these changes, both in space (in relation to the other buildings in the neighbourhood and the city) and in time (from their construction to present day). My fieldwork started with the motivation to uncover these processes of change. I spent one year following the lives of the inhabitants in H2B, to understand how they together maintained and cared towards the building.

I decided to focus on one building only, so that I could gather the nuanced detail that would allow me to do the following: (1) understand the common resources that a community needs to pull together in order to keep their homes in good order and (2) problematize the issue of *scale* by relating individual apartments with the larger infrastructure of the city. I will give due space to these two motivations in the sections that follow, but for now suffice it to say that my aim was to elaborate on the idea of *the building*, not simply by talking with or watching inhabitants, but by taking into account the diverse fields of relations that hold this building together over time and in space, including pipes and cables, administrators and inhabitants, owners and renters. Conceived of in this way, a building is always doing the work of holding together or pulling apart, through maintenance and repair. My theoretical approach draws on anthropological studies of the home and of infrastructure (as detailed in the *Theoretical Framework* section), but I also draw on the work of geographers such as Jane Jacobs who, in her article *The Geography of Big Things* (J. M. Jacobs, 2006) effectively raises the question of how a building comes to have 'presence', how it is stitched into place by fragmented, multi-scaled and multi-sited networks of association.

Geographer Lloyd Jenkins, in his detailed study of 11 Rue du Conservatoire, Paris, asked the question: What is the boundary of a building? How do we theorise changes across a building's boundary? (Jenkins, 2002). Drawing on the sociology of science and technology, Jenkins asks how we can conceive of a building as something other than a formal space, a form known primarily by its boundaries. He argues that traditional accounts of buildings tend to take for granted what their limits and boundaries are - they have formal qualities, they have edges and walls and windows, they are 'there'. Jenkins proposes widening the perspective: "Instead of simply treating buildings as stable, safe, and static black boxes on which we can hang our arguments and claims... we need to dispel the myth of buildings as being static, closed, and materially constant" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 226). Jenkins argues that simply attending to the views and movement of social actors through space, as previous studies had done, is not enough. Indeed, such an analytic approach runs the risk of reinstating the social as if somehow other to and more than the building. In working away from this dilemma Jenkins draws upon the work of John Law and Annemarie Mol, who argue forcefully for the co-production of the material and the social: when we "look at the social, we are also looking at the production of materiality. And when we look at materials, we are witnessing the production of the social" (Law & Mol, 1995). With this in mind, how does one go about studying a specific building methodologically?



Refolosibil bloc H12

INSTITUTUL DE PROIECTARE JUDEȚEAN NEAMȚ I.P.J.		Denumirea proiectului: Bloc H1 ; H2 ; H3 Mărăței Piatra Neamț		Nr. p.r. 267/71 Faza PE
desenat	arh. Filimon		Scara	Denumirea planșei:
întocmit	arh. Filimon		1:50	Fațada posterioară
verificat	arh. Florescu		Data	A.11.
șef proiect	arh. Filimon		11.12.72	
șef atelier	arh. Florescu			

Methodology

Built in 1974, H2B hosted mostly engineers and workers from the Săvinești Industrial Platform, who had bought an apartment before the building was erected, and who would come to the building site, waiting eagerly to see their floor be finalized. Some of them had individual preferences for different tiles for instance, and would arrange something with the workers, and replace the initial plan. This counterpoints the dominant literature of socialist housing, as impersonal rental from the state (Ronald & Elsinga, 2012). Mr. Poenaru, a retired tourism agent from the third floor, for instance, would get off the bus earlier, just to walk home past the new building, where he was about to move in. He had paid the advance of 30,000 lei — the rest of 140,000 lei would be later paid in instalments. The building had apartments with four rooms in the front and three rooms in the back: he chose a three-room apartment on the third floor, not too low, not too high, in case there would be problems with the elevator in the future.

Gradually, the building was filled with people, things and social bonds, in each of the 44 apartments. The relationships between the neighbours were good from the very beginning: "people with superior training and close like in a family", Mr. Poenaru told me. After the change of regime, "some left, some died… it's not as cohesive as it used to be. If something needs to get done, not everyone participates, as they used to. With each meeting, less people come." — he told me in disappointment. Before the Revolution, there was a sense of responsibility, he tells me: not just in the block, but in life. Recently, his has faded, but so did people's financial capacity. He confessed that in H2B, they were lucky to have Mr. Bud, who is a very responsible man, and a *gospodar*. The Proto-Slavic etymology of the word *gospodar*, shared between Romanian, Serbo-Croatian and Slovene, means (1) master of the house or head of a household; (2) a good manager or someone who is in charge.

I met Mr. Bud in September 2014, one month into my fieldwork. Being puzzled by the contrast between the two buildings, I knocked on his door and asked him a few questions about the wall insulation process in 2011. Mr. Bud was the building's "administrator": short for the administrator of the *Owners' Association* (OA), the group of inhabitants who are involved in the maintenance of the building[2]. I was surprised to hear about the six months he spent with the construction workers at the time, and realized that this insulation was only a (visible) part of a much larger (invisible) endeavour. From making a heating system for the building and waking up every winter morning at 6AM to turn the heat on, to raising money for small works of maintenance, Mr. Bud was very involved in the maintenance of the building, and he became the gatekeeper[3] to my main field site, the H2B building.

My insights into the interplay of political, economic, material and aesthetic changes in the H2B block come from a variety of sources, but the bulk of my time was spent with inhabitants in the course of their daily lives in more than twenty homes, most of which were in H2B. I met with Mr. Bud each week, and I repeatedly visited seven other apartments in the building, either for interviews, informal discussions or for daily activities such as cooking. I met the rest of the H2B inhabitants during block

[2] Mr. Bud was both the administrator and the president of the Association, usually two separate functions, but conflated by all the research participants living in various blocks of flats.

[3] Gatekeepers are typically local leaders who represent, or claim to represent, the community in which the research takes place, or who have access to the setting in which the research will take place (e.g., Kawulick 2011, Maginn 2007, Rashid 2007, Wanat 2008).

meetings, payment intervals, or while interviewing Mr. Bud in the administration room. Having accessed the building's social realm through Mr. Bud's path, I immediately had access to some and not others, who were not as close to him. Nevertheless, people like Ms. Anton or Ms. Tomin had no reluctance in voicing their concerns about their block administrator, as will be seen in the rest of the thesis. Additionally, I actively chose to invest as much time as possible into close, trustful relationships with the seven other inhabitants (highlighted in green in the building scheme below), of varied ages and genders (as pointed out in the scheme), so that I could gain more insight into their lives and what matters to them.

10th	**Fam. Fieraru** (3) taxi driver	-	**Fam. Neagu** (2) retired, engineers	**Fam. Ciurea** (2)
9th	**Fam. Leonte** (2) retired, in conflict with Mr. Bud	**Ms. Ciocârlan** (1) retired, librarian	**Fam. Dobrilă** (3) retired, he used to be the sub-prefect	**Fam. Vasiliu** (2) retired, teacher and economist
8th	**Fam. Popescu** (4) retired, financial controllers	-	**Ms. Dumitriu** (2) retired	**Mr. Munteanu** (1) retired, occupied 30% of the year
7th	**Ms. Baghiu** (1) retired, occupied 50% of the year	-	**Ms. Tomin** (1) retired school teacher, occupied 50% of the year	**Fam. Perneș** (4) young professionals, Mr. Bud is hoping he will take over
6th	-	-	**Ms. Filip** (1) retired, occupied 50% of the year	-
5th	-	**Fam. Pruteanu** (2) maths teacher	**Fam. Bud** (2) retired, engineer and school teacher	**Fam. Tănase** (2) retired, engineers
4th	**Fam. Dandu** (2) school teachers	**Fam. Toma** (3) unemployed	-	**Fam. Anăstăsoaie** (3) grandmother (economist), mother (teacher), daughter
3rd	**Fam. Poenaru** (2) retired, occupied 30% of the year	**Ms. Iosub** (1) retired, occupied 20% of the year, she lives in the UK	**Fam. Anton** (2) retired, she works in Italy	**Mr. Raica** (1) retired
2nd	**Fam. Mamulă** (2) retired, used to work in Savinesti platform	**Financial consultancy company**	**Fam. Gavrilă** (4) he works in the wood industry	-
1st	-	**Fam. Ionuț** (4) recently gave birth to a little girl, Mr. Bud is not charging utility costs	**Ms. Jora** (1) retired, occupied 20% of the year, she lives in the US	**Fam. Toma** (4) a priest married to a school teacher, daughter of a priest
GF	**Shop**	**Fam. Bratu** (2) renter-owners are doctors in France	**Fam. Vieru** (3) retired, both worked for the Police	**Fam. Burduja** (4) widow and 3 sons

Importantly, I lived in the A3 block, across from H2B, where I repeatedly visited four apartments, and interviewed the inhabitants of three others. Through a snowballing technique (O'Reilly, 2012), I visited acquaintances of the H2B and A3 inhabitants in the nearby buildings, while I also taught English in two other apartments in town most Saturdays. This was essential in comparing the experiences in H2B with the rest of the city. The snowballing technique provided me with invaluable data on the social networks that were shaped under socialism between people of similar professions. I was surprised to hear, when visiting research participants unrelated to the H2B block, that they knew Mr. Bud quite well, either through work collaborations, or through common friends. For instance, when interviewing Mr. Sum in the 4001 block, he mentioned that he had worked with him, and so did Mr. Onofrei from the D block. Mr. Țolea from the A3 block had not worked with him directly, but had collaborated cross-institutionally, and appreciated his professionalism. The most extreme example was a train ride to Bucharest, when I befriended two very talkative women, after overhearing their two-hour discussion about the unacceptably high price of utilities, and their endeavours to lower their costs by making official complaints. After introducing myself and telling them that my study, related to their conversation, takes place in H2B, one of them told me she used to work in the Săvinești Industrial Platform under his management: "What a gentleman!", she said in spontaneous appreciation. Finally, when doing research in the State Archives, the historian who was advising me on my sources, who lived close to H2B, remembered the time in which Mr. Bud was in charge of the thermal insulation work — he had indeed seen him in overalls each day for months on end, and he appreciated his work.

This made me understand that Mr. Bud was an exceptional gatekeeper: a leader figure, as described in *The Administration Room* chapter. While the first couple of months were spent gaining his trust through weekly interviews, I gained insight into his perspective on the building — his efforts, his hopes, his disappointments. Willingly or not, he often put himself in a positive light, which was most often fully deserved: he truly was a caring, empathetic person, who was appreciated by most of his co-inhabitants. Nonetheless, I felt the need to compare his discursive appreciation of the social life of the building, through participant observation inside the building, and to immerse myself in the life of the block, with an open mind to what might be relevant to the rest of the inhabitants. My aim was to reveal the complexity of social relations and attitudes towards the building, and to put side by side my information from the in-depth discussions with Mr. Bud and the spontaneous interactions as observed inside the building.

My access was aided by my background: I grew up in Piatra-Neamț and left to university in the Netherlands with a scholarship when I was 18. Going back to my home town meant that I had an extensive network of family and friends to draw on at the beginning of the fieldwork, and so I did: I started out by asking my acquaintances if they know block administrators, architects, constructors, or anyone who would be willing to talk to me about the built environment. In doing so, I was aiming at finding research participants who were removed from my immediate social network. I was weary of the dangers of complacency in conducting fieldwork in a familiar culture, as pointed out by Strathern (2012, 17). She warns against assuming that having fewer cultural barriers allows for a greater depth of insight — on the contrary, in my case the ten years that I have lived outside Romania as a student in the Netherlands, the US and the UK have been invaluable in providing me with the much necessary

distance[4]. Having been educated in the Netherlands, the USA and the UK, and trained in the tradition of the British school of anthropology, I was considered a foreign presence as much as a local one. At the same time as I spoke with an unchanged local accent, I often received questions about my background, and my family's, and I used these discussions as a bridge towards their own families and backgrounds.

As Fehérváry notes in her research on Hungarian homes (Fehérváry, 2013), fieldwork in an urban environment where many people hold full-time jobs and are occupied at night with family and television has its unique challenges. Whereas at times I adjusted my schedule to my participants' and visited them during the week-end or interviewed the in their lunch breaks, I most often didn't face these limitations, as most of my research participants were retired and could make time to include me in their lives. If anything, they enjoyed my company or my help around the house, as was the case with Ms. Tomin in H2B or Ms. Mihalache in A3. This has allowed me to overcome the limitations often faced by researchers conducting fieldwork in areas considered inaccessible, such as the domestic arena, which have relied on interviews as their main method of enquiry. I was thus able to avoid the much-discussed problems associated with interviews in home studies, such as attributing too much agency to the individuals involved in the research (as discussed by Daniels 2015). I did, however, conduct in-depth interviews with many professionals who could share their insight into the Romanian housing situation: city planners, architects, academics, city government officials, journalists, utility companies, and so on. Additionally, after an urban planner in City Hall pointed out that constructors often don't follow the strict guidelines of insulation work, I spent two weeks with a team who was insulating a block of flats in the neighbourhood, filming and photographing the process. I followed the lines of what I learned with the constructors and I visited sites across the city, and photographed them in detail, while talking to inhabitants spontaneously.

Therefore, participant observation, in my case, did not only revolve around people, but also around the things, buildings and materials I came across. Much of the evidence for my arguments about the relationship between the material, the aesthetic and the political comes not only from participants' explicit statements, but also from my own observations of the built environment. Granted, such a study of infrastructure poses a number of methodological questions. In *The Ethnography of Infrastructure* (Star & Leigh, 1999), Susan Leigh Star put it as follows: When is an infrastructure finished, and when do we know that? Where are the boundaries of an infrastructure? What values and ethical principles do we inscribe in the inner depth of the built environment? Star argues that we require innovative methods to study the imbrication of infrastructure and human organization. The material objects and substances we live in and with form a taken-for-granted backdrop that constitutes a deceptive "humility of objects" (Miller, 1988). Because it is "beyond words", as Leona Auslander argues, material culture can provide rich sources for "grasping the affective, communicative, symbolic and expressive aspects of human life" (Auslander, 2005). Material arrangements constitute an expressive semiotic realm, so photographs of living spaces, outside and in (along with knowledge of their material qualia)

[4] In his 2013 DPhil thesis about the anime industry, Japanese anthropologist Tomohiro Morisawa contests the notion of 'native' researcher (Morisawa 2013). His Japanese nationality, of course, played a part: on the one hand, linguistic ease made him anything but a burden to his co-worker; but on the other hand, he felt limited in asking questions he otherwise would have ('stupid' questions that a connoisseur should know). However, he usefully points out that in the eyes of his informants, 'Japanese' and 'native' do not always correspond: they have traditionally been spatially constructed, there is no essential link between identity and place of origin as it has commonly been assumed in anthropology.

constitute powerful evidence for the ways people attend to "make" their domestic spaces. For my research, I found that a combination of participant observation and visual methods — better attuned to the material world, while also allowing for a more collaborative approach — was particularly insightful (as seen in Duneier 2001 for instance).

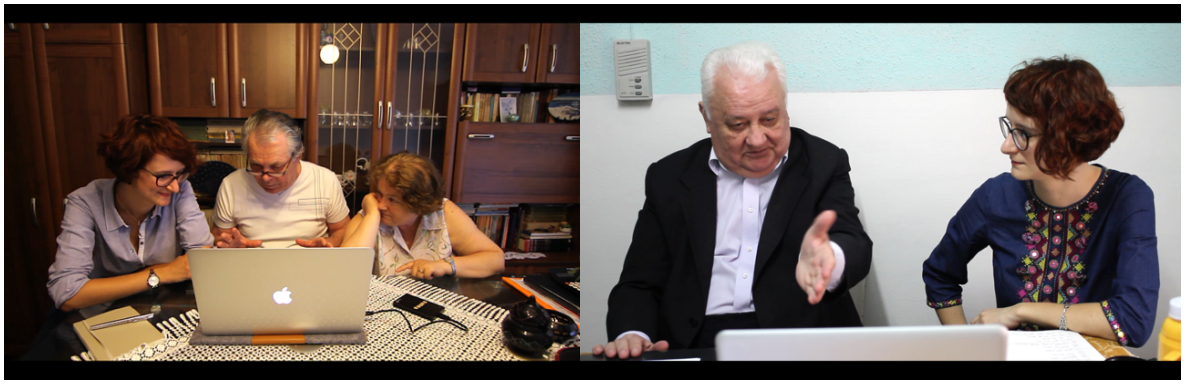
In H2B, I met with Mr. Bud each week, sometimes for five hours, to discuss various engagements with the building's infrastructure, from heating to water distribution, from finances to community involvement. He always supplied me with any documentation I needed, be it the billboard announcements that the OA had posted for the rest of the community (archive: 2000-2015) or the contracts for large construction works (the thermal insulation, the replacement of the cold-water pipes, the technical files for all the materials used in the construction work, the apartment plans, the utility bills, etc). Following three months of discussion with Mr. Bud, I wanted to become more involved in the daily life of the building and get to know other inhabitants. However, Mr. Bud was reluctant, which, I soon learned, came from two sources: (1) the suspicion of some of his fellow inhabitants towards him and how he administers the finances of the building (discussed in the Administration chapter) and (2) a more general sense of resistance towards a stranger in the building, in a country that had suffered from the surveillance of the socialist state, manifested specifically in the living environment (Deletant, 1999). Not only were apartments "bugged" often, but a simple complaint of a neighbour could put one in jail, and so the presence of a researcher in the building for a long period of time had to be negotiated.

In order to overcome this difficulty, I decided to start filming a documentary (later called *Blocul*), not only because filming for the documentary gave me a good reason to be in the building, but also because I have an ongoing interest in the use of visual material in anthropological research. Consequently, many of the inhabitants met me with my camera in my hand — some, open to dialogue; others, more reluctant: why was I interested in the life of a pipe, of a heater, of a water tap, of an elevator? I was interested, because all of them were charming elements of a new life for the people who moved into the buildings in the 1970s — a sign of modernity and contemporaneity with the rest of the (socialist) world, while to current lack of state involvement with the infrastructure of the blocks of flats was emblematic of a political system that is not interested in the welfare of its citizens. While filming, I was not only able to explore the fine-grained detail of my participants' lives, but I also established relationships of trust with them which carried on outside of filming. I attended meetings, visited all the common spaces, spent time in the administration office when people came by to pay their utilities, joined the elevator mechanic when the elevator had a fault, etc. Despite the much-feared possibility that filming is intrusive and that it closes doors, in my case, it opened many.

Each time I filmed an activity, I shared my footage with the people involved, and filmed the resulting interview (see Jean Rouch's *Chronique d'un été* for a classic, if rare, example). Most often, participants would ask me to pause the footage, so that they could tell me more about a particular scene. For instance, I filmed an extensive scene with Mr. Bud and Mr. Anton, which is partly included in the final film. I then shared the same footage with each of them separately, and gained invaluable insight in how they saw themselves, each other, and their contribution to the building. I also received

clarifications concerning details of the building[5]. Video-elicitation was thus not only an open way of collaborating in the making of the documentary, but also a fruitful way of gaining more information.

After sharing my footage with my research participants, who showed their support, I shared it with Ileana Szasz, a visual anthropologist and an editor based in Bucharest who offered to edit the documentary[6]. In editing, I decided to not use any voice-over, but to give the film a clear direction through the montage. This way, in the phrasing of David MacDougal, it is the viewer rather than the author who fills the gaps between the shots and sequences of the film, discovering connections within a network of possibilities structured by the author (Macdougall, 2007, p. 70). Since its completion, the documentary has been screened at many film festivals internationally[7] and has received the Best Documentary award at *Ficarq*, an Architecture& Film Festival in Spain. These screenings have provided me an invaluable opportunity to discuss my research data with varied audiences (Romanian and foreign, academic and non-academic) and to refine my approach to my research project. I thus consider the post-screening discussions as extended exercises of film elicitation on the basis of my edited research material.



Apart from video-elicitation, I engaged in numerous other exercises of visual elicitation with the inhabitants who participated in my research, utilising photographs, maps, drawings, etc. Such a collaborative approach broke the above-mentioned boundaries of suspicion towards myself as a researcher. The research method of photo-elicitation has been considered collaborative, because it is a "dialogue based on the authority of the subject rather than the researcher" (Harper, 2002, p. 68). Apart from acknowledging that the meaning of photographs resides in the discursive practices that constitute them, Harper states that the meaning of the photograph is also constructed by the maker and the viewer (thus both in the production and the consumption stage), "both of whom carry their social position and interest of the photographic act" (Harper, 2002, p. 70).

---

[5] For instance, whereas in the film Mr. Anton tells Mr. Bud that he doesn't know what was the initial function of the small inbuilt cupboard in his basement was, Mr. Bud did know, and he shared it with me during the video-elicitation: it was built by the previous owner to hide a fridge, because he didn't want his neighbours to be able to see that he was "stealing" common electricity for his private purpose". In parallel, Mr. Anton was encouraging me to keep the scenes that show the difficulties of leading a block of flats and getting everyone to contribute to its maintenance: "These are very telling!"

[6] I thus made a storyboard in preparation: a document containing a detailed description of each filmed moment, which then became an important piece of data in my collection, and was used in the writing of the chapters.

[7] Selected film screenings: Architect Africa Film Festival, Johannesburg (South Africa); ASTRA Sibiu International Film Festival, Sibiu (Romania); Filmul de Piatra, Piatra-Neamț (Romania); Docuart Film Festival, Bucharest (Romania); Urban Eye Film Festival, Bucharest (Romania); Culese din Balkani Film Festival, Bucharest (Romania); SIEF Conference, Gottingen (Germany); RAI Ethnographic Film Festival, Bristol (UK); Ethnografilm, Paris (France); Urban Facades (Moldova).

The photographs used in visual elicitation came from multiple sources: my own photographs, participants' photographs[8] and archival photographs[9]. Having trained as a professional photographer at State University of New York and as a visual anthropologist at the University of Oxford, I am used to using my camera for the purpose of documentation. I therefore took photographs of the city during extensive walks, so that I would attentively notice the elements of material culture that seemed to occupy important parts in inhabitants' experiences of living in a block of flats: staircases, windows, balconies, playgrounds, heating systems, churches, stores, plants, pigeons, etc. I thus built a large collection of contemporary images (approx. 2000) which could inform my research, and could be shared with my research participants. After editing my photographs and analysing them in great detail while taking notes of the most poignant details, I would create a new set of themes that I wanted to discuss with my research participants (for instance, the different materials used to close off balconies). This not only allowed me to rely on my participants for the learning process, but also to become immersed in the city and to analyse it very closely. Indeed, a photograph "can't reveal ultimate truths, but it can 'reveal' a particular openness to the visible world in ways that permit access to new and surprising aspects" (Barnouw, 1994, p. 238).

Apart from photographs, I collected other visual and linguistic materials to share with my research participants. I did a detailed survey of the *Ceahlăul* local newspaper archives around the time in which the H2B block was built — between 1970 and 1976 — to pick up on the discourse before and after their construction, but also on the initial engagements with these blocks of flats[10]. Additionally, my research participants pointed me in the direction of an original source of information: home magazines from the socialist period, such as the *Femeia* (*The Woman*) Magazine (1970-1988), or education books for women, such as *Cartea Tinerelor Gospodine* (*The Book of Young Housewives,* 1987) *or Gospodina si Oaspetii Familiei (The Housewife and the Family Guests*, 1981). These painted a vivid picture of socialist ideals of the home, and informed the aesthetic of many of my research participants, still being extensively used in many households[11]. In order to follow the thread of home decorations, I then researched the post-socialist decorations magazines most read by the people I met, among which the most prominent was *Casa Lux* (1990-present), a trendsetter both in terms of decorations and home installations (such as heating boilers or window frames). I additionally chose to look up socialist technical training books (such as *The Book of the Thermal and Phonic Insulator*, 1972; *Installations in Buildings*, 1968) and to use their descriptions and illustrations as starting points for discussions with research participants. Finally, I used Romanian studies of urban transformations, both socialist (*Complex Urban Units* 1969, *Issues of the Contemporary Dwelling* 1987) and contemporary studies issued by the Faculty of Architecture, Bucharest University. These studies, alongside with Romanian ethnographies discussed later in this Introduction, have not been utilized before in an international setting, as they are written in Romanian and have not widely circulated outside of Romania.

[8] I asked my research participants to share their photographs with me — if fact, this often happened naturally once I showed them my own photographs, both contemporary and archival.

[9] I collected approx. 400 archival images of the city, from monographs, newspapers, postcards or private photo collections, going as far back as the beginning of the 20th century.

[10] I followed each day's newspaper for five years, to try to uncover the most important topics related to the new construction work, and its reception with the inhabitants.

[11] Interestingly, they often go beyond the aesthetic to make useful functional suggestions, in terms of home appliance maintenance, use of space or creative furniture solutions when resources are scarce.

In order to understand how Piatra-Neamț had transformed as a city, I used old maps retrieved from the State Archives or City Hall and architectural drawings (the original plans of the buildings). With those, I conducted interviews with both inhabitants and professionals (architects and constructors). This was instrumental in allowing me to grasp what part different social actors played in the making of the city as we now know it. To put this historical information in context, I conducted interviews in the City Hall and the State Inspectorate in Construction, also asking them for further (visual) material, such as the *General Urbanistic Plan* (PUG) or their own studies regarding the built environment of the city. This allowed me to follow the leads pointed out by research participants, and learn about the organizational and legal infrastructure that frames them. Most importantly, I managed to gain access to the thermal insulation documentation, which showed the great contrast between the ideal building rehabilitation steps and what I observed in practice.

Last but not least, I collaborated with Adela Iacoban, an architect from Piatra-Neamț, who became a consultant for my research project from an architectural perspective, and has made five sets of architectural drawings, one of which is showcased on the following pages (the rest will be found in the Annex, together with a detailed description of the changes that have taken place over time). These façades of H2B and four other blocks of flats in its vicinity, were painstakingly constructed by Adela by following a close observation on the basis of my photographs. Our aim was to contrast the initial façade of the building, when built, with the current one, following five case studies, of buildings made of different materials, and with different setups. Together, we analysed the ways in which inhabitants had appropriated their living spaces, making adjustments that had an effect on the building as a whole.

Methodologically, my work invites for a questioning of the ethnographic description and the visual form as a medium of anthropology, as a means of exploring social phenomena and expressing anthropological knowledge (MacDougall 2007, 63). Such an endeavour poses fundamental challenges to anthropological ways of "speaking" and knowing, while reflecting the changing climate of thinking about anthropological representation itself (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). My overall contribution to the study of visual anthropology is thus a very specific way of engaging with various media according to the kinds of information one wants to engender and an exploration of the relationship between the visual and other forms of knowledge. In order to make that clear, I chose for a very conscious presentation of the images in the thesis. Daniels has critiqued the form of the classic ethnographic monograph, saying that despite its centrality as a representational form through which anthropological research is disseminated, it characteristically contains few visuals (maps, graphs and a few black and white photographs) which serve to illustrate the text (Daniels, 2010). She goes on to argue that despite the richness of rhetorical strategies of writing up the ethnographic data (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), there has been little experimentation with visual strategies. However, due to their "multi-vocality and their capacity for capturing phenomenological experiences, images are said not only to bridge subjective and objective understanding, but also to stimulate new ways of thinking about social life across cultures" (MacDougall 2007, 22).

My thesis follows this line of thought and experiments with the combination between image and text, and so contains the following types of images:

- Type 1: my photographs, taken with Canon 7D and three different lenses (50mm, 26mm, 11-16mm), in order to provide the viewer with a multiplicity of framings, both wide and narrow; these are captioned only when the added information shed new light on the image, instead of guiding the gaze or defining the content of the image
- Type 2: screenshots from the documentary, marked by black bands on both horizontal edges
- Type 3: images that I have not produced myself, often captioned (such as maps, newspaper clips, paintings, etc.)

Each type of visual material offers a different perspective on Romanian built environment. In order to draw attention to this visual data, I often allow them to occupy more space than is usually the case in such a document (such as the architectural drawings on pages 26–27). I use all the images in this thesis to draw attention to the material qualities of my field site, rather than a positivistic data set that can be taken as an "objective" perspective. This reasoning lies behind my use of a plurality of images and layouts.

Finally, my research problematizes the assumption of anonymity that pervades much of social science research. I followed the ethics guidelines of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (ASA), and throughout my research process I have kept the best interests of my participants in mind carefully following the ASA recommendations on informed consent. However, given the visual nature of my work, anonymity was not always possible, but neither was it desired. From the very beginning of my interaction with participants, I informed them of my role as researcher and of my research goals. Once inhabitants allowed me access to their worlds, they were very proud of their participation to my research and were happy for me to use their real names. If anything, they would be offended if I changed their names, given how enthusiastic they were about presenting their homes to me — a good illustration is the visit to Mr. Anton's apartment from *The Window* chapter, in which he specifically encourages me to take photographs certain objects, and to share them with "Westerners" who need to see how Romanian apartments are modern and well taken care of. Especially in the case of Mr. Bud, he invested a great deal of time and energy in sharing his everyday endeavours with me and was thrilled to see the final version of the thesis, with his name and photographs included. A notable exception is Ms. Popescu, an urban planner from City Hall, whose name has been anonymised to prevent any work-related complications.

Theoretical framework

The following photograph of a section of C4 (a block of flats in the immediate vicinity of H2B), shows a façade like many others in Piatra-Neamț, only partly renovated. In this case, pragmatic solutions aimed at increasing energy efficiency or at merely preventing further degradation have aesthetic consequences that inhabitants did not consciously reflect upon. It is tempting to interpret the two sides of the same façade as a symbolic manifestation of social inequality or lack of cohesion (pages 24–25), but when looking at the building as a whole (pages 26–27), it becomes clear that the entire building has gone through multiple transformations. The building is thus a complicated *palimpsest*, meaning "something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form" (Oxford English Dictionary). It is a site of growth and transformation that must be considered holistically: instead of a 'social life of things', a 'social life of materials' in interaction with weather, people, animals, plants (Ingold 2012). In my thesis, I draw attention to mutations that take place over time, according to inhabitants' needs to retain more heat in their apartments, to secure larger storage spaces or to simply show their neighbours that they are hardworking and "*gospodar*" (as discussed on page 17).

Architectural drawings are a good way to look at the process of change. Apart from conscious additions to the building, such as insulation or windows, the drawings point to a much subtler change: degradation. If one contrasts the two architectural drawings (illustrating its conception in 1978 vs. the present state in 2015), the colourful thermal insulation is the most visible of changes, but there is much more to that, from the modification of windows and the closing of balconies, to the creation of attics and the addition of doors at ground floors. Since the energy crisis of 1973, buildings have been made more airtight and better insulated to save on energy costs (Wilhite, 2005; Wilk, 2009). At the same time, keeping the warm air inside also means keeping in all the moisture that humans, kitchens and bathrooms constantly exhale. The ecologist and architecture theoretician Steward Brand, in his excellent book *How Buildings Learn* (Brand, 1994), points out that water vapour can penetrate everywhere in search for a cool surface to condense on. When it gets into a wall and condenses there, it soaks insulation, corrodes everything metal and flows down to the floor plate to rot the building's basic structure — all hidden from view (Brand, 1994, p. 114). In the case of Piatra-Neamț, this invisible degradation is accelerated by the addition of the visible thermal insulation, imposed by EU regulations of energy saving. Hence, my data points towards a complex process of long-term change, in which the boundaries of the blocks of flats are constantly negotiated.

Next, I will introduce the anthropological debates that I have used to contextualise my data on urban transformations. In my study, I aim to combine the literature about home and infrastructure in order to accommodate both aesthetic and functional issues pertaining to present-day Romanian blocks of flats. Whereas anthropological studies of the home bring great insights into the inhabitants' motivations behind changes in the domestic space, they have so far focused excessively on issues of aesthetics and identity. On the other hand, anthropological studies of infrastructure have successfully brought up important issues about the functional reasons for alterations in buildings (related to heat and water infrastructure, for instance), but have by and large failed to consider aesthetic consequences of infrastructural changes. Additionally, while anthropology of the home has focused on the "micro" scales of the objects that circulate through the households, infrastructural ethnographies have focused on the "macro" scales of large systems of resource provision. My study bridges these two: it speaks to the wider framework of the built environment through a limited research site: a block of flats.

Anthropology of the home

The dialectic relationship between inhabitants and the built environment is a back bone of my study, as it was established by the ethnographies of Lévi-Strauss and Bourdieu, and further developed by the more recent material culture studies of the home.

Although homes have been methodologically central to the ethnographic project since the 1930s, they merely provided the context in which topics such as kinship were studied. During the 1960s, Levi-Strauss put the focus back on architecture, with his notion of 'house societies', whereby the house is the collective form of moral personhood (Lévi-Strauss, 1982). Importantly for my research, the emphasis was on the home as a representation of normative order through symbolic contrast: the architectural structure of the home was found to have a shadow in its symbolic structure. In contrast, Bourdieu focused very explicitly on domestic architectural forms. His most influential concept, elaborated in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1977), has been *habitus*, also exemplified in his study of the Kabyle house (1970). In it, he demonstrated that the structure of the house, although seemingly structuralist at first glance, is contingent on the changing movements and perspectives of the Kabyle themselves. He found that meanings were not rigidly determined by some theoretical, disembodied structure of difference (as Lévi-Strauss would have argued), but were generated by people themselves through their everyday practices and habits. In other words, space is not read like a text but experienced with our bodies, through everyday, bodily practices. Bourdieu thus made two important contributions, which are vital to my own study. Firstly, he overcame the opposition between subjects and objects in Western thought, by arguing that persons and things exist in dynamic relations. Secondly, he made the important point that just as the Kabyle shape their houses, so the house shapes the Kabyle.

What happens, though, in the case of state-built housing that seemingly does not allow the inhabitants to shape their living environments? Miller, in his 1988 article *Appropriating the State in the Council Estate*, addressed the problem of state housing in the UK from this angle, arguing that council tenants see their living environments as the product of a system which would not be regarded as an investment of their social being (Miller, 1988, p. 354). He thus concluded that, if they are to identify with their households, it must be through some form of consumption as appropriation. This paved the road for a new wave of studies in the 1990s, emphasizing the house as a site of consumption, with a stress on domesticity and the everyday. Gender studies had previously highlighted the agency of women in the home (Ardener, 1981; DeVault, 1991), conceptualized as a mode of self-expression: "a means by which people constructed themselves and their ideologies" (Miller, 2001, p. 5). Miller, in his edited volume *Home Possessions* (Miller, 2001), critiqued these studies for their model of a semiotic home which did not leave room for the contradictions and complexities of everyday life as experienced by the inhabitants (Miller 2001).

Home Possessions (2001) has provided me with unusually insightful accounts of daily life inside people's homes. Alison Clarke's study of working class households within a British council estate shows a complex understanding of what the house performs in mediating the inhabitants' relationship to others. The home is not only an expression of other people's 'gaze', but rather an interiorized and













more controlled replacement of those absent others. Clarke thoughtfully observes that the home itself carried the burden of the discrepancies between its actual state at a given time and a wide range of aspirational 'ideal homes' (Clarke, 2001). In the same volume, Adam Drazin has focused on Romanians' use of wood in the interior of post-socialist blocks of flats, which contrasts with the grey and crumbling concrete of their exterior (Drazin, 2001). Whereas in my own research I relativize this contrast, I appreciate his point that wood itself has become the objectification of domestic care for the family, in defiance of the limitations imposed by the (concrete-dominated) socialist state. This finding has allowed Drazin to fill the gaps between home-making as an expression of identity (as epitomized in Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995) and as appropriation (as seen in Miller 1988).

In the case of Clarke and Drazin, the home might be the context and the object of most consumer practices, but I find that the preoccupation with the materiality of consumerist appropriation tends to privilege aesthetics and conscious semiotic choices to the detriment of more holistic building transformations. Whereas this approach is valuable in highlighting how inhabitants consciously *communicate* with the rest of the world through their homes, some Romanian ethnographies have been more innovative, by surfacing the complex motivations behind inhabitants' appropriations of their living spaces. One classic example is Mihăilescu's anthropological study of Romanian kitchens in Bucharest (2009), in which he indicates that during socialism, the kitchen had become a place of refuge due to the general lack of heating in the 1980s. Therefore, inhabitants began to redesign the kitchen in order to provide for reunions with family or friends, most commonly adding a corner couch around the table, known as *colțar* (Mihăilescu, Nicolau, Giorghiu, & Olaru, 2009). This newly-revised space, small and multifunctional, became the space of family sociability, as a material reaction to the infrastructural conditions of the time[12].

Further, Poenaru has discussed the post-socialist process of renovation following the purchase of a flat: closing the balcony in order to turn it into a thermal shield against the elements, was a common practice under socialism and has been maintained to this day (Poenaru, 2008). Poenaru showcased a few apartment owners' reasoning, among which the presence of snow in the balconies during winter, the necessity for the whole family to sleep in the same room due to the lack of heating, etc. In a similar line of thought, Iancu has taken windows as the objectification of hard work, especially for emigrating inhabitants whose remittances are spent on refurbishments (Iancu, 2011). For instance, *termopan* windows (double glazed PVC windows) were chosen not only for their technical qualities but because they could be interpreted by the neighbours as proof of their hard work: "so people see they made a living and do not waste their time there!" (Iancu, 2011, p. 23). At that time, double-glazed windows, like any new technology, were costly and not everybody could afford it. Thus, the *termopan* became an element implicitly associated with social distinction.

My research builds on both early material culture studies about the home and these recent Romanian ethnographies, but introduces a focus on home *infrastructures* as a way to depart from the prevalent emphasis on objects of consumption (even where they have more pragmatic purposes of energy conservation vs purely aesthetic). Tim Ingold has critiqued material culture studies because "the

[12] In contrast, after the revolution, this sociability left the space of the kitchen towards the living room. It is still cold, a change in temperature in the house is not the explanation; instead, the TV draws the members of the house towards the living room and consequently changes the kind of furniture: from large dining spaces towards coffee tables that allow for attention towards the television.

prevailing emphasis on materiality obstructs our understanding of the fields of force and circulation of materials that actually give rise to things and that are constitutive of the web of life" (Ingold, 2012). I would like to hold on to some of the semiotic claims that inhabitants can make through their buildings, but also integrate Ingold's critique and look at the interaction between materials and elements of weather, such as rain. In order to explore these complex transformations, I now turn to the recent developments in the anthropology of infrastructure.

Anthropology of infrastructure

For a long time, infrastructure has been discussed as a metaphor (Marx, 1971), useful for theorising capitalism, but ignored as an element of material culture. Recently, however, the anthropology of infrastructure has blossomed, as a field which addresses, at once, the necessities of global urban life, the material ordering of social relations, and the aspirations and imaginations of global connection and participation that fuel contemporary politics (Anand, 2012; Dalakoglou & Harvey, 2012; Fennell, 2011; Penny Harvey & Knox, 2012). More than material forms and networks of technology, infrastructures, as Susan Leigh Star has observed, are learned arrangements that constitute membership in particular communities of practice (Star & Leigh, 1999, p. 381).

This increased salience of infrastructure in ethnographic research has been inspired by a range of recent theoretical, historical, and philosophical works in which the material qualities of the infrastructures of modern life have come to the fore. In these studies, infrastructures are complexes of material connections, actions, and reactions that come to have wider social meaning (Bennett, 2004; Latour, 2002). Among them, Actor Network Theory (ANT) has been singled out as a theoretically innovative manner of looking at the material world as not a passive recipient of our projections, but as co-constitutive of the very world we live in. As Latour put it, "it is because the social cannot be constructed with the social that it needs keys and locks" (Latour, 2000, p. 19). These keys and locks, for Latour, are disparate elements connected as "actants" in a single system. ANT sees the world as a collection of fluid, heterogeneous webs of activity that are constantly reinforced through the 'immutable mobiles': hybrid objects that can be combined in such a way, that information is effectively exchanged among human and non-human agents (Latour, 1999). For instance, in his discussion of post-socialist energy reforms, Bouzarovski finds ANT useful for interpreting the dynamics of social and political power that underlie the evolution of energy networks in post-socialist societies (Bouzarovski, 2010). Nevertheless, he points out that ANT's de-centred view of agency fails to consider the ethical implications of moving the onus of responsibility for action away from human subjects, and 'flattens out' inherent inequalities in access to resources and power among different "actants" (Bouzarovski, 2010, p. 70).

ANT has also been criticised for being ahistorical. In his work in Russia, Collier argues that an ethnography of infrastructures should not only trace the development of their material connections. It should also aim to trace "their relationship to broader fields of significance and historical conditions of intelligibility that are themselves temporally circumscribed, and whose identification is a critical moment of inquiry" (Collier, 2011, p. 28). Additionally, Coleman has recently pointed out that ANT's insistence on tracing material connections can become limiting if it does not take into account the work of interpretation and ascription of meanings to material things by human actors (Coleman, 2014).

In his article *Infrastructure and Interpretation: Meters, Dams, and State Imagination in Scotland and India* (2014), Coleman suggests reintegrating ritual performances to the historical and discursive conditions for collective meaning (Coleman, 2014, p. 459). These alternative resources, he argues, have long been available in ethnographic interpretation for understanding the complex relation between materiality and collective meaning.

In my work, I follow Collier's suggestion, by historically framing everyday practices and engagements with the building's infrastructure. However, I remain wary of Coleman's insistence to focus on rituals, because I see the value of infrastructure in allowing for a study of domestic homes across both space (linking the apartments with the wider network of pipes, heaters, power plants, etc.) and across long periods of time (specifically following the aforementioned degradation of the building due to moist). Instead of looking at specific rituals (events that are limited in time), I prefer to look at the long-term process of maintenance and repair in order to highlight an ecologically holistic process of change in the built environment. My approach is inspired by the provocation in recent scholarship to shift the locus of study from the production of urban infrastructure to its disrepair and maintenance (Anand 2012, Chu 2014, Graham and Thrift 2007). These recent ethnographies have revealed that it is "impossible to ignore that the very technosocial architectures of urban life are heavily dominated by, and constituted through, a giant system of repair and improvisation" (S. Graham & Thrift, 2007, p. 11).

These recent studies of infrastructure connect material and social worlds, Larkin has argued in an influential review (2013). Firstly, they argue that infrastructure is a form of political rationality linked with a specific apparatus of governmentality embodying political. Infrastructure is thus linked in intricate ways to the collective fantasy of society about what it means to be modern, through a subtle "poetics of infrastructure" (Larkin, 2013). Secondly, infrastructure is seen to not only have a technical function, but a symbolic one. Larkin has recently noted that infrastructures are also things that exist apart from their purely technical functioning and that "need to be analysed as concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles oriented to addressees" (Larkin, 2013, p. 329). That is, infrastructures do more than succeeding or failing to realize the aspirations that established them. It is in this light that I want to address them.

In the socialist realm, urban infrastructure was presented in the past as a "spectacular socialist achievement" (Schwenkel 2015), which stood as emblematic of progress and contemporaneity with the rest of the (socialist) world. In her ethnography of water infrastructure in contemporary Vietnam, Schwenkel argued that these developments were not only *spectacular* — they did not just serve the illustration of the socialist power as a semiotic exercise — "they provided an infrastructure of hygiene that was well planned, precise, and complex" (Schwenkel 2015). When technical systems fail, the unseen hardware and absent materiality of cities suddenly became visible, "exposed and awkwardly present in our everyday life" (Schwenkel, 2015, p. 522). As my data shows, damaged infrastructure is very much invisible — out of sight, out of mind — until it breaks down, and it becomes visible. The slow process of damage makes such a distinction hard to make, and inaccessible to solely the sense of sight.

Indeed, by paying attention to the "small" gestures of repair and maintenance towards the building, we can also show how the process of care fits in the "larger" scheme of global infrastructural developments. Law has observed that the global is always taken to be complex and "large, as large

as could be on earth" (Law, 2004) and argues instead that it is possible to think of the global as "small" and "non-coherent" (Law, 2004). He therefore suggests that we need a *baroque* understanding of the global that beckons us not to "look up" towards the broader picture, but to "look down" at the detail. A baroque imagination, he points out, "discovers complexity in detail or specificity, rather than in the emergence of higher level order" (Law, 2004, p. 60). A baroque sensibility reminds us that a seemingly global thing - like the block of flats - is always at the same time situated and specific. This kind of reasoning has particular ramifications for the question of scale more generally. Methodologically, it forms the backbone of my choice for one building to study, the H2B block of flats. Through its lens, I provide an analysis of larger post-socialist changes as experienced by the inhabitants and the building.

Chapter breakdown and key findings

Infrastructural issues were at the forefront of inhabitants' preoccupations, and they were very precisely localized inside the building: from the water tap in the kitchen, to the heater in the staircase of the building. Hence, a great deal of my data pointed in the direction of precise elements of infrastructure. In order to give justice to these preoccupations, I organized my thesis accordingly, and decided upon a spatial thematisation of my chapters: the water tap, the heater, the window, the thermal insulation — these themes govern both local preoccupations inside the building, and the division of chapters inside my thesis. Each chapter begins with an illustration made by architect Irina-Elena Nicolescu of the respective infrastructural artefact (as seen on page 39), aimed at emphasizing its role in relation to the rest of the building.

The first chapter, ***The House and the Block***, tells the story of the systematisation process in Piatra-Neamț and the demolitions that ensued it. According to their position in the city and to the social capital of the owners, some houses remained in place, allowing for a certain continuity in the city landscape. With this in mind, the demolished houses left traces: some were physically inscribed in the urban fabric, such as underground storage spaces which were afterwards used by the block inhabitants (*beci*); some were habitual, ranging from a kind of sociality that came with living in the houses to very specific ways of decorating while protecting the home from the elements. Many research participants who used to live in Piatra-Neamț before the demolition pointed out the difficulty in the transition from the house to the apartment building. Apart from the loss of their house and garden, they didn't easily adapt to the new morphology of the block of flats: they were both too close to their neighbours (hence the feeling of surveillance) and, in some cases, too distant (as one participant put it, "familiarity without friendship") - this will prove essential in my later argument about suspicion and mistrust. At the same time as the local inhabitants had a negative attitude towards the newly-emerging blocks of flats, the new comers from nearby towns and villages were often very enthusiastic towards them, for the promises of a modern life. Most importantly, the running water and centralised heating allowed for comfort that was unavailable to a great majority of the population before.

After providing a brief history of the block of flats as a building form, the chapter continues with the specificities of the block construction in Piatra-Neamț. With such a swift demographic change, the limited resources of time, space and money engendered a great contrast between plan and realisation, with many flimsy buildings being built very close to one another. Broken taps, bad airways that allowed for cooking smells to travel between apartments, or bad window finishings that allowed the cold air to

pass — these were all very common. Additionally, the previous houses had been built in a vernacular manner in closer relationship with the environment (taking into account the topology, the predominant winds, the size of the house, and the buffer storage spaces that would insulate the home). In contrast, the industrially constructed blocks of flats, were not positioned with the natural environment in mind, but the changes that ensued included, for instance, thermal insulation on the Northern side, in the direction of the harsh Northern winds. Therefore, the state required a bottom up system of administration: a way for inhabitants to voice their concerns and organize themselves in the maintenance of the buildings.

The second chapter, *The Administration Room*, picks up of this administrative dimension of block inhabitation, and illustrates it through the lens of Mr. Bud's activity as a block administrator in H2B. After describing his daily life surrounding the building, from utilities calculations, to maintenance work, the chapter goes into the inhabitants' difficulties in paying for their individual bills in good time. With pensions considerably lowering in recent years, Mr. Bud had an ever-harder time raising money for the block's common maintenance. With this in mind, his financial strategies included approximations and re-distributions of costs, to make sure that all the bills could be paid. Often, he would find strategies to make sure that money circulates: whereas the electricity bill would come every three months, he would read the meters himself and would make his own estimations, asking for a monthly bill. These gestures of care towards the rest of the community established him as a leader and provided him with a meaningful activity after his retirement, but also raised the suspicion of his neighbours, who realised that the numbers didn't always add up.

From Mr. Bud's perspective, his work as an administrator was both a reason for pride and recognition, and a very challenging, tiring job which involved a lot of mental and physical pressure — because he was in charge of the heating system, he would often go outside the building in the middle of the night to check it, and catch a cold. In time, he tried to find a replacement, but failed to. This leads me to the unsustainability of such a fragile ecology of the block of flats, in which the difference between generations make it almost impossible for a younger administrator to take over. The close interdependence between Mr. Bud and the building made it so that he genuinely could not leave the city for more than a few days. In light of the complex technical, financial and social knowledge one needs to have for such a(n unpaid) job, it is no surprise that many people are not up to the task. At the same time, the block administrator emerges as a key figure of leadership, filling the gap between the state and the market, while (1) administering and maintaining the best conditions of the housing fund and (2) promoting an attitude of respect towards the common property and the moral norms of cohabitation.

The third chapter, *The Water Tap*, explores the relationships of trust and suspicion that are shaped inside the building in relation to water consumption and the maintenance of the water infrastructure. Faults in the ageing pipework made it so that neighbours would accidentally flood one another, both damaging the neighbourly relations, and creating social relations around mitigating the damage. These are testing moments, in which moral conceptions of what makes a good neighbour are revealed. Additionally, water consumption reports (on the basis of individual meters), tainted by lies and technical impressions, equally shaped the social relations inside the block. Conceptually, the relationship between water and the ageing infrastructure is explored through the lens of (1) the building (and the communication between the apartments), (2) pipes (and their corrosions and fissures),

(3) residues (and how they affect the circulation of water through the pipes); (4) bacteria (contaminating the water as it is being transported from the source). This later aspect of water contamination, hinting towards a larger lack of trust in the current governance, is put in contrast with the nostalgic feelings towards the quality of the tap water in the past, given the proximity to good mountain sources. Finally, the chapter draws attention towards a flawed implementation of EU policies of water infrastructure rehabilitation, which lead to higher prices and lower quality.

Another example of an EU policy gone awry is presented in the fourth chapter, ***The Wall Insulation***. As previously mentioned, the EU funds towards building rehabilitation were poorly used by the local authorities and failed to reach most citizens who could have taken advantage of it. In the rare cases in which the City Hall did manage to thermally rehabilitate some blocks of flats, both City Hall and the inhabitants took issue with the process — the first, because they had difficulties in retrieving the inhabitants' contribution; the latter, because the work had been poor and they felt they were overcharged. It comes as no surprise, then, that most inhabitants came up with an ad hoc process of rehabilitation, often insulating independently, without consulting their neighbours. Consequently, the city transformed drastically, with the majority of the buildings being only partly insulated. It is in this context that the example of the H2B block is being discussed in great detail, taking into account each step of the insulation process — both financial and technical. Taking a *chaîne opératoire* approach to processes of "making", the chapter shows the subtle ways in which constructors diverge from the norms of insulation work. Essentially for the purpose of energy saving, the building's heating costs did decrease considerably, as pointed out by Mr. Bud' statistics, shared with his neighbours on the hallway billboard.

Because energy saving is at the root of recent rehabilitation work, the fifth chapter, entitled ***The Heater***, looks at heat distribution, and how it has changed from the fully centralised district heating systems (DH), to intermediary block heating systems (like the one in H2B), to individual apartment boilers (as half of the H2B inhabitants own). Through the perspective of the H2B inhabitants, the chapter explores the difficulties in maintaining the entire building uniformly warm, given the pipework's lack of capacity to transport the hot water with ease, and Mr. Bud's energy saving practices. Mr. Bud, having projected and overseen the construction of the building's heating system, is also responsible of its smooth running. He thus prides himself in producing heat that is cheap, by using his engineering knowledge of communicating vessels to encourage the heating system to circulate on the basis of its inertia, once the engine is turned off.

The chapter follows the complex process of heat decentralisation, caused by outdated equipment, oversized network coverage and irregular peak services. Once inhabitants started installing individual boilers and disconnecting from the network, the systems became evermore fragile, with lower heat levels and higher prices. Especially for medium sized towns such as Piatra-Neamț, this slowly meant the end of centralized heating, and the beginning of energy poverty in the harsh climate of the financial crisis following 2008. Given the aforementioned absence of many of the inhabitants, many apartments were cold, and so the remaining ones had to overcompensate for their cold ceilings and/or floors. Far from that being the case, what was most common was heating up only the space where one spends more time, and leaving the rest of the house cold. This comes in stark contrast with the principles of thermal balance, by which a *whole* building is considered an entity with a number of energy sources and sinks, and which defines the energy efficiency of a building.

If thermal balance is to be maintained throughout the entire building, the sixth chapter, ***The Staircase***, centres on the spaces between the apartments, that speak to issues surrounding maintenance and the sense of community. The chapter showcases spaces in the building which require careful negotiation, from the entrance stairs and front door, to the elevator and the garbage collection points. The private-public dichotomy turns out to be a messy one, which constantly shifts boundaries — the private spaces "spill" outwards through the intricate process described in the architectural intermezzo earlier. Apart from decorations that are moved from the apartments onto the common spaces, other substances invade the staircase, such as garbage, which can emanate smells or leave leaky traces as it is being carried outside. In order to correct behaviour, neighbours will then use the billboard, to pin posters, or the mailbox, to leave messages. Following these patterns of communication indicates by which criteria morality is assigned to the social relationships in the building.

Lastly, ***The Window*** follows the renovation processes that usually contain both thermally insulating and redecorating the apartments. I wanted to understand inhabitants' aesthetic ideals at the same time as the pragmatic manifestations of those ideals, and thus followed the contents of the decoration magazines used by the inhabitants (especially the women) and their reasoning for interior design changes. Specifically, changing the wooden windows with double glazed PVC windows (*termopan*) is often argued by inhabitants to be a solution to the need to close off the apartment in the face of the harsh climatic conditions of the cold seasons, but it fits equally in their discourses of aesthetics, status and modernity. I paid specific attention to their view on *curent*, a specifically Romanian way of conceptualising the air draft that circulates through the house if not sealed efficiently.

Whereas during socialism, the town administration strictly regulated the appearance of any home modification that would have an effect on the exterior, during the heat-deprived 1980s, they closed an eye to inhabitants' modifications aimed at energy saving, such as changing the windows and closing the balcony. These changes became evermore common after 1989 and are currently seen by some as charming ways of appropriating one's home, and by others as a problematic "uncivilized" way of intruding into the public spaces. The inside had spilled outwards, with ground floor balconies seeing doors and stairs added onto them, to ease the independence of inhabitants and to make use of the surrounding spaces. By carefully looking at these modifications, I got an invaluable insight into inhabitants' conceptualisations of the block and the house, with ground floor apartments falling in between these two dialectic categories.



The House and the Block

> Before, whoever would visit Piatra-Neamț, would stop at the Tower of Stephen the Great and would witness the marks of a town integrated in the beautiful history of the Moldavian region […]. The legends of the years, written in chronicles, were the only traces of a time with a great fame. There, a provincial town, with narrow streets and petty factories. Recently, we have endowed with a younger appearance […] Now, everywhere you look, you will find a treat for your eyes. Wide streets framed by beautiful flowers, majestic blocks of flats whose heights are competing with Stephen's tower, the modern factories driven by people's creative work — these are the hardworking and talented constructors of socialism. What took place in Piatra-Neamț is not a miracle, but a product of the new history of socialist Romania. The old, convoluted streets made way for wide tarmac boulevards, illuminated by fluorescent lighting. Blocks of flats with eight or nine floors with multicolour façades, commercial spaces and socio-cultural institutions rise in an imposing manner next to the vestiges of the glorious Moldavian past. (Verșescu, 1971, p. 20, my translation).

This fragment, extracted from a local guide of Piatra-Neamț from 1971, is emblematic of the official discourse of the time surrounding the socialist architectural changes, as relating to the rapid industrialisation process that shaped them. In Piatra-Neamț (as in most cities), they were not added to an empty canvas. The "majestic blocks of flats" situated on wide, well-lit boulevards were a site of socialist modernity and came to replace the urban fabric of the previous regime, described in the official literature as derelict. In this chapter, I will explore the early days of blocks of flats, first describing the process of systematisation and the demolitions that ensued it, then analysing the building process of the blocks of flats, and the early life in these new living spaces. Two elderly families from Piatra-Neamț — Petruca in their house, and Bunghez in their apartment - will guide us through this chapter, and through the relationship between the house and the block, as caught in the Romanian changes of 1970s urbanization wave. Their words will be followed by my long-term work in the State Archives Piatra-Neamț and Bacău, on the *Architecture, Systematization and Investments* department of the Romanian Socialist State, and in the *Ceahlăul* local newspaper archives from 1969 until 1973.

For Romania, the end of the First World War meant the remaking of the unitary national state and a transformation into one of the countries in Southeast Europe with significant prospects for economic development (for instance, the population of Bucharest grew from 380,000 in 1918 to 870,000 1939). Modernism came about in that period, during the reign of the Royal family in Romania (Machedon & Scoffham, 1999), considerably before Communists came to power in 1947 (idem, 20). However, before modernism, Romanian architecture was crystalizing in Bucharest in the newly established Society of Romanian Architects (1891), in the form of the 'neo-Romanian' style (an adaptation of the forms of historic church architecture to secular building programs). An important idea adopted by Romanian architects at the time was that the principles of modernism and the compositional attributes of Romanian architecture had to be fused (Machedon & Scoffham, 1999).







The University of Architecture in Bucharest, an example of 'neo-Romanian' style

In the interwar period, apartment buildings formed an important mass of building. Though of varying architectural quality, all were conceived in response to modernism, to the physical and economical requirements of clients with 'progressive' ideas, and to the conditions imposed by a particular location (Machedon & Scoffham, 1999). With great enthusiasm, architect Cantacuzino wrote in *Arhitectura* in 1934: "Architecture is modern as it uses modern materials and methods of construction and endorses the new standards of hygiene" (Cantacuzino, 1934, p. 3). Florea Stanculescu also stressed the arguments for a new architecture, in the same journal: "The modern style is built reason: it is comfort, the turning of material to advantage, the present in harmony with speed and scientific discovery; it is the spirituality of the time; it is hygiene and health and concrete and brick" (Stanculescu, 1934, p. 13).

After the Second World War, as Communist Parties rose to power in Eastern Europe under Soviet guidance, the question of rebuilding and developing architecture became prominent. Although, as aforementioned, the term 'modernist' is often applied to dominant ideas of the time, the post-war period was removed from the peak of modernism in the 1920s. The term 'international style' could then better describe the characteristic internationalized architectural form of the fifties and sixties (Macel, 2002, p. 106), since the general principles of modernism had become almost canonical. The building of big, concrete buildings termed 'modernist' was not exclusively Communist (Drazin, 2005). It is, indeed, the case that during the 1920s dawn of Communist statehood, before Stalin's ascendancy, modernist architecture formed part of the "foundational project of the Soviet state" (Buchli, 1999, p. 2); and also that at a later date modernist architecture came to be associated with left-wing political ideas more broadly (Miller, 1988). However, this architecture was not imposed and enforced by a Soviet dictatorship; it was an architectural tradition maintained further West, reintroduced into Russia, and initially declared to be socialist realist to deny any capitalist associations (Drazin, 2005). High-rise international-style housing was a feature of many countries between the 1950s and the 1970s, a phenomenon of the public sphere at a global level rather than of socialist administrations: "The Communist regimes built buildings physically not dissimilar to elsewhere, they built a lot of them, and then they unveiled them with their own distinctive ideological fanfares" (Drazin, 2005, p. 200). What effect did these fanfares have?

Socialist enthusiasm for the block

On the 4th floor of 4001, a ten-storey block of flats in the centre of Piatra-Neamț, the Bunghez family welcomed me in their home. Both in their 80s, the Bunghez family were warm, thoughtful hosts. Lia, a retired Literature teacher, had light blue eyes which looked for your every word. She walked very slowly around the apartment, due to her terrible leg pains. Gelu, a charismatic man with round glasses, had been the Director of the Theatre for a long time, and a well-known cultural figure in town. Their living room, covered in paintings, was lit in a warm, soothing light. As the sun went down and hid in the hills, it lit their living room directly. Their balcony was only half closed — half for storage, half for the flowers. The loud ticking of the beautiful wooden clock gave the room a certain kind of rhythm and beat.

For the Bunghez family, coming from Bacău, moving to the block in Piatra was easy — especially because it was a block made out of bricks, as their house used to be. A friend of theirs was the chief engineer working on it, and Lia had seen the block in the making. She picked an apartment which would bring her good luck — he giggled — or at least, one that would avoid bad luck. She didn't want an apartment on the bottom floors, because it would be loud; but she also didn't want the high ones. "And, so, Gelu came with the paperwork for the apartment on the 3rd floor, no. 13. She told him to go change it. First, he had changed the section, now the floor." They congratulated themselves on the view, as most of the new inhabitants: the heights of the new buildings were a very attractive feature. "This was the advantage of this block: from every room, you see nature. Unlike now, there was no hotel, no mall in front of it."





Mr. Bunghez told me that the construction of blocks of flats is connected to moments in the history of the city which meant modernisation and progress, as beautiful as the city's historical buildings might have been: "For the city, these blocks, as modest as they are now — tormented, troubled, outdated — constituted progress from an urban point of view. They determined the passing from the old townlet to the modern city." The chief architect, who designed the city centre, Alexandru Iotzu, made sure that the centre would be airy, and would allow for an ample view over the landscape. The image was not obstructed by closed spaces — on the contrary, the block in the city centre had large parks. The space would be interrupted, to allow for the mountain perspective (as seen in the postcard on the right above).

A good illustration of this ideal is the neighbourhood containing the first blocks of flats in Piatra-Neamț. In April 1959, a notice was released by the Systematization Department, favouring the placing of four-



An illustration of the original architectural plan, 1960



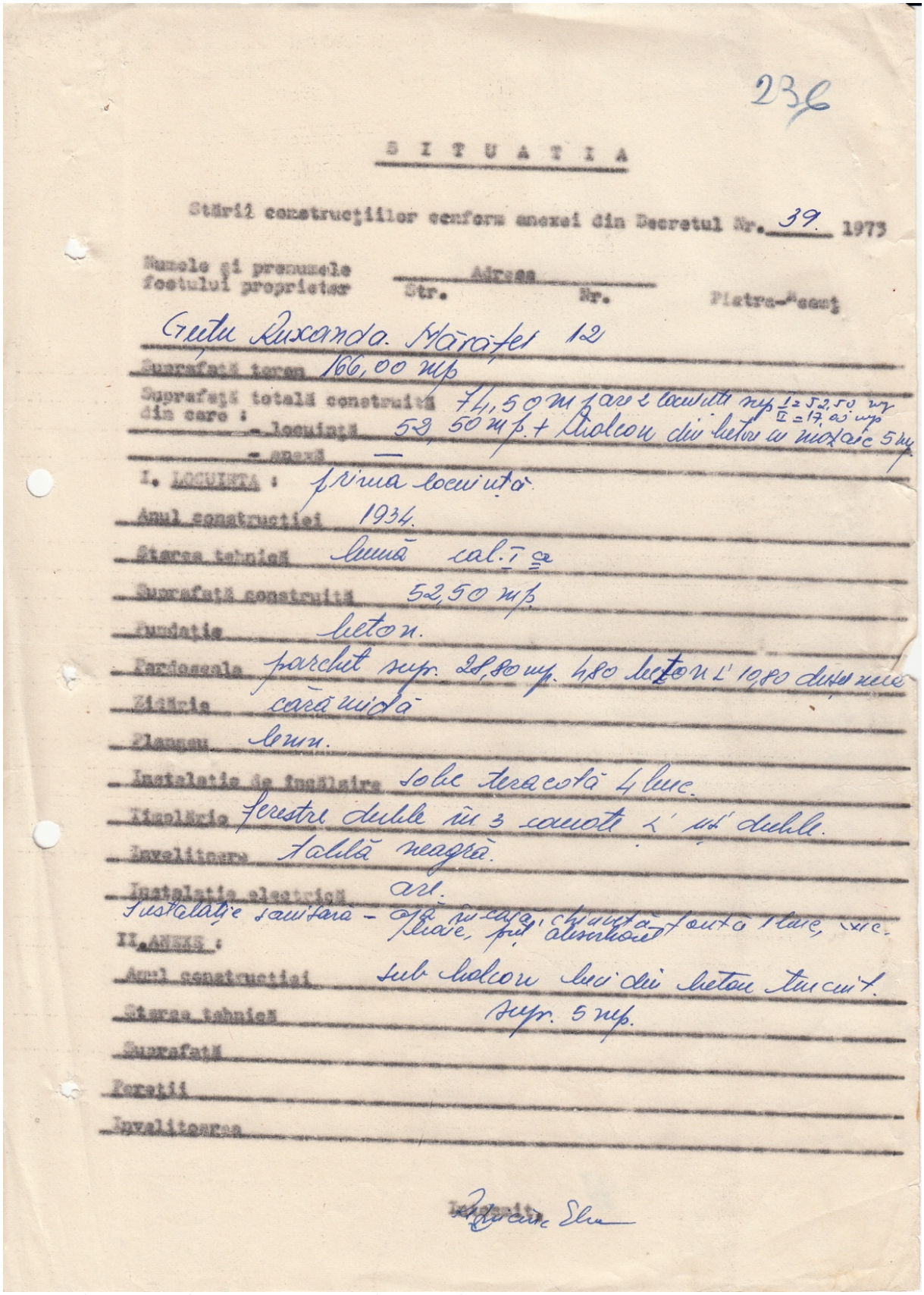
The entrance to one of the blocks, 2006

storey blocks in the 'Stalin square', which had been initiated in 1957. The 'Stalin' blocks, currently known as the 'German' blocks, were to host German engineers who put together the Săvinești factory — the working place of 30,000 chemists and engineers. They were proud to have a higher capacity than initially planned: 506 instead of 375 apartments. After the city centre would be systematized, they would return upon this area to add more blocks. They crammed as many buildings as possible in the quarter, for two reasons: (1) the difficulty of buying terrain in the area and (2) the high costs of infrastructural work, which raised the cost of each apartment. Due to the lack of present infrastructure, they could not create isolated buildings, but had to think of ensembles that could be connected to the water pipes and the heating system.

Interestingly, the writers of the placement study asked insightful questions about the participation of the quarter in the aesthetic of the city, as well as the economic efficiency of the project. Aesthetically, their interest lied in creating deep perspectives, which would allow the inhabitant to get a good sense of the neighbourhood surroundings, while being mesmerised by the recurring facades of the P+3 buildings. Pragmatically, they were interested in efficiency: the more they would build, the less they would have to pay per apartment. Pages and pages of calculations tested the most efficient way to create housing spaces. This was the first of a series of quick building projects, aimed at accommodating the expected influx of workers. For this aim, they would have to demolish a few houses of 'minimal value' (page 4 of the report). They would 'lift the urban appearance of the city to its new economic role', by replacing the 'easily demolishable' buildings in the city centre (page 2 of the report). In the meantime, the 'German' neighbourhood, now known for its streets with flower names and its many cats, has seen a degradation that culminated in the early 2000s (see picture on the previous page), their facades being corroded to the brick, their benches broken, their pipes clogged. The blocks became well known for their small, uncomfortable apartments, with materials of poor quality. This resulted in the recent rehabilitation attempts, which will be discussed in *The Wall Insulation*.

This example illustrates two interrelated processes that are key to the later development of the blocks of flats: (1) the demolitions and (2) the economical construction of the blocks. The demolitions that followed the expropriation of the inhabitants had to make room for as many blocks of flats as possible, connected to the centralised heat and water infrastructure. A systematisation study from 1957 ("Studiu privind problema construcțiilor de locuințe și social culturale din R.P.R".) encouraged the nationalisation of the "bourjois" houses for the "equitable redistribution of the living space". The study criticized the fact that the state did not own land in the central parts of town, which did not allow for new construction in the centre of cities. Thus, situating housing on the outskirts of cities made apartments more expensive through the costs of the utilities networks. The solution was the simplification of legislation concerning expropriation.

Although a systematization plan per se was not aproved, the demolitions started in Piatra-Neamț in great numbers. In researching the expropriation contestations filed by the inhabitants, I was struck by the overwhelming number of people who were arguing that they had received too small of a financial compensation, or that their homes were taken away in unjust circumstances. In one of the most extreme examples, an inhabitant was in the hospital when his house was demolished without his knowledge in 1969: The letter reads: "On the 28th of February, while I was in the hospital, gravely ill […] the demolition team entered my family's property. […] Apart from the fact that I do not know what happened to the objects in the house, I was also not informed of the demolition while in the hospital.



236

S I T U A T I A

Stării construcțiilor conform anexei din Decretul Nr. 39. 1973

Numele și prenumele fostului proprietar Geutu Alexandra. Adresa Str. Mărăței Nr. 12 Piatra-Neamț

Suprafață teren 166,00 mp

Suprafață totală construită 74,50 m² case locuit mp 1=52,50 mp II=17,00 mp
din care : - locuință 52,50 m.p. + balcon din beton cu mozaic 5 m.p.
- anexă —

I. LOCUINȚA : prima locuință.

Anul construcției 1934.

Starea tehnică bună cal. I-a

Suprafață construită 52,50 m.p.

Fundația beton.

Pardoseala parchet supr. 28,50 mp. 4,80 beton 1,980 dușumele

Zidăria cără mixtă

Planșeu lemn.

Instalație de încălzire sobe teracotă 4 buc.

Tâmplărie ferestre duble în 3 canate / uși duble.

Învelitoarea tablă neagră.

Instalație electrică ari.

Instalație sanitară - 1/2 în casă, chiuveta 1 buc, WC.

II. ANEXE :

Anul construcției sub balcon bec din beton turnat.

Starea tehnică supr. 5 mp.

Suprafață

Poratii

Invelitoarea

Raportor Ilie

Example of a demolition file, containing detailed information of the house's size, quality, materials, heating system, water infrastructure



Each demolition file contained a plan of the building, and photographs of the property

[…] The house was made out of wood with a tin roof, with ten rooms, two large storage spaces, one garage, one stone basement, water installations." Most complaint letters included a detailed description of the houses, aimed at proving that the house had been undervalued in the assessment process. This process involved a demolition file which contained a verbal description of the house (a typified form), a house plan and photographic evidence of the state of the house, as seen on the next page. The typified form contained details such as the surface of the terrain, the built surface, the construction year, the state of the building, the material of the foundation, the flooring, the masonry, the joinery, the heating system, the sanitary installation, etc.

In order to justify this swift change, the already-existing houses were set in stark contrast with the new blocks of flats: old versus new, poorly built versus industrially designed, backwards versus modern. Thus, most demolition files noted that the houses were in bad/medium condition, whereas the inhabitants' complaint letters pointed to their high/excellent quality. Most often, their complaints were rejected and they were denied compensation. Hundreds of letters testify to the normalisation of this poor compensation, in contrast to the large areas of land taken over by the state. Consequently, the demolition files were of interest to many of my research participants, because they represented the only chance of receiving fair compensation for the lost land. For me, they provided an invaluable insight into the constitution of the homes, and their relationship to the natural and built environment. Furthermore, the kinds of materials and constructions that were indicated by State Archive documentation (often, of very good quality) came in stark contrast to the desciption of the propaganda of the time, as I will demonstrate in the following section.

Contrasting discourses about houses and blocks of flats

In *Geneze*, a documentary about Piatra-Neamț from 1972 (pictured below), the voice-over describes the gloomy atmosphere that pervades the existing urban houses: "I've seen these pictures before, of houses that looked impoverished. Assuming that these houses had a God of their own, he wouldn't dare visit and see in what poor state these people live. In the meantime, they have entirely demolished, and these are the only images that are left, of sad children dreaming." This kind of discourse did not only pervade popular culture, but studies of urban planning as well: "The poor quality of the built environment, the lack of socio-cultural spaces, the partial or total lack of infrastructure […] have aggravated permanently in the last decades before the instalment of a new order in our country, triggering the accentuation of the qualitative differences between centre and periphery. This is to say that the periphery has lost the advantages of the rural condition, namely the contact with nature,





through the over-agglomeration, without gaining any of the advantages of urban living" (Rău & Mihuță, 1969, p. 13).

The underlying reasoning was that the use of terrain was not economical (Rău & Mihuță, 1969, p. 20), the high density being the consequence of the excessive use of terrain following real estate speculation. Therefore, Romanian cities were characterized by a low population density and a poor structure of the road infrastructure, not fitting with a continually increasing traffic. An urbanism study at the time gave the example of Western capitalist developments, in which the urban development had reached a crisis due to the explosion of the large cities after industrialisation. As a consequence, the chaotic development of the built environment had accentuated the difference between centre and periphery (Rău & Mihuță, 1969, p. 24). Alternatively, the emergence of suburbia with one-family houses spread over long stretches of land and connected through roads were seen as a result of the tendency for isolation and the individualism specific to the "capitalist bourgeoisie" (Rău & Mihuță, 1969, p. 29). Instead, the new relationships of production, based on the "equality of all members of society when it comes to work, culture and rest" (idem), gave a new shape to the structure and ways of the socialist city.

While seated in their living room, Ms. Bunghez told me that socialist city administration didn't take into account the value of some of the old, beautiful buildings. Building the blocks in Piatra-Neamț was a huge intervention — there were many valuable houses of people who had to give them up. There was an entire Jewish neighbourhood around the 'high street' of the city at the time, of which one finds no trace in the present-day city. For instance, a friend of theirs had a house which was exceptionally beautiful, where the Art School is nowadays. It was also ahead of its time — built between the two wars, a bit cubist, with a terrace — "it was splendid", Ms. Bunghez tells me. The only thing that was left after demolition was a tree between the blocks. "She goes there sometimes and says: <this is the walnut tree from our garden>. It's painful, especially because a tree gives you a sense of continuity". She then pointed to the symbolic and material cost of demolition: "Everyone who lived in those houses — as modern or modest as they might have been — everyone was shocked and demoralised. They crashed. Their hearts were demolished, because they had to put aside the tradition of the family, of the city, of the street."

In the UK, Hyatt speaks of campaigns for better housing conditions undertaken in the earlier part of the 20th century as "civilising missions, aimed at reforming the urban poor who made up Britain's own domestic 'dark continent'", thus drawing a parallel with colonization (Hyatt, 1997). Romania bears a similarity with the English definition of 'social', in that the English council estates were, as she argues, great experiments of high modernity, and so were the Romanian blocks of flats. A parallel can be made with interwar British housing. In the words of the brilliant George Orwell: "Give people a decent home and they will soon learn to keep it decent. Moreover, with a smart-looking house to live up to, they improve in self-respect and cleanliness, and their children start life with better choices. Nevertheless, in a Corporation estate there is an uncomfortable, almost prison-like atmosphere, and the people who live here are well aware of it" (Orwell, 1965, p. 71).

In contrast, Romanian blocks of flats were actually markers of comfort, far from the prison-like atmosphere that Orwell was referring to in the UK. Romanian industrial construction technology was seen as a saving force allowing modest people to surpass their condition. In the socialist literature on

inhabitation, comfort is defined as the tendency to increase energy efficiency and productivity, transposed onto the level of everyday life (Caffé, 1987, p. 99). Talking about comfort in industrial terms, we read: "The increase in comfort represents the decrease in the amount of energy and mental concentration used in domestic activities, with the purpose of liberating people from material and mental constrictions and favouring the spiritual and creative availability for the benefit of the individual and of society" (Caffé, 1987, p. 99). Enhancing lighting, heat and hygiene in the home is often compared to industrial automatization. The authors admit that it is unusual to speak of comfort in the factory, or of ergonomics in the home. But ergonomic preoccupations with light, chromatics, signalling, manoeuvring tools, silence, a good working position and air quality are actually elements of labour comfort. Transposed onto the home, they reveal the utilitarian dimension of comfort, as an instrument of increasing the quality of life — and not as a purpose in and of itself, as an exclusive and sufficient indicator (Caffé, 1987, p. 99).

It is in this industrial vocabulary that the housewife's chores were described: a *Ceahlăul* newspaper article from 1972 is titled: "The housewife's time budget — affected by organisational deficiencies". Pre-cooked canned foodstuffs are suggested as an alternative to the traditional "sarmale", a complex dish that is much too time consuming to make. In the same line of thought, *Femeia* (The Woman), a women's magazine from the 1980s, discusses the most efficient ways to manage time and energy by the housewife. Swiping the floor, making the bed, sewing, doing shopping, lifting a heavy vase, taking care of the child, hanging the clothes to dry — these activities are analysed in terms of time and energy consumption. On the top of a table titled "Dividing time and energy by the housewife", four female figures are drawn, making the following gestures: sweeping, making the bed, sowing, doing the groceries. Both time and energy required (in kcal/min) are given for each activity. The text below, titled: "Household activities and energy consumption", reads: "The values in the drawing show that these activities require a higher level of energy consumption and they point out the fact that we must try to decrease that level. How? First of all, through perfecting work techniques by mechanising them […]; second of all, by using new products made in the local and national industry. For instance, for cleaning the windows without water, a new spray has been created, called *Comfort*, that reduces both the time and the effort to half."

ÎMPĂRȚIREA TIMPULUI ȘI ENERGIEI DE CĂTRE GOSPODINĂ



	măturа	face patul	coase	cumpără
Timp în min.	150	20	120	60
Energie în kcal./min.	2—3	3—4	0,5—1	1,5—1

ACTIVITATEA GOSPODĂREASCĂ ȘI CONSUMUL DE ENERGIE

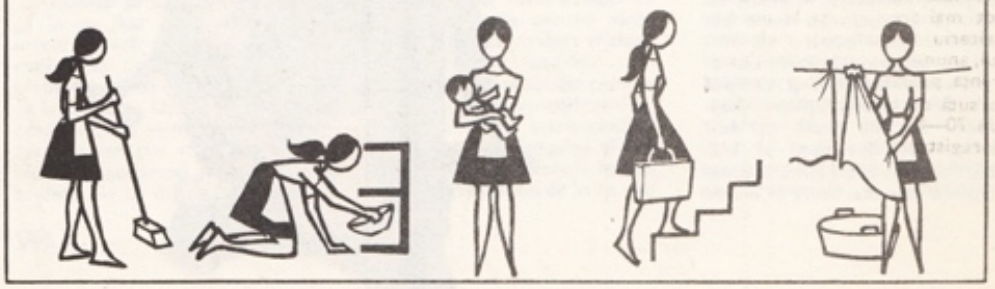
Lehman, unul dintre fondatorii cercetării de fiziologia muncii, a studiat randamentul consumului de energie într-o serie de gospodării de-a lungul zilei. Printre activitățile care solicită cel mai înalt consum energetic sînt: frecatul și spălatul podelelor, curățatul covoarelor, al ferestrelor, călcatul. Valorile indicate în desen arată că aceste activități cer un consum de energie deosebit de înalt, dar ele ne-ar putea avertiza și asupra faptului că trebuie să încercăm să le facem să devină mai ușoare. Cum? În primul rînd perfecționînd tehnicile de lucru prin mecanizarea unora (aspirator, mătură mecanică, bătător de covoare electric etc.); în al doilea rînd, apelînd cu mai multă încredere la noile produse, aparate și articole realizate de industria republicană și locală. De exemplu, pentru curățatul geamurilor fără apă s-a realizat un spray «Confort», care reduce și timpul, și efortul de curățire la jumătate; pentru ștersul mozaicului și linoleumului există burete cu storcător mecanic; pentru călcatul rufelor mari am putea apela (dacă s-ar înființa) la călcătorii industriale. Se știe că azi un număr foarte mare de familii dispun de mașini de spălat rufe, dar, cum calandrele de călcat pentru uz menajer nu au apărut încă pe piață, s-ar putea crea aceste servicii parțiale în cadrul spălătoriilor industriale.

FORME ALE EFORTULUI STATIC ÎN DIVERSE ACTIVITĂȚI DIN CASĂ



face patul — ridică un vas greu — spală vase — se întinde după obiecte prost așezate — calcă

face curat — se apleacă după unelte de spălat — îngrijește copilul — duce greutate — întinde rufe



This notion of comfort extends outside the home, to the rest of the urban fabric and natural setting: "Urban comfort is determined on the one hand by the comfort of the object itself [the block], and on the other hand by the comfort of the whole, of the entire frame of life that contains the object. Comfort is influenced by natural geographic and climatic conditions, as well as by historical conditions" (Rău & Mihuță, 1969, p. 52). These historical conditions included what was considered at the time to be the great socialist progress and transformation, driven by industrialisation of food production for instance, which made home storage unnecessary, and thus allowed for smaller apartments:

> Both the context in which urban life takes place and the relationships between neighbours are in constant transformation. Together with the development of society […], the dwelling and its surroundings must also transform. As a consequence of these transformations, a series of activities that used to take place inside the dwelling now find a correspondent outside. Thus, the surfaces inside the home that used to be needed for storing food have a present-day equivalent in the units of production and distribution of foods that are pre-packaged, pre-cooked and conserved, which are ever more varied. Also, the storage of fuel that was previously necessary for heating are now not needed, in the context of modern district heating systems. The large sizes of the previously promoted dwellings can now be much smaller, while increasing the level of comfort, by adding more well-rounded technical features. […] Consequently, the range of the term "dwelling" widens, to implicitly include that part of the amenities which come to complement the dwelling function (Rău & Mihuță, 1969, p. 53).

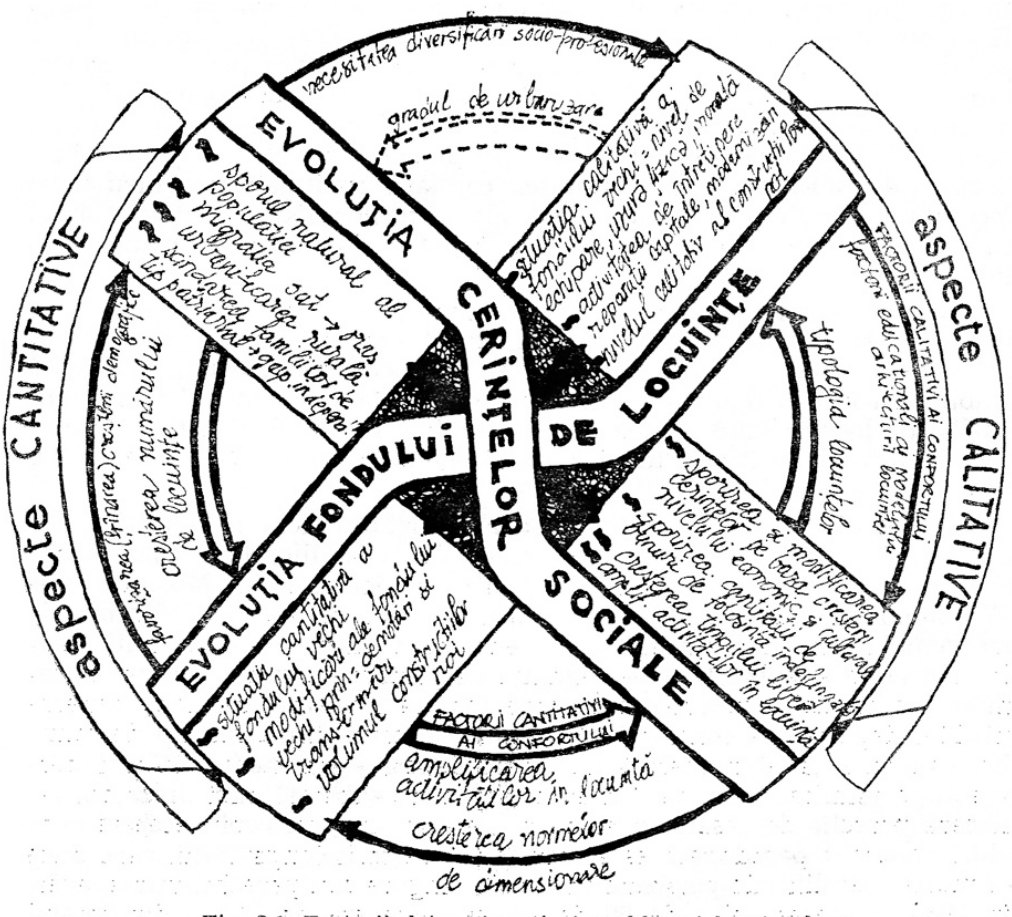


Fig. 3.1. Factorii determinanți ai problemei locuințelor.

In a scheme titled "The determinant factors of the issues of housing" from an 1986 urbanisation study, two main categories are connected: "The evolution of the housing stock" and "The evolution of social demands" - both these sections are divided in quantitative (on the left) and qualitative (on the right) elements (Caffé, 1987). The "qualitative state" of the current housing stock (with "physical and moral wear") is no longer suitable for a population that has increased in size and has diversified its socio-professional endeavours. For this new population, that has higher levels of education and more independence from the "patriarchal family", comfort needs to be improved inside the ever-growing amounts of housing units. For example, the new apartments would find a better solution for heating the whole surface of the living space. The same urbanisation study argues that before neighbourhood heating, houses were heated with wood or coals through sobe (stoves) which needed fume tubes. The most advantageous position was the centre, even if the most important warming sites were in the extremes, where cold would come in; the rooms would be arranged around the stove and the tubes. With neighbourhood heating, the arrangement of the rooms became independent of the need to warm up the apartment. As I will argue in *The Heater*, the recent energy poverty crisis in small sized Romanian towns has forced inhabitants to reintroduce wood-based heating in their homes, only because they cannot afford to pay for gas-based heating. This development does not only contradict the initial reasoning for comfort of the blocks of flats, but it presents dangers to the life and well-being of inhabitants.

My thesis will explore this notion of comfort extensively, as seen through the eyes of the inhabitants. Most poignantly, *The Window* will demonstrate how people negotiated this need for more living space with the urgency of storing foods, and how they changed the morphology of their apartments in order to accommodate for needs that cannot be estimated by an all-encompassing state. For the purposes of this chapter, the socialist discourse presented so far highlights a top-down approach to living spaces, imposed by the state, in contrast to the bottom-up vernacular architecture that was typical of Romanian houses. In the Romanian countryside, the shape of the building would be determined by the climate, by the materials or by the preoccupations of the inhabitants. Cantacuzino, in 1933, wrote a detailed analysis of the causes which generated the specificity of the houses from the villages in contrast to the cities. The houses from the villages have few commonalities; conversely, the city ones resemble one another, they are built from the same materials, he argued (Cantacuzino, 1934). This outer city variation resulted from the varying geographical morphologies, weather conditions and natural resources. For instance, houses in the mountainous regions had tall, abrupt rooftops, to prevent snow from gathering and to provide a thermal barrier, whereas houses in the southern plains had very flat rooftops, to protect them from the harsh winds. Thus, the bioclimatic conditions of these houses engendered very specific aesthetic forms. In a sense, vernacular architecture is always bioclimatic architecture, determined by the need to protect one from the cold/heat/wind/rain.

Overall, my field work suggests that inhabitants in Piatra were very weary of the amount of sun, the topography of the land, the form of the terrain and the micro-climatic conditions. When a new house would be built, one needed to find a place that was "good, fruitful and healthy" ("bun, rodnic și sănătos"). The houses were usually oriented towards the sun, and were protected from local winds. Typically, on the Northern side, the walls would be filled or there would be storage rooms or kitchens under a lowered roof, which turned into buffer zones. My findings from the demolition files reveal carefulness towards ecological factors — for instance, the windows on the Northern side of the house, towards the harsh cold winds, would be smaller than the ones on the Southern side. Additionally,

storage spaces ("cămară") would be placed on the Northern side, to create a thermal buffer space, whereas the room used for sleeping ("cameră de locuit") would be towards the South/West, protected from these cold winds and directed towards the sun. Additionally, intermediary spaces between the inside and the outside ("prispă") would provide shade during the hot summers, and a space for socialisation. As far as shape is concerned, the houses were long — starting from the centre (from the 'good' room), they would continue from one room to another. So far, this characterisation gently contradicts Cantacuzino's description of a certain urban uniformity in houses.

This is very relevant for the life in the blocks of flats: as we will see in the chapter on insulation, it is on the less sunny Northern side that block inhabitants typically insulated their apartments. Also, systematisation documentation reveals that most houses were made out of wood and clay — the first, from local forests, the second, known for its insulation properties. Because during the systematisation process, the urban planners rarely had the luxury of taking into account the local climatic conditions (being pressed by budget, space and time of execution), the blocks of flats had to follow the paths of the new roads and boulevards (and were, by definition, made up of various apartments with multiple orientations). Consequently, inhabitants adapted their homes according to their taste and to their climatic needs — aesthetics and pragmatics at the same time. The thesis will explore each of these adaptations in detail in the following chapter (the closing of balconies, the changing of windows, the wall insulation). For now, I want to stress that most of these adaptations were part and parcel of people's lives in the houses, and that these very people moved to the block — not on a clean slate, but bringing with them a very particular way of appropriating their home.

After the change of regime in 1989, many attacked the block of flats, such as the writer Octavian Paler:

> For a peasant, the house is more than a dwelling. It is a way of installing oneself in the universe. The garden, in his eyes, doesn't primarily have an economic value. Together with the other outhouses [acareturi], they form an order and a point of balance. […] Each house is the expression of a particular identity, the worldly form of a soul. […] Snatched out of his natural order [ordinea firească], he is placed into a block in which no-one has any memories. Discipline takes the place of any humanly feeling (Paler, 1990, my translation).

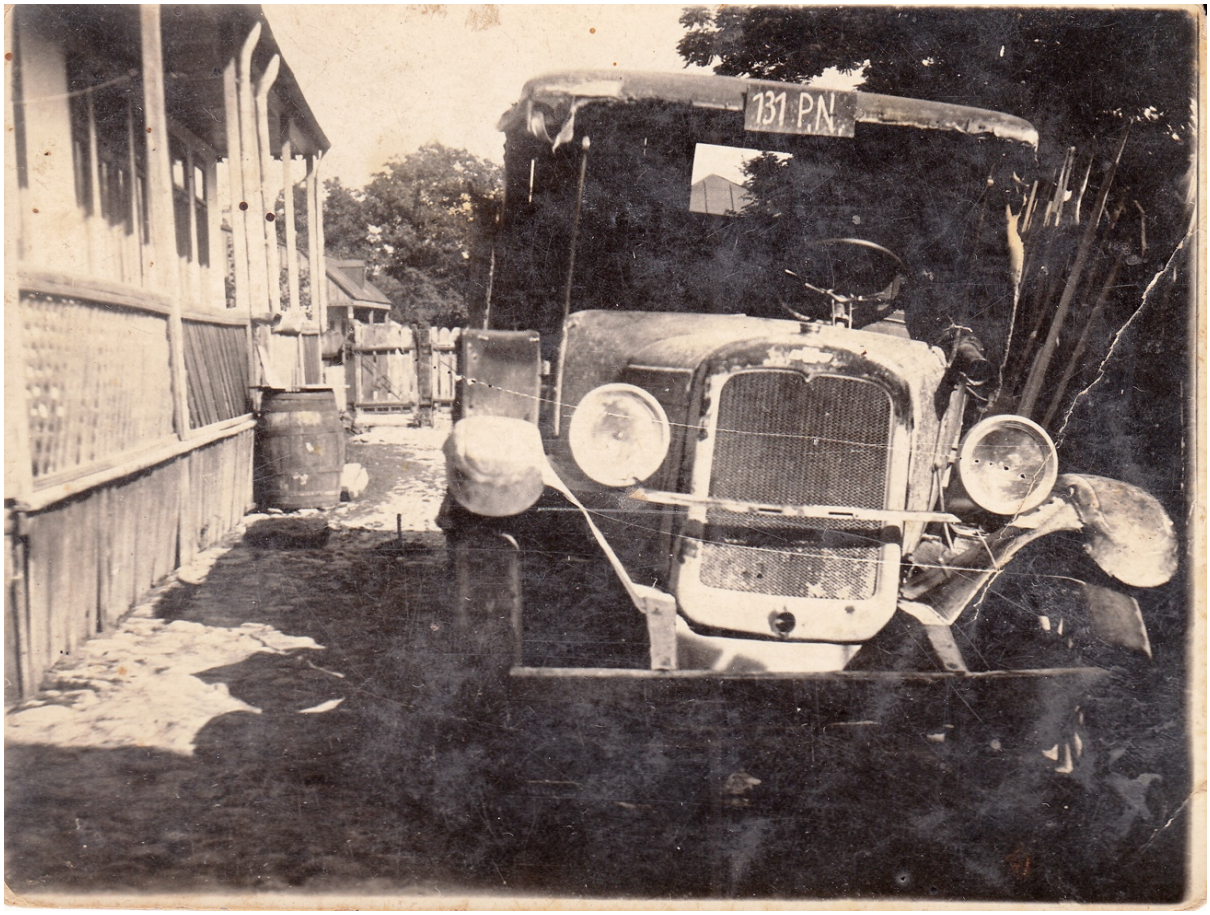
What my thesis will show is that the block of flats was not such a fierce instrument of alienation — that inhabitants had their own way of creating memories — material and immaterial. At the same time, the expropriation and demolition process profoundly changed the morphology of the city and the inhabitants' interactions. As follows, I will give the example of one of the few houses that withstood the test of time and continued its existence between the blocks of flats, despite losing adjacent land. Illustrating both a specific kind of sociality and a certain use of materials in the home, this case study comes to nuance the dominant discourse on houses during the socialist regime.

The Petruca family — the story of a house in the Mărăței neighbourhood

In a small house in the neighbourhood of Mărăței, ten minutes away from H2B and between the neighbouring blocks of flats, Ms. and Mr. Petruca welcomed me in the living room. It was in the house we were in, that he came to ask his wife for marriage. They had been classmates from primary school onwards — she couldn't even dance with someone else, because he would threaten them, he told me with a big smile. Her dad loved his three daughters so much, that he would tell friends and relatives: 'my daughters will never leave this place' - and it entered their system, without feeling obliged, so they stayed in the neighbourhood. When they moved into the house they lived in now, the neighbourhood had households with cows and sheep. The town had only 15,000 people — it was a commune. It was beautiful; the tallest store had two floors. In the 77 years of his life, he had seen the neighbourhood change drastically. People used to be kinder. For instance, because his mum was extremely devout, each Sunday they would go to church, and stay with her until the end of the service. She would scold him as a teenager for not saying hello to the elders on the street. Neighbours knew each other well and took care of the neighbourhood - each week-end, the path in front of the house, which was not cemented of course, would be swiped until it would shine. People would clean both their individual gardens, and the path in front.

Ms. Petruca brought coffee and cake, especially home-made for the occasion, while Mr. Petruca started telling me about his childhood in the city. He had grown up in a house with a big garden in the old neighbourhood of Mărăței. He told me about the atmosphere in the old neighbourhood, when relationships were very amiable and inhabitants were very united. I then thought of sharing the demolition files from the State Archives with them, following both their street and the neighbouring ones. As we went through the files, they seemed to know everyone: "Iconaru, yes! The house from the corner! Across from the school. On the other side, there's a different house — the only one left between the blocks there — a small, beautiful house. The house of this man is on an intersection. He had a big garden. It was in great condition — made out of brick, with a garage." A few belonged to the Lipovans, towards the *Dobrogeanu Gherea* neighbourhood. "The Antoniu family, who made icons! They had relatives on that street, the Gugiu family. Look, Țară Lungă Agripina — she was a teacher! And the engineer of the city, Cornel!" There were also a few houses that had survived the demolition, like his own, but most of them had only left a paper trace in the shape of these demolition files.

What became apparent from discussing the demolition files was that they knew each house's life story. In his young age, when someone made a cake, all the close neighbours got a slice, they told me. "Popa, Oboroceanu… Hociung Ioan… Eftinimia Petru — the driver who is related to… Catinca. They were all related. Borș Vasile. I used to go carolling there. Moroșanu — the priest… Gherman, Stoicescu, Cociung Dumitru, on their street — she moved to the block after the demolition, but she died soon after — she had a shock when she left her beautiful house. Crăciun Maria, close by. Roca Zamfira. Pantiru. The house is left there — next to the heating system. Gliga Maria. Vasiliu — the priest lived there. Guțu — a beautiful house, and taller than usual." That one wasn't demolished after all. "For communists, the intimacy of the houses posed a problem", Mr. Petruca concludes — "because they had a fence. No-one would look into your house. I felt my whole life that that's how a normal society should look like."


131 P.N.

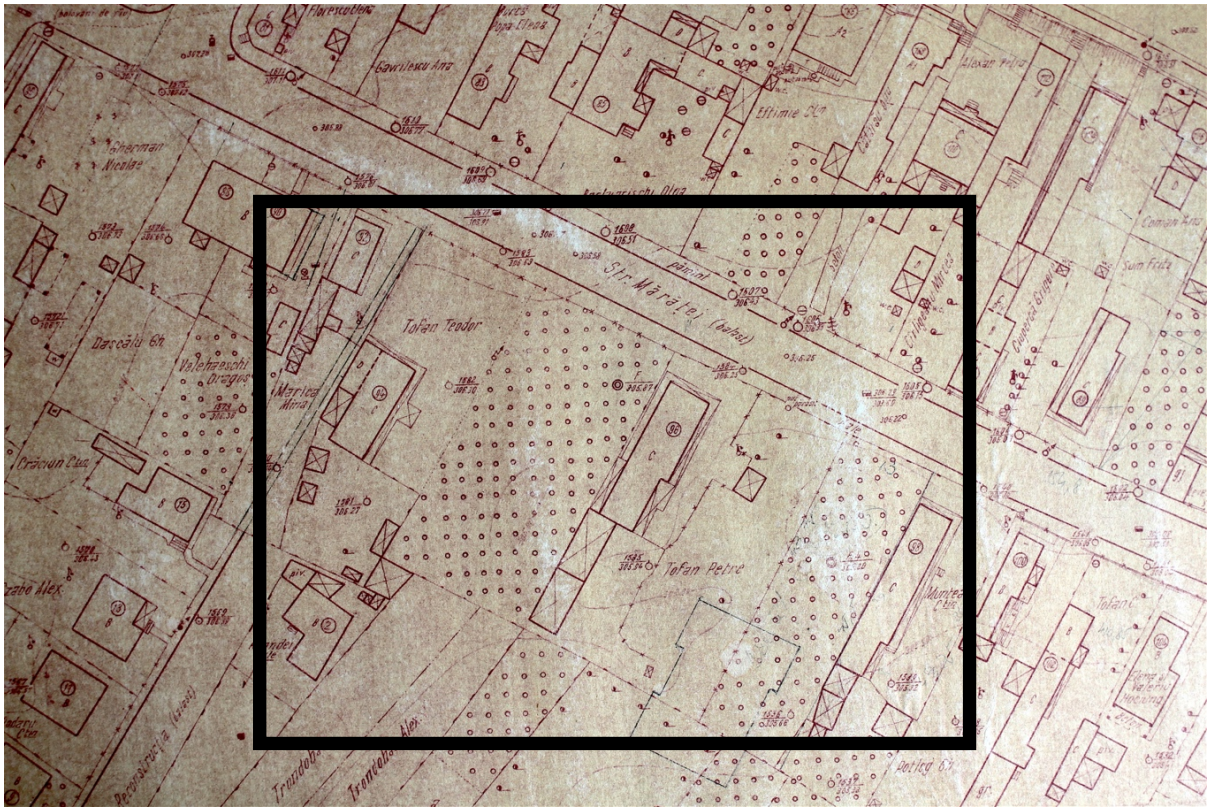


Going through these files made him reminisce. When they demolished the old home that had been built by his father — over 100 years old — he took out a small piece of the wooden beam and wrote on it when it had been built, and when it had been demolished. It was a heart-breaking process. Similarly, his father-in-law had been expropriated from his house when the new blocks were built. They were very ashamed. He now said that they shouldn't have been, because everyone had been taken out of their homes — but his father-in-law had suffered so much, that he interiorized it, and ultimately died of Alzheimer's at 51. This was a common explanation for the health problems or the early deaths of many of the people whose houses had been demolished: the impossibility of getting used to the new living spaces.

Their grandparents had also lived in the neighbourhood, on Progress Street (Str. Progresului). There were only well-made houses there — many of them, Jewish. One would go through people's gardens, and end up on Carol Street. The houses were made out of wood, and laid on a structure of rocks, which would leave room for air to pass. Around the house there was a wooden frame, then sand and slag. Wooden flooring was rare — his grandfather had it, because he was a "plutaș" (a wood merchant), dealing in wood brought in by the rafts men from Vatra Dornei. Otherwise, most people had clay on the floor, which they would replace for each Easter. In Mr. Petruca's childhood, children would sleep around the stove [*sobă*], all in one room — the heating would be in the centre of the house. I will discuss the role of this type of heating in *The Heater* chapter in more detail, but for now I want to point out that the *sobă* is a key element of the Romanian household, which was often the centre of social life, and was decorated with most carefulness.

The house they currently lived in had been built by her father — they had only added two rooms (the ones we were in), but the foundation had been poured already. In the back garden, they used to have a fountain and a horse shed. The fountain source is under their current bathroom, and they regret having accessed the city pipes, instead of pumping the water that was already available. Now he has to pay big money for tap water of dubious quality, he regretfully admitted. We will explore the transformations in the water infrastructure in *The Water Tap* chapter, addressing the socialist discourse about the emancipatory potential of the new water infrastructure, and comparing it with the present-day disappointment towards the quality and price of water. Unlike other research participants, the running water of the new blocks of flats did not lure the Petruca family to the block. If anything, they resisted this change for as long as they could.

In 1981, however, their house was planned for demolition, and so they had to move to the block. They lived there for eight years, until 1989, when they were allowed to return to their house. They were tremendously happy, because they never adapted to the new life. How come they hadn't demolish the house? The paperwork had already been in order for a kindergarten to be built, but the financial crisis of the 1980s didn't allow it. Right after the revolution, they went and returned the money they had received for the house, and they asked for it back. Even if their house was not demolished in the construction of the blocks, their gardens were taken away in 1967, for the construction of blocks of flats (see maps on the next page). "It is what it is", he says. They were split in two — his father-in-law, and himself — he got 52000 lei at the time — "very little", he tells me, "I couldn't even buy a car" (which was 60000 lei). His father-in-law got 20000. It was painful for the old ones to see their gardens, of 2200 square metres, be taken away, with trees, and vegetables. They had 100 grape plants, almost ready to be picked. Had the officials waited for a week, they could have taken the grapes.



Map from 1923, showing, the gardens of the Tofan (Petruca) household



Same location of the Petruca household, with blocks replacing the gardens

they could have taken the grapes. His father-in-law had asked them to allow him to pick up his grapes, but they wouldn't. He was hurt. It was the first time they would have picked them, they were young plants.

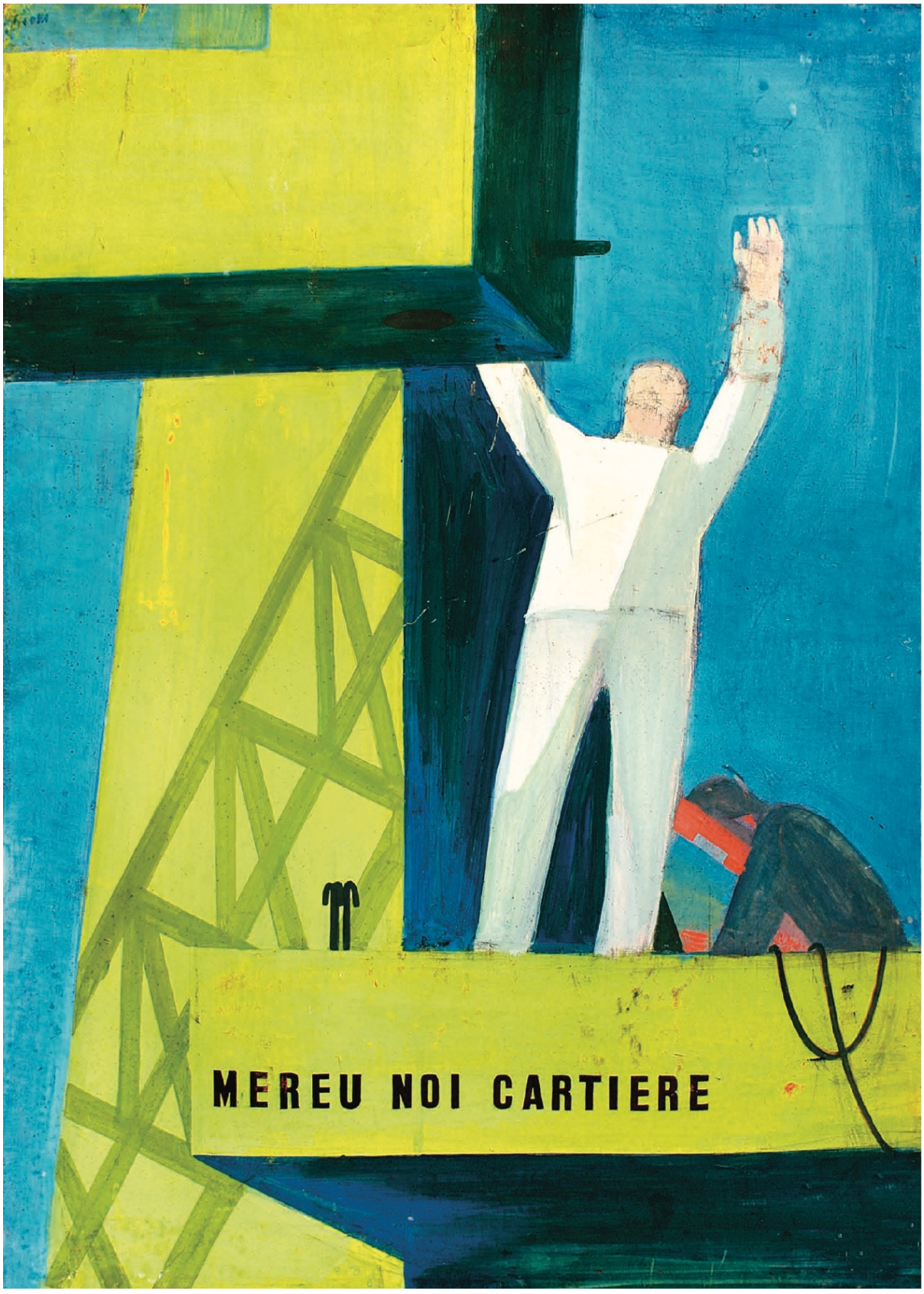
And so, the gardens were taken away — they built the blocks using prisoners from the local jail: the foundation of the block was laid with their work. The building work was very quick. They were supposed to have a distance of 20 metres towards the blocks. They came 20 meters closer, but between the blocks there is a huge space. For the blocks built on the old garden of Mr. Petruca, he received land that was on top of the hill, on the other side of the city. He didn't even want to think about it. "It has no value, it's on steep ravine. On a landslide." Similarly, for the land of his father's house, where there was a road now, he got a small piece of land at the end of a far neighbourhood — after he would park the car, he would need to walk for an hour and a half. For 23 years, they'd left it untouched. Not even goats graze there, he joked. Ștefan (the previous mayor, now in prison) made fun of them this way. It wasn't only them — everyone was unhappy with where they received land. After that, everyone got sick, the family suffered a lot, he told me. "You see? This is the life of someone whose state put screws on their hands and tightened them."

The construction process

The socialist propaganda poster on the following page, captioned "Always new neighbourhoods", illustrates a lively, blue-green urban landscape in the making, a space for great potential towards social formation in the Romanian socialist state. The poster's message aligns elegantly with the lyrics of the well-known song from 1961 entitled "Cranes": "Tens of silver blocks are laughing in the sun! Tens of blocks, in the dawn of day. The cranes are ascending slowly on the blue pathways, the cranes are ascending towards the sky, without stopping, until dusk. Look at their iron arm, how it lifts towards the sky, tens of blocks, a neighbourhood!" (my translation). The enthusiasm towards the almost mystical qualities of the ascending cranes, reveals a great sense of trust towards the all-caring, all-capable socialist state. As my research participants pointed out:

> These blocks were built very quickly — almost overnight. You would find a true paradise, a spectacle. Close to the hospital, there were gatherings of houses on the side of the hill, impoverished and in a bad state. On the right of the street, you had true favelas, with little gypsies and dubious people. All of a sudden, the face of the city changed (fam. Bunghez).

Mr. Iacob, an architect who had been in charge of urbanism projects during the initial block construction, told me that in socialism, money, like now, dictated what was being built and how, by the principle of "making two blocks with the same crane". In terms of the economic use of resources, an architect would receive a certain area and a number of buildings that would have to fit that narrow space. The solution, of course, would be narrow sidewalks, smaller streets. The best example is Precista, where sometimes the space between the blocks is only nine metres wide. Especially after the revolution, many spaces between the blocks were filled with buildings which had sketchy construction licenses, and which disrespected the legislation of the minimal distance that would allow healthy lighting. Such a lack of control over the urban development triggered a huge disappointment with neoliberal policies after the revolution (see example below). The City Hall could gather taxes from


MEREU NOI CARTIERE

those who built additional shops, and, as a research participant pointed out, "the greedy desire to be in the centre has created this mess. They disfigured the centre, which had been wonderful. It was a pleasure to take walks and see the mountains" (Lia Bunghez). While this observation is further developed in *The Window* chapter, for now it is worth pointing out that the lack of light and of privacy, although exacerbated during post-socialism, was inbuilt in the construction process.

In the article above from the 20th of January 1970 *Ceahlăul* newspaper, "A major desideratum: The rational use of time", the pictured block has the following caption: "The B2 block should have been handed over for use on the 29th of December, but they are still executing the finishing". Going through the archive of *Ceahlăul* between 1968 and 1974, when most blocks in Piatra-Neamț were constructed, one often finds such articles encouraging speedy construction. Apart from saving time, they also encouraged saving materials. Among the construction-related titles:

"With the same monetary and material expenditure, more finite products"
"Have the constructors lost the notion of materials management?"
"Raising economic efficiency imposes a careful use of each: millimetre, gram, second"
"The Illusion of the good worker: the reprehensible negligence in the supply and conservation of building materials"
"More than 300 apartments than the initial plan"
"We are building well and timely"
"The constructors, competing with time"
"Home ownership - a development without precedent"
"The constructors are persevering in realising the Five-Year plan in four years"
"More construction materials for the sites"
"Higher degree of industrialization in the construction work"
"Sobriety is a rigour of the architectural composition"
"The rational use of energy and fuel"
"Managing materials should be a general preoccupation"
"A clear NO to energy waste"
"The management of energy and fuel — a patriotic duty and a constant preoccupation of all of us"

At the same time, the thrifty building rush had its negative consequences, both highlighted by my research participants and pointed out in the local press. From a 1973 article entitled *The construction is ready. Now, let's start… fixing it!*: "The construction is finished, the furniture is inside, and the utilities are ready. Sadly, wet walls and cracked parapets also await." In a section with complaints, an inhabitant notes that the fixing work that had been promised for their apartments and the common spaces has been postponed endlessly, and so has the exterior finishing, which was never ready in the first place. They posed the question: "When will spring come for us?" — because, walking through scaffolding and staying away from piles of materials and holes in the pavement, people didn't get to notice the arrival of flowers and greens, the article notes in a sarcastic tone. At this point, it is worth pointing out that the quality of the buildings varied enormously according to the location and the future inhabitants; whereas in blocks in the centre, built for the people in leadership positions, benefited from larger sizes and better materials, the ones on the periphery were smaller and flimsier. This contrast the overwhelming preconception that socialist blocks of flats aimed at homogenising the population (Mihăilescu, 2009).

The thrifty construction process is, surprisingly, also described in the popular films of the time. In a feature film from 1976 called "Serenade for the XII floor", a new neighbourhood in Bucharest is being

placed into use. The film begins with the new inhabitants leaving their homes, and heading towards their new ones. An old man is sad to see his house being demolished, and is rushed by his neighbour, who will drive him to his new home. "Leave him", his wife says, "he built this house with his bare hands. He was ambitious, he promised me he'll build a home if I marry him". The bulldozers shred his house to pieces, as he's looking back.



When they arrive in their new neighbourhood, they are joined by tens of others, who cannot access the block — the roads are not ready. "We don't cover holes, we dig them", says a construction worker — "we need a few people to cover them". One of the future inhabitants, surprised to his core, asks him: "what are we, then, pharmacists?" Before we know it, he delegates his fellow comrades and starts work on his new neighbourhood.



As people move into their flats, a group of menders knock on everybody's doors, asking them if they need any fixing. A university professor is incredibly annoyed with these disturbances, and asks his wife to type a note that he would add on his apartment's door: "I don't need window fixing. I don't need door polishing..." The flimsiness of the new apartments often required people to make early changes to their apartments, especially if they were the owners. At the stage, it is worth pointing out that, despite the common preconception in housing literature (sources), the Romanian socialist regime did not merely provide rental housing, but often offered the possibility of buying (thus situating itself between the Russian one, known for rental, and the Bulgarian one, known for ownership).

Initial problems and degradation

Among the documentation at the State Archive, many reports draft the process of mending the newly built apartments. One such report notes:

> *We are following up from the request of inhabitant Murariu Olga (no. 1742/14.12.1984) in which she is soliciting a different apartment, because she has small children, and the apartment in which she is living has mould on the walls and the ceiling. We inform you that, during our visit, the following were noted:*
>
> - *It is true that the apartment has mould on the exterior walls.*
> - *The apartment is made up of two rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom.*
> - *In order to live there optimally, it is necessary to redo the plaster on the exterior walls, to air the house every day and to maintain a constant temperature inside.*
> - *We noticed that all the doors were open (including the bathroom and the kitchen), creating the possibility for the water vapours to go into all the other rooms and to condense on the walls.*
> - *The rooms in which water vapour is produced must have closed doors, and they need to be aired by opening the windows.*
> - *If the plaster and the paintwork are redone and the heating and airing rules are respected, the apartment will be in good conditions for living.*
>
> *The Research was conducted by Ing. Mihai Jitaru within the Architecture, Systematization and Investments Department.*

These issues will be coming back throughout my thesis, as they are exacerbated by the passing of time. In order to understand these initial problems, I went to talk to a family of architects who were involved in the planning and construction of blocks of flats in the early 1980s. When the Iacob family moved into their block, only the first two stories were built and inhabited. Because he worked in the City Council in the architectural committee, he could choose where he wanted to live. They were in their 20s at the time, with a young child, and preferred a higher floor due to the beautiful view. Indeed, as I was standing next to their window, I could see most hills surrounding Piatra: Pietricica, Cernegura and Cozla. The view was a leitmotif in all conversations I had: the blocks had enchanted most new inhabitants with the novelty of their heights, in a city that had such breath-taking views. From their bedroom, they used to be able to see Ceahlău, a 2000m mountain at a half hour drive from Piatra. Now that the other section of the block had raised their attic, it was much harder to see. When it came to moving in and cleaning the house, there was little one could improve. The floor had been mounted when wet, so "you could put your hand through it when it was dry. That's what the circumstances were, that's how they used to build." The wind would blow in the apartments through the window frames, the woodwork would be painted in an "ugly" standard green (a hue known by all my research participants) … but they were happy they even had this.

The charming view fading away, and their bodies growing old, they would now prefer to live on a lower floor. Since most four-floor blocks don't have an elevator, this was a common concern among my research participants. While looking for an apartment on a lower floor, however, they found most apartments were 'modified', meaning that the previous owners had broken down a structure wall. Knowing the risks in case of an earthquake (after the terrible 1977 earthquake which killed about 1,500

people in Bucharest alone), and the corruption of the State Inspectorate in Construction (which would allow such illegal work), they did not have the courage to move into such a flat.

> And if you want the first floor... What if they didn't consolidate it afterwards... Most people do what they want in their house; because it's their house. The law does regulate it... but only for 1%... maybe 5%. But most importantly, checking the process of the construction is compromised - no-one does it anymore. […] But then the neighbours do make a complaint. If you break one of these walls, the noise is tremendous. And there are some that even find taking off tiles suspect.

One of my research participants in a different block, living on the 4th floor, was indeed worried about the neighbour on the 1st floor, who was doing very loud renovation work, and called the Inspectorate to make a complaint. When asked for her name for the record, she became worried about the lack of anonymity — "after all, we're neighbours" — and hung up the phone. She was not the only one to be weary of the neighbours making a change to their apartment, especially given the rumours of possible construction defects.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, architectural metrics of the new buildings were constrained by strict budgets: "this block needs to fit into 1000 lei" — so constructors would have to give up on "luxury items", such as tiles, or inbuilt wall insulation. The most extreme example, reported to me by the city's chief architect, was a block of flats where instead of mineral wool as thermal insulation, they had used paper/cloth in an improvised manner (this had only been discovered recently during a series of unrelated checks). Most strikingly, as I will discuss in *The Window*, due to an unexpected lack of storage space in the kitchen on the one hand, and resource scarcity on the other hand, a large part of the balcony space ended up being reconverted as a storage space.

When Mr. Iacob was still working in the architectural committee of City Hall in the early 2010s, he received an authorization for the rehabilitation work for one of the D blocks (that the constructor named above had insulated). When they looked at the structural poles, they found some holes in the pole. That had been a happy incident, because they found this flaw. They saw it and they were aware of the danger in the case of an earthquake, so the worker who did the work didn't just put the tiles on top, pretending he had seen nothing. Instead, they worked for about a year and a half on a consolidation of a couple of poles in the area. However, on the other side of the building, there were commercial sites, so they could not oblige them to pay for an assessment; there will always be doubts concerning the foundation of the building. The analysis of the concrete was unstable, and so the quality of the construction is questionable.

Overall, it was the modesty of the finishing and the small size of the inhabiting spaces that lead to a dislike towards living in the block. Blocks of flats rarely 'function well', Mr. Iacob told me. A good example was the ventilation strand that hardly ever functioned correctly. When neighbours would throw away food in the toilet, it would smell like a kitchen in all bathrooms on that segment. Neighbours had a terribly hard time asking each other to stop doing this, up to the point where they would prefer writing threatening messages on the building's billboard, instead of talking to each other. "It is the airing system that is faulty — like a chimney, it sucks everything in", Ms. Iacob clarified. Similarly, in the H2B block, one of the inhabitants complained to Mr. Bud that each time her neighbour

cooked, she had to air her apartment, to let the smell of garlic leave her house. I will expand on this sensorial communication in *The Staircase*, but for now I want to suggest the great contrast between the modernizing potential of the block, and the difficulty of living together in a building that allows for smells to travel from one apartment to another.

Block sociality — a new kind of community

When the Bunghez family moved into their block, they had already lived in another block in Precista. Before that, an apartment in Bacau; and before that, in a beautiful villa, in which they had lived with his aunt and her two sons. She had a very controlling character, and so Ms. Bunghez wanted to leave. As she was telling me this, Mr. Bunghez wanted to change the topic, thinking it was not relevant for me, but I pointed out that moving to the block probably offered a degree of autonomy. He then encouraged me to compare it to the "traditional" family, which lived in the old houses from together with their multi-generational families; in contrast, the apartment offered the possibility of the nuclear, independent family. This was a big change: autonomy for the young families. It was something else, something desirable at the time: "It meant a modern life vs. traditional life." A socialist study from 1986 describes the changes in the family structure as the engine of the changes in the types of buildings being built: "Indeed, the contemporary urban family stopped being a productive nucleus (as the traditional family once was). Even the everyday cooking chores, and the preserves production has decreased" (Sebestyen, 1986, p. 60). One has to wonder if it was a chicken and egg question — did people adapt their behaviour to the types of buildings they lived in? Indeed, the socialist state would even change child-rearing practices in the home: "Even raising children was taken over by the social care system through the kindergartens, etc. — especially now that women participate in the social production outside the home" (Sebestyen, 1986, p. 60).

The socialist building project has been criticised for looking out for quantifiable needs at the expense of social content — not "for whom", but "for how many". In other words, it built apartments for an abstraction, rather than for real people: "If in the past each home had its personal history, which was the history of the family […], the urban building currently stopped being a specific expression of the people and the family that inhabit it" (Abraham, 1987, p. 90). If anything, apartments were meant to be flexible, modular forms of habitation, as seen in this 1987 scheme titled "The flexibility of individual use. Examples of different uses of the same room, for one or two persons".

As Mr. Bunghez was telling me, at the time in which the blocks were allocated, in each block, political choices dictated who would live where, according to people's professions: three military families, two political police families ("this was our block!", she laughs), five families of Săvinești factory workers, three families of workers, two doctors — these were bizarre calculations, but they left a mark on the structure of the block and the behaviours of the inhabitants. These differences might have melted in time, but in the beginning, they really mattered, he pointed out, despite the Party trying to annihilate all differences. A ten-storey block is a small village, Mr. Bunghez told me: a locative community with many stories. It is split into families which have relationships of closeness, indifference, or conflict. "After all, you can't be best friends with all your neighbours — because there are more than 40."

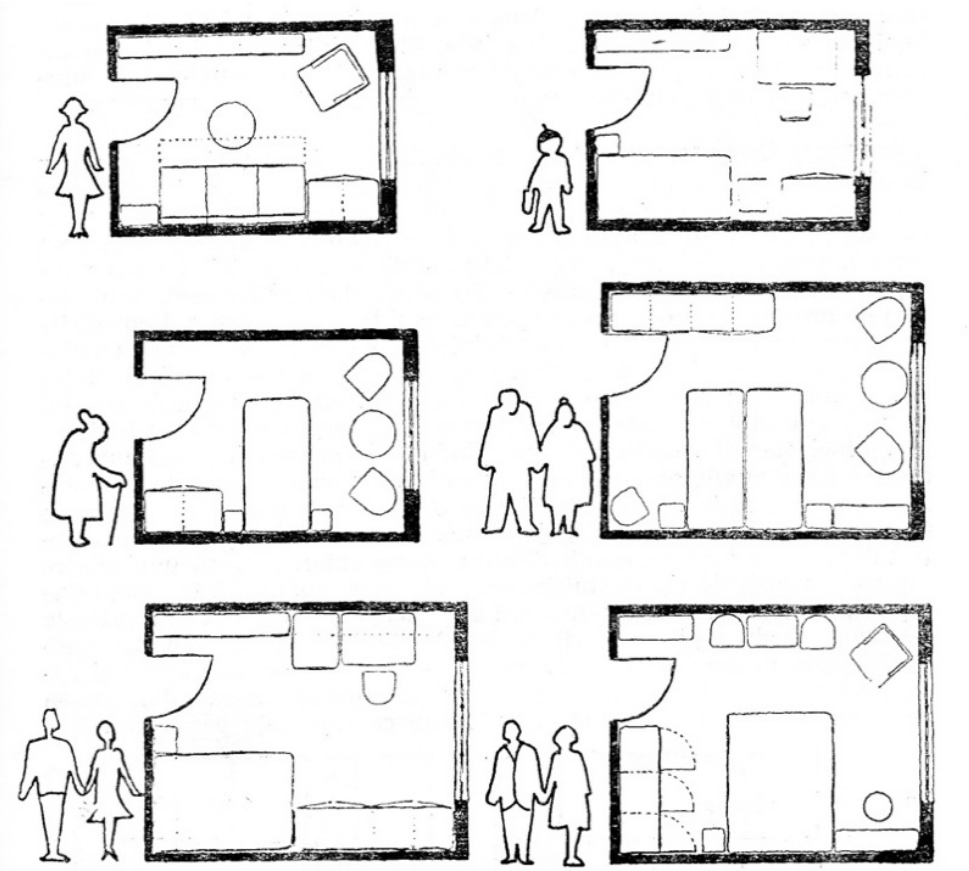


Fig. 5.5. Flexibilitatea de utilizare individuală (mobilare). Exemple de utilizare diferită a aceloraşi camere, pentru una sau două persoane.

They believed that, in smaller blocks, a different kind of relationships is created. Some blocks with 6 or 8 apartments had a tighter link, and you could see that on the fabric of the block. There was someone on the 5th floor who recently had moved in, and they had left a block in which everyone was closer. Coming there, she had told me Ms. Bunghez that she had the feeling that if something happened to her, she could yell for help and no-one would come to help her — "We live in the middle of nowhere. We are alone." In contrast, the Bunghez family knew they were surrounded by good neighbours, because they had lived there for so long. But the difference was striking to the newcomer. They continue to remind me that what is civilized is not to be friends, but to keep a certain distance: "You have to respect someone's space within certain limits." They had to adapt to living in a tight community. In their previous block, Ms. Bunghez had had a hard time finding the limits of sociality. "You have to isolate yourself, so that you know how to maintain your style. I came here determined to not create relationships like the ones I had in Precista." She had been tormented by the fact that her acquaintances in the block had no work, and would wait for her: they would know her schedule, and look for her. For instance, the wife of the Hospital's director was a housewife, and enjoyed her presence. When she would come home from classes, her neighbour would sit in the balcony, and tell her: "I was waiting for you, the coffee is boiling!"

She found it incredibly frustrating, and felt that she had to re-gain the autonomy she was looking for in the first place.

> I couldn't even get home. I couldn't change my clothes, or prepare for next day's classes. I promised myself I would talk to no-one when I would move into a new block — there is no such thing, clearly. But you need more distant relationships. Civilized, but not intimate. It's too hard, when you are so close. I know someone who visits their neighbour each day at a certain time, and they have coffee together. I can't even imagine that, to have a schedule of this sort. You need to plan your own schedule and life style.

This resonates with Clarke's study of an estate in London, in which a research participant in her late thirties consciously chose to remain distant from her neighbours. This behaviour was the result of the pressure of her husband, who was protective towards the boundaries of the home. Clarke argued that "the negotiation of living inside and outside, for retaining autonomy and maintaining sociality, is a tentative and on-going process particularly for women raising children on the estate" (Clarke 2001: She counterpoints her findings to that of Gullestad's (1986), who described the sociability of Norwegian housewives where the home is constantly 'primed' for potential neighbourly visits.

Back in the Bunghez living room, my interlocutors particularly focused on discussing the comfort that blocks had brought about, and their contribution to "civilizing the population". There not only intellectuals, they told me, but a lot of "simple people": workers who were forced to move from the villages to the city, and who used to live in the poor outskirts of the city. The periphery of the city was a space for inhabitants that are in a transition between the village and the city. "You also find yourself with funny surprises, such as neighbours who would bring their chickens on top of the block. They couldn't give up their habits, and you saw them manifest in this way". This points to a certain conformity in communal living — anything that goes outside the norm is punished by "the committee of old ladies who sits on the bench and knows everything". In their block, which is in the centre of the city, people couldn't expand in such a way. The block did not have any surrounding gardens, but a basement with a few storage spaces. Everyone fought hard to make sure they have a basement storage, which they then adjusted to their own needs. For example, many block inhabitants still make wine in the basement, extending water infrastructure to suit this purpose — interestingly, the consumed water is not reported by the inhabitants as part of their apartment's consumption, and is thus divided across all people (as I will discuss extensively in *The Water Tap* chapter). Typically, however, they use the basement for storage. They have small shelves, small closets: anything, just to make sure they have an extra space to store things, to put pickles, etc. — the elevator becomes the main way to move these pickles and bottles of wine.

In the same line of thought, between a few of the blocks of flats in Mărăței, there are old cellars of the inhabitants who used to have houses there — the new inhabitants insisted that they wouldn't get destroyed. This indicates that there is a continuity between the house and the block, and a sign that people need these kinds of spaces, no matter where they live. People often told me that they need a small garden, that they need the connection with the ground. I will address the complex topic of storage spaces in *The Window* chapter, but for now I want to highlight the importance of the house dwelling in certain practices both **inside** the home, such as using woollen textiles to cover the walls and keep the house warm (as discussed in *The Heater* chapter), and outside the home, such as maintaining gardens around the blocks of flats and often surrounding them with a fence (as seen in the previous photo spread). In these gardens, block inhabitants would add benches, tables or chairs





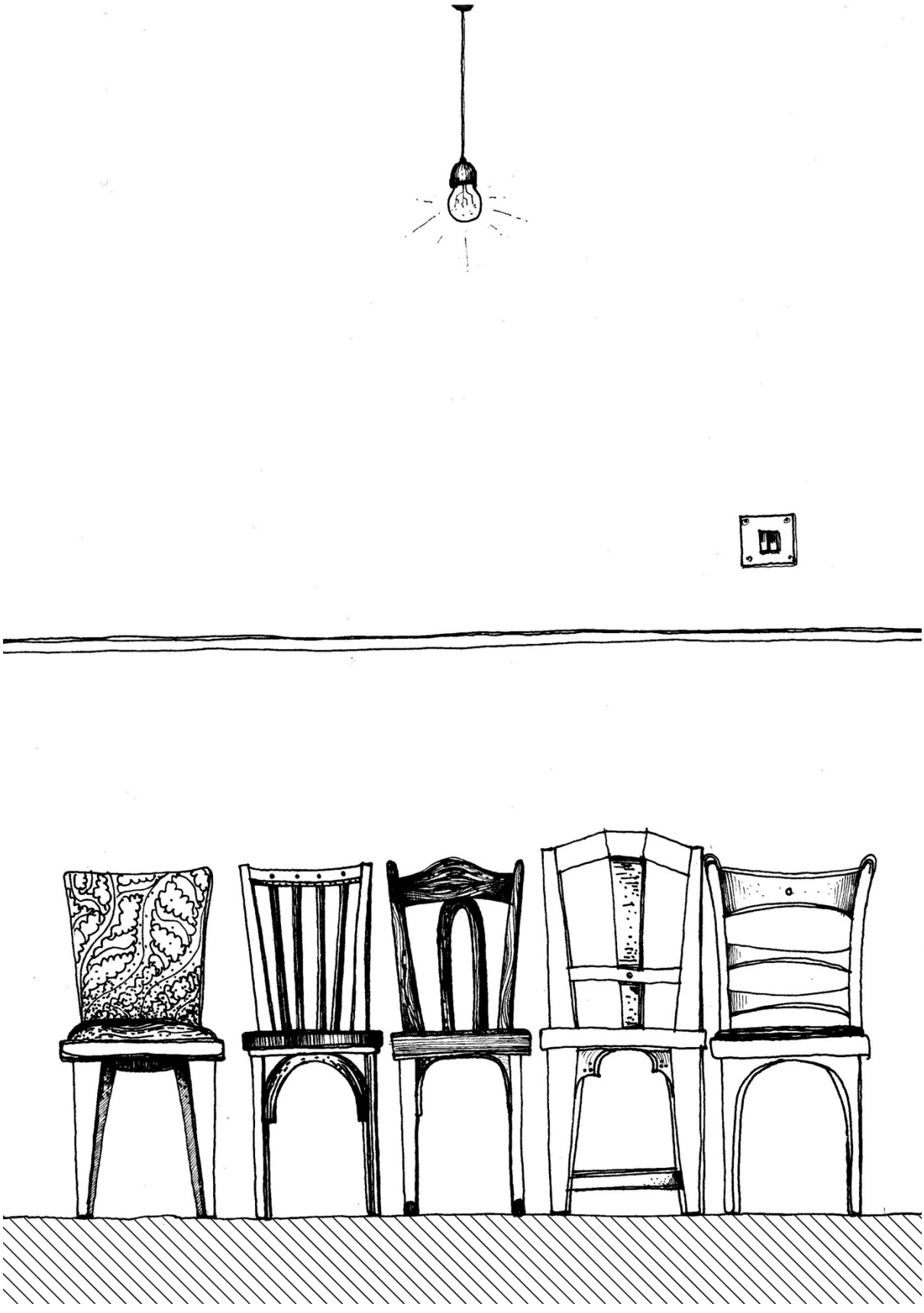


and would decorate extensively. A mere visitor would feel uncomfortable sitting there, given the rather intimate and private nature of the newly furbished space.

Similarly, Mr. Iacob also confessed that when moving to the block they now live in, they had to adjust to the 'cultural shock'. Many families in their building had come from the countryside — they had spent some of their wedding money to move to the city. "And they still have reminiscences of leaving the shoes at the door, taking out the trash in the common spaces, and doing what they want... At the beginning, they would pursue agriculture… Potatoes and what not." This reminded me of a research participant who was an engineer and moved to a block, in a ground floor apartment. Following the lead of his neighbours, he decided to plant onions. Having no agricultural experience whatsoever, he found himself confused: what side of the onion would go down? He decided to do 50/50: one onion upwards, one onion downwards, one onion upwards, one onion downwards! This became salient in dialogue with the Iacob family, who did not approve of this practice by any means: "Everybody wants a handful of parsley. But not everyone should get the chance to plant it. It's ugly: in spring, you see them in their pyjamas, stirring up the ground. It's not nice as an image. The man won't plant a flower — he'll plant his onions and potatoes... and then he'll leave it and forget about it."

This comment fits into the discussion about the block as an incentive for modernity, for 'civilization'. The Socialist 'New Man' would be a modern man, divorced from the pressures of agriculture. His house off the ground, stacked on top of another house, and another one. His garden stripped away from him, to be replaced by the factory's canteen. At the same time, the regime encouraged sessions of "patriotic work" consisting of gardening in front of the newly built blocks of flats. These events were initiated by City Hall, but organised by the then "Inhabitants Associations", made up of inhabitants who would take care of the building and its maintenance. The next chapter will address the inner workings of these associations, and the changes that they underwent in the years following the change of regime.

For now, it is important to keep in mind that these blocks of flats, now taken care of predominantly by the inhabitants, were specifically created and administered by the Romanian socialist state and imbued with a modernising discourse of efficiency and comfort. Both this discourse and the conditions under which the blocks were built, involving extensive and abusive expropriations and demolitions, make the otherwise neutral category of the block of flats problematic. The deep connection between these new buildings and the state as a provider is put under new light when considering that, despite the modernising discourse, the flimsy and rapid construction process often resulted in flaws such as bad airing systems or leaky utilities. Additionally, the limited space provided by the apartments (justified in the official literature as "efficient" dimensions of inhabitations) was seen by the many research participants as a means to control the individual (as Mr. Petruca has argued). The "New Man" was meant to externalise the previously domestic activities such as production of food or child rearing to socialist institutions outside the apartment. In reality, as we will see throughout the rest of the thesis, people appropriated their apartments according to their needs, for instance creating additional storage spaces for the home-produced foods. As follows, I will fast forward to the present-day and analyse the way in which inhabitants negotiate their needs inside an ageing building.



The Administration Room

On the ground floor of the H2B block, in a room behind two glazed doors, Mr. Bud was waiting for his neighbours to join him for the annual Inhabitants' Association meeting. Imagine a three by three metres room painted in mint green with small sparkles shining through, with a tiny cupboard on the left, a table in the middle, and a few chairs around it, all different from one another. The inhabitants were now starting to walk in, to sign the attendance sheet, and sit down. Mr. Bud slowly arranged his glasses on his nose as he was going through his meeting notes. It was a cold evening in November, and the room was not precisely warm. When I mentioned this to him, he told me: "wait until 8 of us are here, you will see how warm it becomes." 8 out of 44 apartments? That's not a lot, I said to myself, and I shared the thought with him. "We would be lucky if 8 of them show up."

Each year, the president of the association summoned a meeting in which the most current issues would be debated, and in which he was up for re-election. This was one of these meeting: Mr. Bud had been the president of the association for 15 years, ever since the previous one left both the block and the association without notice, "leaving the keys hanging from a nail in the wall." Among the participants, Mr. Vasiliu, a retired physics teacher in his 90s, joked: "If I knew there would be so few people, I would have brought my wife." Mr. Bud replied in an amused fashion: "At least 5 other people said they would join… But you know what it's like… A young man went past me and I told him we have a meeting — he ran for the elevator!" Discussions between inhabitants were then gently interrupted by the beginning of the formal meeting. The topic of the meeting? The socio-economic situation and surviving the cold season. "How do we go through it? It's not easy."

He began with a few maintenance issues: "This block is now 40 years old. All the equipment, whether we like it or not, is also 40 years old. It's the life of a man, 40 years. So, we need to find a way to understand, to educate, to know. What do we do? Do we fix it or leave this place?" That said, with all the hardship considered, Mr. Bud reassured everyone that they were the association with the best results with regards to expenditures. During the summer, he made sure that the Association did not have more than 50 million lei in debt (about £1,000); in winter, he would not go over 800 lei (about. £160), when the total expenses reach 2000 lei (about £400). Ms. Anăstăsoaie, an arts teacher in her late thirties, pointed out that this was all very impressive. Mr. Bud proudly replied: "I *live* these things - from 6 in the morning until 9, I do all sorts of rounds, I check everything on the heating system. After that, I read a little bit, I do my things. Then, in the afternoon again; in the evening, again. I cannot leave the area — I have no replacement. The heating system is no game."

Indeed, his daily schedule and yearly planning revolved around the heating system. He would wake up in the morning at 6.30 a.m., have breakfast, shave, and by 7.00 a.m. the latest he would be downstairs, in the heating room, turning on the heat and "checking that everything is under control". He would not go anywhere until the temperature was balanced in the system, which usually meant 1 hour, until around 7.30 a.m.. He would then go to the news vendors to get his local newspaper, walk over to the shop to buy milk with which to take his pills, then would go back home to read. If he went to town for 2 or 3 hours, he would check the system first; when he got back, he would check it again. If it was a Tuesday or a Thursday, he would open the association's office, in order to receive payments

from the inhabitants. From his desk, he could see everyone coming into the block, and would often jump off his chair to approach a late payer.

This is exactly what those present at the meeting suggested as a solution for tackling the problem of late payers, who often received summations from the water company or from the Association. Instead of an official paper threatening with legal implications, they suggested that it was much better for neighbours to talk to neighbours — to alleviate some of Mr. Bud's responsibilities as both a neighbour and the president of the association. The troublemakers could be approached colloquially with: "Listen, neighbour, I see that you haven't paid your bills. Before you know it, we will all suffer if they stop the water, if they stop the gas, or something." Everyone agreed that this personal approach would be good. However, a fellow neighbour was more hesitant: "What communication is possible, if all they care about is closing the door and watching TV?" Mr. Bud agreed: "Maybe you have the feeling that the neighbours in the other block, who spend some time around the basement having a little drink [alcohol is often brewed in the basement] - that they communicate better. There is so much meanness there between them, that it cannot be measured."





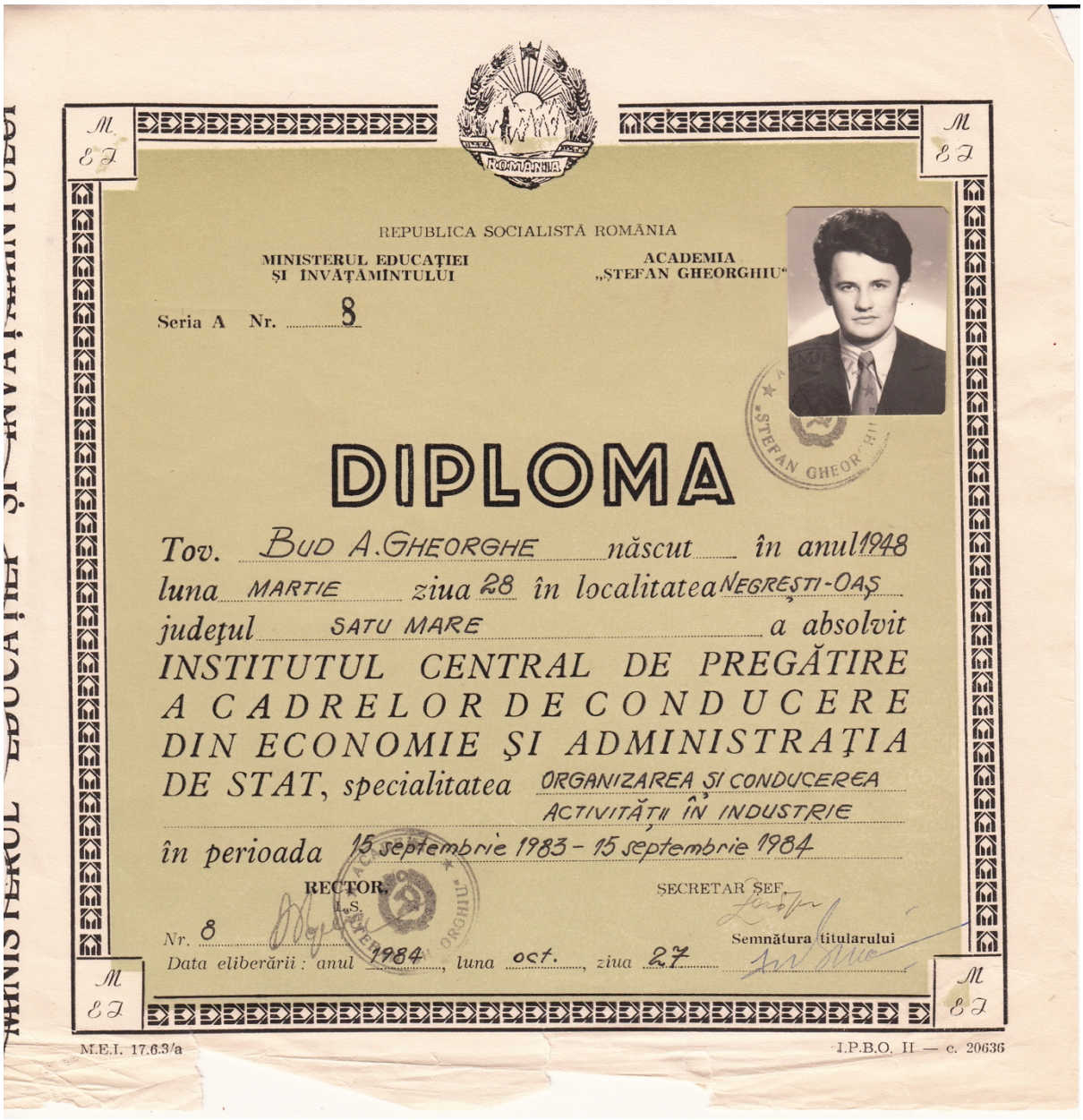
Overall, raising money was the central issue during the meeting, which swiftly reached a boiling point. A neighbour lost his temper and asked what had happened to the money they had raised in the past for maintenance costs. Mr. Bud, noticeably upset, reminded him that half of it had been used for maintenance purposes, and the other half had been given to the funeral of the Neagu family in the block — with the recent deaths in the block due to old age, they had gotten used to supporting families that suffered a loss. Seeing that he had upset the association's president, the neighbour retreated: "That's not what I meant to say: you cannot stop people's tongues. River's water and man's tongue cannot be stopped." All in all, the neighbours agreed that they would pay for the necessary common maintenance work — but no-one wanted to be the first one to pay — "Why would I be the fool who pays first? What if this other guy, who has more money than me, won't pay? In the end, we'll still carry on with the maintenance work, but on our backs…" Mr. Bud put his head in his hands and quietly said: "If my wife knew how much money I spend for this block, she would kick me out. But she doesn't know."[13]

[13] He once confessed to me that at least 60 million (£1,000) were invested in the maintenance of the block. His wife does not know about it — she would not understand, she is a bit more difficult. Without money, there is nothing you can do — "that is how you can explain the state of the rest of the buildings in our neighbourhood".



The block administrator

The son of a mayor, Mr. Bud was born in March 1948 in Negresti-Oaș, Maramureș, where he went to primary school and to high school. His family lived across from school and when he was five, he started going there, to spend time with the other children. When he was seven and his father wanted to send him to school, but he was told that he had actually taken all the tests for the first grade already and that he was actually ready to go straight into second grade. This way, when he was 16, in 1965, he took the exam for the Polytechnics University in Iasi — The Faculty of Industrial Chemistry and Metallurgy. He graduated from university in 1970, and he was recruited to work in the Săvinești industrial complex. He was 22 when he was recruited to be in charge of one of the most challenging factories: The Ammonia Plant, in the Investments Department. Seeing that he was a capable man, his bosses promoted him swiftly: hard work and good engineering skills brought him in top positions, he told me proudly.



REPUBLICA SOCIALISTĂ ROMÂNIA

MINISTERUL EDUCAȚIEI ȘI ÎNVĂȚĂMÂNTULUI

ACADEMIA „ȘTEFAN GHEORGHIU"

Seria A Nr. 8

DIPLOMA

Tov. BUD A. GHEORGHE născut în anul 1948
luna MARTIE ziua 28 în localitatea NEGREȘTI-OAȘ
județul SATU MARE a absolvit
INSTITUTUL CENTRAL DE PREGĂTIRE A CADRELOR DE CONDUCERE DIN ECONOMIE ȘI ADMINISTRAȚIA DE STAT, specialitatea ORGANIZAREA ȘI CONDUCEREA ACTIVITĂȚII ÎN INDUSTRIE
în perioada 15 septembrie 1983 - 15 septembrie 1984

RECTOR, L.S.

SECRETAR ȘEF,

Nr. 8

Semnătura titularului

Data eliberării: anul 1984, luna oct., ziua 27

M.E.I. 17.6.3/a

I.P.B.O. II — c. 20636

Mr. Bud's accreditation for management in industry, 1984

In 1984, when he was 36, he was asked to take over the *County Inspectorate for the Quality Control of Products and Services*. He had a huge responsibility, taking care of everything that was exported in the area: from chemical fertilisers and casing tubes to foods and textiles. After the change of regime in 1989, when everything "turned upside down", the institution was transformed into *The Authority for Consumer Protection* and the previous legislation disappeared. It was only in 1994 that new laws came about, following European nomenclature. He then started training his employees himself, so that they would be ready for these legislative changes. He led this institution for 27 years, during which he travelled extensively throughout the country. For instance, in the winter of 2007, the city of Vaslui was left without heating. The city's district heating had broken down, and they called him in the middle of the night, asking him to join other specialists in the country, to help repair it. After a week, they managed to fix the heating system, but such problems gave way to individual heating boilers, which will be discussed in *The Heater* chapter. He opposed this change, anticipating that, if people have to heat up their own apartments, they will stay in the cold — "this is poverty".

After his retirement, he missed being "among people" — not to boss them around, but to help them. When the previous block administrator left the building without notice, the neighbours encouraged him to take over. He was already very involved in the administration of the building, given that he had made a heating system for the building himself. More than ten years have passed since, and among his most significant additions, he counts: 1. Installing the heating unit. 2. Changing the cold-water pipes. 3. Placing the thermal insulation. I will address each of these separately in the chapters to come — for now, suffice it to say that, from his perspective, his involvement was and still is the only solution to keeping his building in good shape.

There are days which he dedicates entirely to the block — calculating the different kinds of consumption already takes a full day. He counts on himself for all the administration stages — on the 1st of each month, he calculates everything; by the time he gets the bills, he already knows the amount he should be paying (which is often different than the bill). He looks at the block meters, and he compares them to the bills he receives. He often waits for a younger neighbour to pass by, so that he gets a double check on the readings, which are always shown in too small a font. In the case of water bills, there is always a big difference (described in detail in the water chapter) and he often divides that difference among the inhabitants, as legislation advises. Often, however, he will specifically charge the people he feels have not been honest.

In his attempts to balance the financial weight on his neighbours' shoulders, he has other strategies as well. For instance, the electricity bills from EON arrive every three months, but he does not wait for the full three months. Instead, he reports the exact consumption, and it appears on the expenses list - his purpose is to make sure that people budget their expenses. Otherwise, EON would come in with a large bill every three months, and the inhabitants would be overwhelmed. Despite the seemingly rigid bureaucratic system, this paperwork is of his own making, adjusted to each month's situation. He thus makes sure he takes into account these "social elements", as he calls them, which perhaps are not considered by others. He tries to keep them in balance, to make sure that people do not suffer. "Of course, for me, this is extra work - no-one else does this. That's why I have so much paperwork". His financial gymnastics, described in detail in this chapter, take place in the administration room, but

he shares these calculations with Locativ Serv, a block administration company under the control of City Hall. In turn, they print out the list of expenses, which he then posts on the block's billboard.

Usually, there are extra expenses, like the verification of the cooking stoves, or of the heating system. Additionally, every three months, the inhabitants pay a fee for the granting of the land under the block's heating system to the City Hall. That amounts to 4 million and a half per year, and every three months, this is added to the costs. In the month of February, when we were discussing the list, he had added a new category, 'repairs'. He waited each month for 25 lei from every inhabitant, as a contribution to the cleaning that was done in the administration room (the cleaning he started when I told him that I would like to film the documentary in his block). They had not done a general cleaning in 40 years, and he thought it was necessary.

Calculating the block's expenses

To calculate the total common expenses in the block, Mr. Bud adds up all the individual expenses on his list. He signs the list, stamps it, and brings it to Locativ Serv. The worker there inputs the numbers in the computer in 5 minutes, and his job is done - if there is no administrator in a block, they have to do it themselves. As Mr. Bud told me: "When I go there, I exchange a few words with the director, with the chief accountant (she now has a cold), I talk to the people who come in, to get a feel for how things are in town, etc. It's a matter of connection, of hearty dialogue. […] I am the only one who keeps everything together, and they back me up with a legal structure. No-one can attack me, I have all official papers." In fact, that is only partly true — Mr. Bud has his own files with all the expenses, many of which cannot be billed — for instance, invoiced work costs twice more than when it is unbilled, so Mr. Bud generally picks the unbilled, for financial reasons. All of his repairs have been done through such a negotiation, without an invoice — if it had been taxed, it would have cost him too much.

I once joined him when he brought his list of expenses to Locativ Serv, and observed how he interacted with the accountants there, and with the director of the company, who welcomed us both in his office. The chief accountant asked him not to retire, because he makes her life easy, while others were slightly annoyed with his talkativeness and preferred to go about their business. One of the accountants would come to his administration room each Tuesday and Thursday, to collect the payments from his neighbours (Mr. Bud only collects money for the common work, and not for utilities). Interestingly, on this occasion, other inhabitants from the block would come to pay their bills, and the room would turn into a node of social interaction in the block, but also of circulation of money. Some inhabitants disliked it, because it meant that the front door of the block would get more strain, and would require more maintenance, but for Mr. Bud, this was an occasion to hear the latest gossip and to supervise the payments. For instance, Ms. Tomin was "a difficult one" — she did hand in 150 lei yesterday, but he had to explain the use of the money four times: it was for an essential piece that keeps the heating system going. After all, he needs to look one year ahead: "If I don't look after the project, everything tumbles down."

In order to align the numbers with the actual consumption of resources, Mr. Bud also finds inventive ways of saving energy and thus money. In order to lower the costs of the heating system, for instance, he uses his knowledge of physics, to only turn on the heat from time to time, and to start the pumping

of hot water through the pipes. Due to the principle of communicating vessels, the water continues to circulate through the circuit and to heat up the homes, without using energy to propel it. If the temperature is lower than 0 °C, however, he uses the automatic settings, directing them from his office (through a small screen that in the meantime broke). The heat starts automatically according to the temperature in his office — for two hours, then it stops for one hour. If the temperature is higher than 0, it is not economical. If it is cold, he starts the pump manually, for about an hour. It then creates a circuit for one hour, and so the heat reaches the 10th floor. On an automatic setting, it would be maintained there, by allowing the circuit to continue on the basis of the 'specific weight' of the liquid in the pipe, "according to the laws of physics". The difference in the temperature between the clockwise and the counter clockwise cycles creates a difference in density, which maintains the circuit in movement. Problematically, this means that the inhabitants on the top floor do not always get a lot of that heat, also because the pipes, now aged, have gathered residue. Thus, many of the inhabitants on the top floors actually installed individual heating systems, and have disconnected from his system. This complicates the calculation process even further, because those inhabitants 'produce' their heat by means of water consumption, so they only report cold water. I will describe these processed in detail in *The Heater* chapter — what matters for now is that there is a close relationship between the imprecision of the heating system and the financial complications of calculating heating costs.

Mr. Bud's activity in relation to the heating system is not only centred around saving. Sometimes he turns on the heating around noon, if he feels that heat is needed. Talking about himself in the third person, he remarks: "But that means that Bud has to be around 24/7." He caught a cold while going up and down all the time, and spending an hour to get everything started. "It was a terrible cold, with fever, and muscle pain. At least intellectually, you're out of the circuit." Apart from his health, he is also completely tied to the building, especially in winter. For two years, he never left the city. During the Christmas of my fieldwork, he had to go to the Maramureș region in the North, where he is from, to attend a funeral. He had a very hard time, wondering if something had happened; he left the keys to the heating system with the wife of a thermal engineer (Mr. Burduja), but he did not manage to reach him while he was away, and that made him terribly nervous. After three days of being in Maramureș, he got a phone call from a neighbour, and was relieved to hear that the temperature in the apartments was all right; he then found his peace.

This intense schedule means that he is sometimes overwhelmed with work — "I haven't' really retired, have I?", he would often ask me. He has been on the look-out for a replacement, because his health is sometimes more fragile than he would even like to admit. During the thermal insulation work, an acquaintance who was a nurse saw his ankles, and advised him to take care of them, and to avoid standing up for long periods of time. "With my 90 kg, I have to take care", he tells me. However, finding a replacement is highly problematic. "You rarely find someone who is technically skilled, but also humanly sensitive." When he was looking for a replacement, people suggested Mr. Burduja — after all, he was a thermal engineer, he could deal with the heating system — "Indeed, but who will then deal with the numbers?" The problem was also that the man drank heavily — how could he handle all the accounting? All the money that is paid here needs argumentation "Imagine getting your hands on the money. What if you get a new administrator who starts stealing?" In the meantime, Mr. Burduja died, leaving behind his wife and three sons. Mr. Bud went around collecting money for the family,





Wedding pictures of both the son (top), and the daughter (bottom) of Mr. Bud, in his living room book case

and was heart-broken to see that some neighbours only paid 10 lei (£2). On that occasion, I saw him desperately disappointed at the lack of humanity, while he was running around, talking to his connections in order to get the oldest son a job. He erased all the family debt from the list of utilities, and told me without hesitation that he would find a way to balance the expense sheets. Doing things like this sometimes contributed to the dislike of his neighbours. What is most ardent is the cost of the heating system maintenance, and he feels that his effort is not understood — not even by half. "Some don't care, and some are just plain mean." He finds it upsetting that people speak without knowing. Especially the inhabitants who leave during the summer, and who do not know what happens — "They come in to wash, because it doesn't cost any money. Or they lie about their water consumption."

I asked him once what his biggest pride was — what was he happy with and proud of? His career, and his children was the response. And their houses, made with his contribution. Having had leadership positions throughout his career, he had always been well paid. He was thus tremendously happy to have built houses for both his son, and his daughter, so that they do not live in a block of flats. On this note, he once confessed that he slightly regrets not having built a house for himself, now that he finds himself stuck in an aging block, with aging, "difficult" neighbours. Mr. Bud told me he was happy that people who used to be more "difficult" have shown understanding, and have been more collaborative of recent. "As a person, you need to find a way of helping people" - but he told me again that he needed to find a replacement, it was too much work. He often reminded me that it was not the financial gain he was after. Otherwise, he was fortunate enough not to worry about money — he had worked in executive positions for 40 years, and thus has a good pension of 25 million lei. Apart from the official incomes he would get, he benefited from the long-term connections he had built with the people around him:

> And indeed, I do extra work either for money or for small favours. If my collaborator sent me a pig for Christmas, is that not also money? He sent me only meat — no grease. That's also money. I don't ask for it, but he gives this to me. Or he asks me, if I ever need anything for the kids, to let him know, it's a great gesture; I never asked them. But when he called me three times to ask me what the deal was with the bread ingredients approvals, I helped him.

Once, when we were talking in his office, an acquaintance called him — he was the administrator of another block in the centre, and they needed to change all the water metres. Mr. Bud told him that he would call 'his guy' — he did so swiftly, and in 5 minutes, he returned the phone call, giving his friend a name and a phone number. During the entire period of my fieldwork, Mr. Bud would always be on the phone, sometimes asking for help, but usually providing help. Why would he do that? What does *he* get out of it, as some of his neighbours asked?

"Infrastructural" Big-Man

To answer this question, a few concepts that are foregrounded in anthropology theory could be of help. Specifically, Marshall Sahlins' famous discussion of the Melanesian "big-man" is very productive (reference!). In Melanesian communities, men with leadership ambitions work to develop personal access to resources within and outside their communities. Mr. Bud resourcefully uses his connections outside the block in order to maintain the good state of the building; similarly, he uses his achievements related to the block to assert himself as a *gospodar* (a Romanian term loosely translated as a *householder* — here, a "*building holder*", or a manager). Given his visible presence in the maintenance of the building (such as the six months in which he was outside his block supervising the constructors, as described in the Wall Insulation chapter), one could associate him with what Jane Jacobs called a "public character" in the life of a Romanian city. As Jacobs writes in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, a public character is "anyone who is in frequent contact with a wide circle and who is sufficiently interested to make himself a public character. A public character need have no special talents or wisdom...he just needs to be present" (J. Jacobs, 1961, p. 78).

Whereas Mr. Bud is indeed a public character (even appearing on television on multiple occasions), he is more than that. He indeed has many special talents, or skills, at once technical, financial, and social. This is why the concept of the 'big-man' is more appropriate. Big man is the Anglicisation of a descriptive phrase *bikpela man*, meaning *'prominent man'* — common in some variants of Tok Pisin (an important Melanesian lingua franca). The term was adopted widely in Melanesian ethnography to refer to male leaders whose political influence is achieved by means of public oratory, informal persuasion, and the skilful conduct of both private and public wealth exchange (Oliver, 1955; Read, 1959; A. Strathern, 1971). As leaders of their communities, big-men make their name by successfully orienting their clansmen to collective ends. Their power is thus ephemeral, and it is constantly negotiated through actions of care, and, in our case, of infrastructural maintenance. In the Melanesian context, leadership is a personal achievement, associated with organizing events held in the names of clans and tribal alliances. Leaders neither inherit their status by virtue of seniority, lineage or ritual sanction, nor are they formally elected or installed. In the same way, Mr. Bud took over the administration of his block in an organic fashion, having shown his skills as a stoker of the heating

system. He could always be changed, but rather than fearing lack of re-election, he tells me that he has a hard time finding a replacement. He is indispensable to the wellbeing of his block. Like in the Melanesian example, big-man status becomes a type of polity — a form or process of civil government. It is through it that he asserts his power and his agency in relation to others.

"Big-men do instigate mass action, but only by establishing both extensive renown and personal connections with other 'centre-men'" (Sahlins, 1963, p. 290). His autonomy is enacted in the elaboration of personal networks of kin and exchange partners: each person's social network embodies interests that converge partially, but may regularly conflict with the collective projects. In the case of Mr. Bud, other block administrators call him when they need help with something; he is called as a specialist in local council meetings, or by business men when they need to adhere to EU quality laws, etc. A gesture of care towards the neighbours or the building is not only altruistic, but also brings him symbolic capital: "His every public action is designed to make a competitive and invidious comparison with others, to show a standing above the masses that is the product of his own manufacture" (Sahlins, 1963, p. 298).

Mr. Bud asserts himself as a 'prominent man' by differentiating himself from other block administrators, but also from his neighbours. As Sahlins notes, "leadership is a creation: a creation of followership." Followers, in this case the neighbours, stand in various relationships to their leader: "their obedience to the headman's decisions is caused by motivations which reflect their own, particular relationship to the leader" (Sahlins, 1963, p. 290), who, in turn, "needs to demonstrate the kinds of skills that command respect" (Sahlins, 1963, p. 291). In the case of Mr. Bud, that is done by showing infrastructural mastery — both in terms of pipes, and finances (and particularly, both together). Importantly for this case study, as it crosses over from the internal to the external sector, a big-man's power undergoes qualitative change: in the case of the Melanesian big-man, he shows true command ability only within his faction, whereas outside of it, he gains only fame and indirect influence. Ironically, in the case of the H2B block, the dynamics are the opposite: command outside the block, through a long-term career which engendered many connections, gives him fame inside the block. Typically decisive is the deployment of one's skills and efforts in a certain direction: towards amassing goods, and "distributing them in ways which build a name for cavalier generosity, if not for compassion" (Sahlins, 1963, p. 291). Throughout my thesis, I will continue to show how replacing the elevator, fixing the pipes, insulating the block, etc. — all come in as a way of amassing a "fund of power' (Malinowski, 1922).

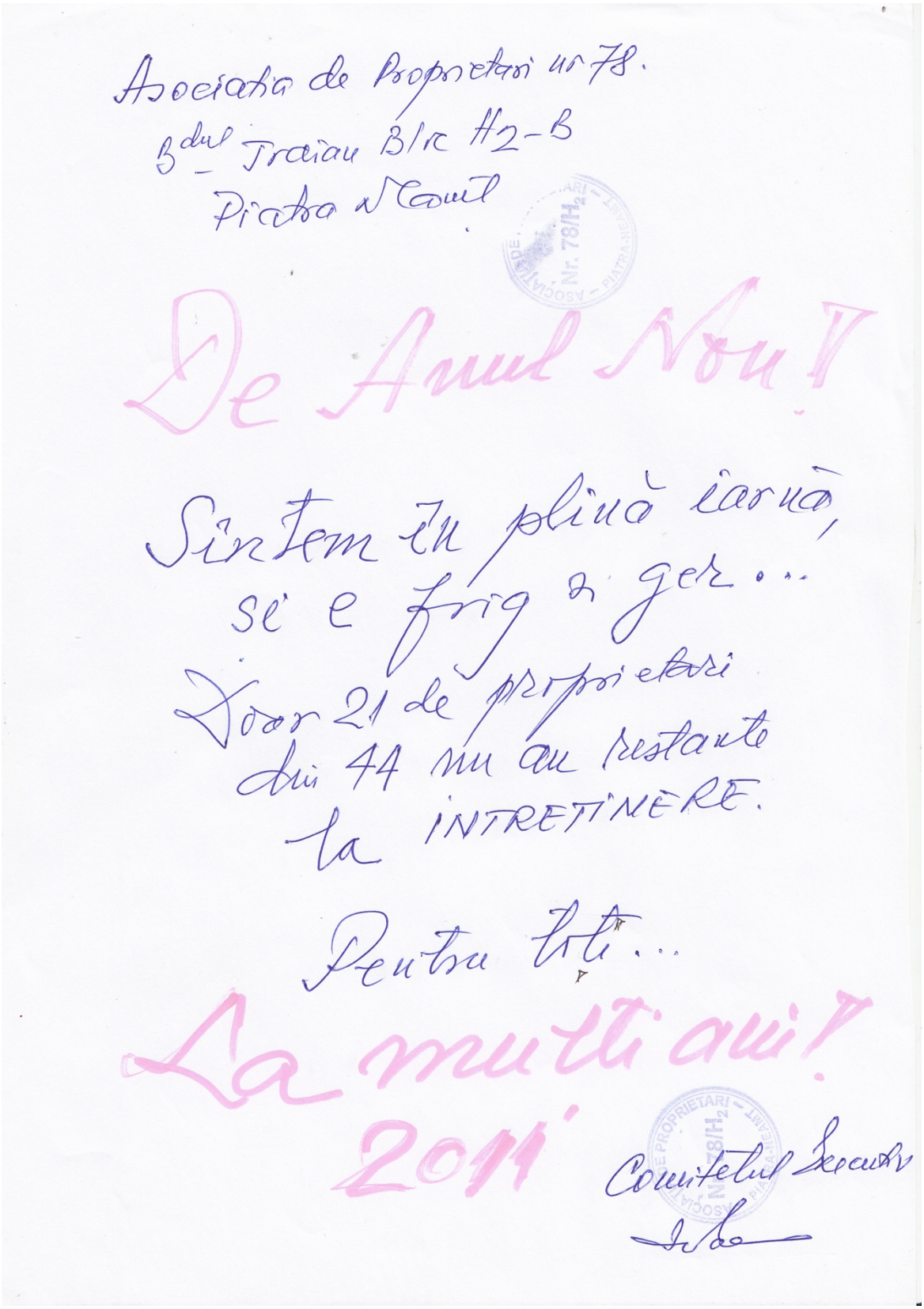
As an example of *achieved* leadership, the big-man status is used by Sahlins as a vantage point for understanding how economic intensification can be possible in the absence of political institutionalized structures. In the case of Romania, *mutatis mutandis*, we are talking about the retreat of the state from the maintenance of the block. Whereas in the case of the Melanesian society at the time of Sahlins' study, socio-political life was decentralized, informal and participatory, in the post-socialist Romanian case, the typology of the big-man is a middle way between the state and the market, when both seem to fail. This can be instrumental in a discussion about the circulation of money, goods, materials, people; in the literature, the state competes with the market in its role in shaping the urban fabric, and there is little in between. Mr. Bud, and other block administrators, reveal themselves as a telling example of 'human infrastructure' (Simone, 2004).

Mr. Bud's role becomes clear when we compare it to the Inhabitants' Associations of other blocks of flats. For instance, block 4001, the block of Mr. Șum in the centre of the city, was split in three administrative associations, following the conflictual relationships surrounding water consumption: "Let me tell you: at some point, there was only one administration. But because Romanians are Romanian, we started to play tricks on one another when it came to water consumption - both warm and cold. So, inhabitants would cut out the heater, put a pipe in and take the water to the kitchen, to the bathroom. And of course, that it worked for a while, but then it became visible."

To deal with this situation, the inhabitants of the 4001 block held a referendum and split up the three different segments of the block - each with their own administrative Association, and each with their own president. The water pipes were then divided at the base of the block. But even with this new division in three, there would be big differences in consumption. Whereas segment C would use on average 3 cubic meters for instance, another segment would use 1.5. For this reason, they completely decentralized it: now each association's president would read their own segment. This way they could not cheat. But because some cheating is always involved, if one adds up the three segments and compares them with Apaserv's numbers, there was another big difference, usually linked to the losses on the pipes. But because there was money dripping everywhere, they tried to be as economical as possible.

For instance, during one of the most recent meetings, the inhabitants discussed using lights in the common spaces that would be directed by sensors — they would only turn on when someone passed by — but in the meantime, it would be pitch dark: they deemed that a bit dangerous and they postponed taking a decision. They had been robbed a few times, because people assumed that they were rich. To this day, the decision about the lights in common areas has not been taken, and people feel 'leaderless' and confused. Hence, an essential common point between the two blocks is the state of suspicion and reluctance, especially related to work that is not directly visible (hence the importance of visibility, further discussed in the thesis).

Similarly, in H2B, there are many things that the neighbours do not know, Mr. Bud tells me. For instance, the huge amount of work that went into fixing the attic — this work is invisible, hidden from the eyes of the neighbours. In the block opposite from H2B, the administrator had a hard time raising money for the attic. Whereas the lack of a good attic affects the state of the entire building, the 1st floor inhabitants argue that it only affects the 4th floor inhabitants, and thus refuse to pay. Mr. Bud complained to me that one of his neighbours, Mr. Anton, was not knowledgeable of these things, because he did not join any meeting. And there are many difficult block meetings, in which people decide many things — it is important to have everyone there. During one such a meeting, he was enthusiastic about selling the administration room to a dentist, who has an office in the ground floor apartment next to it. Mr. Anton had opposed it, together with a drunkard neighbour, two gossipy ladies and Pruteanu, his next-door neighbour. Mr. Anton had suggested moving to the 9th floor, where there is a common room which is rarely used. He could invest in cleaning that room and preparing it for block activities. The problem, of course, is that he would have had a difficult time recuperating the money; for instance, for the work on the stairs, he spent 9 million (about £150), and recuperated nothing. Even the clips that hold the curtains were 40 lei (about £8) — "and you can hardly see them!" During that meeting, the husband of the sub-prefect offended the dentist, calling him names.



Inhabitants' Association Nr. 78
For the New Year!
We find ourselves in the middle of winter, and it's cold outside, what a blizzard…
Only 21 out of 44 owners do not have UTILITIES debts.
For everybody… Happy New Year! 2011
The executive committee

What was the problem? Why create such hassle? The cause was quite simple: the wife of a neighbour had fixed her teeth at the dentist and had problems with a fissure a few months after. When she went up to the dentist with this complaint, he repaired everything for free. The mix that was used had a pore that cracked in time, and he apologised. But the neighbour never forgot, and accused him of doing a bad job and abusing people's money. "Instead of talking about our business, we were talking about his wife's teeth!", Mr. Bud says in despair. In the meantime, the dentist's wife, also a dentist, heard the hassle from the office and came to ask what was happening. When the meeting was over, Mr. Bud talked to the dentists, and explained the difficulty of the situation[14]. He also spoke to the neighbour in question, and told him that he should be ashamed of himself. "I understand that you are disappointed, but that's not a way to fix it — this is between your wife and the doctor." He realised what he had done, and he apologised. Mr. Bud had saved the day, yet again. He was disappointed that he could not use the money he would have gotten on selling the room — he would have liked to put it aside as savings for the block. And on their side, the dentists would have liked to expand, now that their son was in the process of becoming a dentist himself (a common path in Romania).

As he was telling me about this, the neighbour from the 9th floor came into the block. She is a retired librarian whose son, in his 50s, has terminal cancer. She has huge debts and Mr. Bud has a hard time paying the bills because of this. His office faces the entrance, and so he can see everyone go in and out. Seeing that she came in, he rushed to greet her and talk about her financial situation. I stayed in the office, to allow for privacy in an already very public discussion (in the hallway of the block). It was not the first time that a discussion was interrupted in this way, by his chasing a neighbour to pay their bills. He came back after 15 minutes, looking exhausted: "I really don't know what to do about this woman… You see Maria, this job is not some mumbo jumbo, it's truly difficult… I need to talk to everybody, know their troubles, find solutions." His neighbour had 20 million in debt, and Mr. Bud was losing his patience: I understand that this is her personal issue, but this presses on the costs, over the bills." His tone would vary from compassion to annoyance, frustrated with her *bourgeois* attitude, always talking about how much they read, how many doctors she knows, what guest house she stays in when in Bucharest… But the debts? "She keeps saying she only makes stakes for [her son]; I told her that even a potato is good if made well."

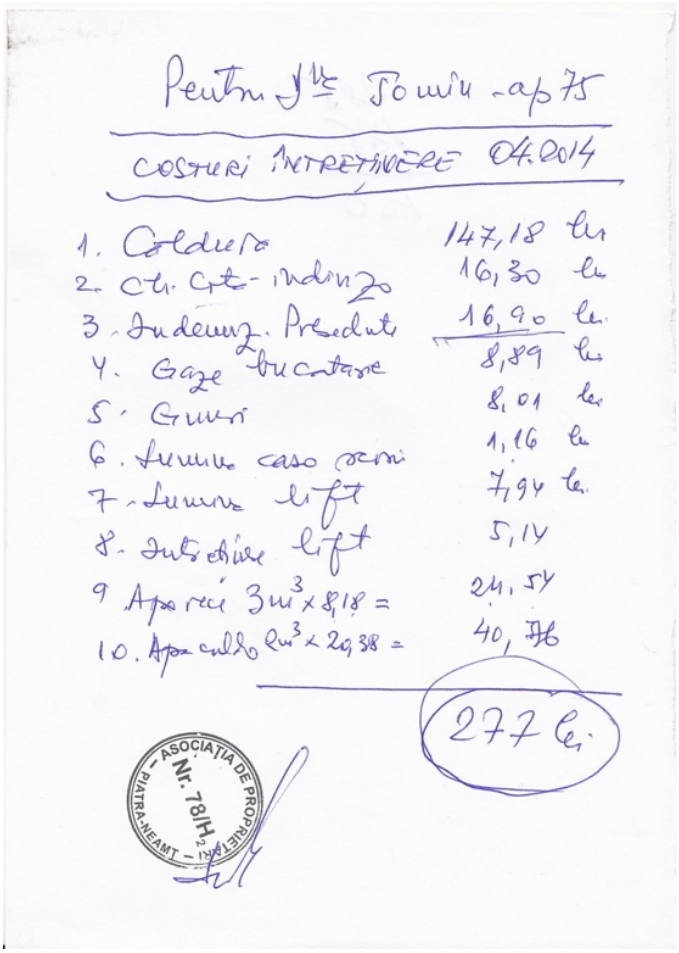
Trust and suspicion

One day, Ms. Tomin, a retired school teacher living on the 7th floor, walked in: she needed to make a payment to Mr. Bud for an important component of the heating system. Mr. Bud told her that he had recently repaired the stairs; he explained that it would have been ideal to replace them entirely, but it would have cost him too much. She made it clear that she would only pay for the heating system, but not for the stairs: "There are others who never pay for these things — let them contribute, I don't have money for everyone!" Mr. Bud explained to her that the ones who never pay will be put on a list… but she would have none of it. A few days later, Ms. Tomin was on her way out to the market, to get some beetroot, to bake it (even if it loses half of its volume, it becomes sweeter). Although she was almost half his size, she had a few intimidating words for Mr. Bud, who seemed dwarfed by her tone:

[14] When I booked an appointment to check my teeth, and ask about their activity in the block, the dentists told me that Mr. Bud had helped them tremendously through his connections with authorities to make adjustments to the flat in order to turn it into a dentist practice.

Ms. Tomin: You told me you would take down the water from the month in which you overcharged me.
Mr. Bud: But I did.
Ms. Tomin: Where? I didn't see it. I mean the common expenses — the elevator and I don't know what.
Mr. Bud: But you're not supposed to pay, you already did.
Ms. Tomin: Then why am I on the list?
Mr. Bud: You have a tax for the gas verification.
Ms. Tomin: Oh I know that one, and I also gave the man money in the house, although I didn't need to.
Mr. Bud: When you come pay next time, I will show you.
Ms. Tomin: I won't come too soon, because let me tell you: taxes — 2 million; electricity — 2 million; pills — 2 million; TV tax, etc. I have little left. And I'm waiting for my pension.

In the past, Mr. Bud had made a note for Ms. Tomin, containing the breakdown of all the monthly costs: heating, water consumption, gas (kitchen), garbage collection, lighting of the common spaces, electricity and maintenance for the elevator, etc. On top of that, he had to take care of the debts from a renter with a strong attitude: "The other day he came in after changing the third car in three months, and I told him: you change your cars more often than I change my socks." He had not paid his bills in 4 months and his reply was: "There are others who are also in debt! I saw people with 20 million in debt!" Mr. Bud intended to call the owner of the flat, and ask him to change the renter and to settle the bills, otherwise he would take legal action. Ultimately, this is what he did, after calling the gas and water companies, and asking them to cut off his connections.



For Ms. Tomin, ap. 75
Utility costs, 04. 2014

1. Heat costs
2. Individual apartment contributions
3. Chairman indemnity
4. Gas — kitchen
5. Garbage
6. Electricity — staircase
7. Electricity — elevator
8. Maintenance — elevator
9. Cold water
10. Hot Water

Total: 277 lei

A few weeks later, close to Easter, I went to Ms. Tomin's apartment to help her bake Easter cakes. Four hours and five cakes later, we took a small break and had a glass of home-made white wine. As we looked outside her window, she pointed at the block across from hers, whose insulation was unfinished. Rumour had it that the workers were Ukrainians, and that they had taken the money and left. She was suspicious, though; she was more tempted to believe that people did not pay, looking at the floor with no insulation (the fourth floor on the photograph below). In contrast, in H2B, they had contracted people from Sibiu (reliable, because there is a large German community there, and German equals quality). Mr. Bud had done his best to supervise the work (as described in The Wall Insulation chapter) - that was the least Mr. Bud could do. After all, they pay him. "And we all know he gets enough out of it." — she says, suspiciously. She had encouraged him to quit: "I told him — your children are well, you have your pension and your wife, leave it, stop getting upset over these things. There are also people who don't mean well, who offend him. That's typical for the block, it is what it is. But indeed there's no one to take over."

By comparison, she told me the story of her sister's block, also an engineer from Săvinești: "You know how fair he is? The luxury that is in there! What a fair man!... What improvements they made… And we also gave a lot of money — but we never saw it! We divided it… but I must shut up, I mustn't get into conflicts. But we are always told to give money. Money, money, all the time, money! Now, with the stairs, I didn't even dare to think that the job would be done so superficially. Another patchwork, for all this money? In one or two years, it will break again." She had witnessed a woman falling after getting her heel stuck in the crack of the stairs. She wonders what happened to the 2 million who were paid a few years back. "I am fine with paying more money, as long as we do something well, but not new patchwork every year… Something well done. Not everyone gives money, but there are probably people who know of certain expenses, who are good with finances, and that's why they don't give any money. And I don't want to fight. Someone else could take over if they wanted. But there's no-one who does, or who could in fact. There's also the heating system. He goes to turn it on, he checks it from time to time; it's an activity that keeps him going. When you retire, you get bored. He has a pension, he doesn't need the money — but I told him — you're reaching a certain age, don't get pissed off with all these mad people."

Ms. Tomin was clearly critical and suspicious of Mr. Bud, but their relationship was not all bad. One day we visited her together, for her to give me photographs from the neighbourhood (she had grown up around the corner). Over a cup of coffee, and through my facilitating intervention, they had a cordial conversation. Mr. Bud directed the discussion towards utility bills, and they both agreed that, for the young generation, paying bills posed great challenges. In contrast, during socialism, with one salary, one could still go on holiday, buy a new piece of furniture, etc. Mr. Bud confessed that he had been helping his children with expenses — and this gave Ms. Tomin a reason to discuss her grandson's marital situation. This illustrated the mix of friendship and suspicion that was typical of many social interactions in the block.

Similarly, her frustration with being one of the few to pay for common expenses was not uncommon. One day, as I visited Mr. Bud in his office, Mr. Anton, a history teacher, walked in. He told Mr. Bud that he was unwilling to pay for more repair work — he was disappointed that he seemed to be one of the few to contribute, and he showed great suspicion towards Mr. Bud's investments. The next day, Mr. Bud joined me in visiting Mr. Anton in his home, and they had a tumultuous conversation.

Mr. Bud: Look, Mr. Anton, this invoice is for the money you gave me yesterday - I took out the registers. I am a proud man. You've never been to any meeting, and these repairs were discussed then and there. We're talking about 10 repairs: 1. Changing the warm water pipes. 2…
Mr. Anton: I understand, but I don't care about these things. I care about the human element. Only remember this: with what I gave yesterday, I paid almost 12 million.
Mr. Bud: Over 4 years? That's very little.
Mr. Anton: Tell me, in the whole block, is there anyone else who paid this amount?
Mr. Bud: There are 4 more.
Mr. Anton: 5.
Mr. Bud: 5. Let me tell you — for the repairs, you paid 4, Teodorescu paid 5, and Raica gave 6. That's all.
Mr. Anton: And Poenaru.
Mr. Bud: He gave nothing.
Mr. Anton: But he was the one to clarify things for me, and tell me how necessary the money is, how much will be done with its help, etc. I didn't ask whether he gave something…
Mr. Bud: … he didn't…
Mr. Anton: But don't brag if you paid nothing.
Mr. Bud: After a few people upset me on Sunday, I wrote 2 pieces of A4 paper, and added them on the billboard at the entrance. Whoever wants to read it, will know. Whoever does, will gossip.
Mr. Anton: It could be better to write up the people who have embarrassing debts.
Mr. Bud: I did. And then they stopped answering my hello.
Mr. Anton: As a boss, you need to find a way to make them pay.
Mr. Bud: My way has been to talk to them — on the corridors, in their home. I talk to everyone all the time. But sometimes it's too much. Many people are surprised at how much effort I put into this.
Mr. Anton: I told you. Don't punish the horse that pulls the cart.
Mr. Bud: Did I ever?
Mr. Anton: Well…
Mr. Bud: I always appreciated the ones who pull. But there are few.
Mr. Anton: Don't ask for more money, you won't get it from me! You know what I want? As Victor said, he will make a meeting space at the entrance, apart from fixing the stairs.
Mr. Bud: Unfortunately, there can't be anything done there, there's too much concrete. Enough of this talk, in any case… For such a thing, I need money from at least half the people — not 3.
Mr. Anton: I thought that would be a great idea. A place to meet, to play games, to spend time together. We could even have meetings there.
Mr. Bud: Poenaru talks about many things, and then he leaves for the countryside. He leaves in March and comes back in November. And he's not the only one.
Mr. Anton: To my surprise, he was very supportive of you. And he said: each time, I contributed with money."
Mr. Bud: For the heating system, last year, he paid.
Mr. Anton: There were people who told me to stop giving you money, who knows why. I appreciate the following: correctness… I think you know who I mean. They also said: Bud should pay for it, because he has money. I liked that, hahaha!
Mr. Bud: Or: Bud should pay, because he always finds a way!
Mr. Anton: I told you I have an apartment in Roman — I never paid so much.
Mr. Bud: You can't compare.
Mr. Anton: Or in Iasi, my daughter never paid so much. I paid for the interphone, but nothing else.
Mr. Bud: It means they don't do anything.
Mr. Anton: They have beautiful sidewalks, nice benches…
Mr. Bud: Those were made by City Hall, but here we did everything. This block has gone through so much in 40 years.

These illustrations of suspicions and doubt do not contradict the big-man model I suggested earlier. On the contrary: in Sahlins' comparison between the Polynesian chief and the Melanesian big-man, he emphasized the limited coercive power of the big man in mobilizing wealth for public benefit, and identified these limits in the refusal of his clansmen to put up with his (increasingly unreciprocated) behaviour. There is bound to be a tension in big men's practice of tapping labour and other resources in groups other than their own by means of exchange networks. Whereas "the attainment of big-man status is rather the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd and attract around him a coterie of loyal, lesser men" (Sahlins, 1963, p. 289), the status of leader comes with significant frictions and disagreements. Sometimes, as above, these are expressed in a tensed manner, but sometimes also in a comical one: as I ran across Mr. Anton at the market, he was amused to talk about Mr. Bud, whom he appreciated deeply in fact: "Of course he needs to be a boss. If Bud is not a boss, he'll despair. Now that he's retired, he's a boss over us!"

In the words of Sahlins: "A leader's career sustains its upward climb when he is able to link other men and their families to his faction, harnessing their production to his ambition. This is done by calculated generosities, by placing others in gratitude through helping them in some big way" (Sahlins, 1963, p. 292). In the case of Mr. Bud, these generosities are spread throughout the block, as was the case when he thermally insulated the building, and lent a few inhabitants the money for the insulation, as I will describe in detail in *The Wall Insulation* chapter. Outside the block, bride wealth is an example given by Sahlins and present in my own ethnography. In the year of my fieldwork, Mr. Bud went to at least three weddings, offering generous presents and large sums of money. Despite being a bit overwhelmed financially, he acknowledged the need to attend, given that some of the families had been to his children's weddings, and had given their support as well.

By playing such a prominent part in the ambivalent relationships between the block administrator and the rest of the inhabitants, money can indeed be termed the 'god of commodities' (Christophers, 2011). Social geographer Brett Christophers (2011) puts forward a convincing encouragement to follow the relationships that co-constitute money. Looking at money as "a social relation, a symbolic system and a material reality" (Maurer, 2006, p. 27), it is telling to see where money has come from and travelled to. By trailing the various stages of its passage, we can identify the social relations underpinning its ongoing movement and metamorphosis. In the case of H2B, these refer to the flexible relationship between resources such as water or heat and money, as managed by Mr. Bud. Because "money is at the same time an aspect of relations between persons and a thing detached from persons" (Hart, 1986, 639), it could be the best medium to create a detailed radiography of what the circulation of resources and materials through the block's pipes does to the inhabitants' everyday lives.

In his seminal discussion of money, Simmel disentangles the role that money plays in social life. He argues that in the Middle Ages, when a person was a member of a feudal association, "their personality was merged with and drew their character from real local interest groups" (Simmel, 1991). He argues that this uniformity was destroyed by modernity, specifically by the inclusion in money economy: Money "fosters a distance between personality and property by mediating between the two" (an idea followed by Hart, 1986). While personality was left to itself, with incomparable mental and physical freedom of movement, the practical content of life "was endowed with unrivalled objectivity" (Simmel, 1991). In my chapter, I have tried to put the two back together, by showing how Mr. Bud's personality created the space for a particular circulation of money and material resource. Considering Simmel's

argument that "this interdependence of personality and material relationships, which is typical of the barter economy, is dissolved by the money economy" (Simmel, 1991), in my case study, it is precisely money which creates a relationship between inhabitants — both a positive and a negative one. By actively redistributing the monetary debts and financial responsibilities of the inhabitants towards their shared resources, Mr. Bud makes money play a central role in mediating relationships, both with and in between his neighbours. Through this very particular kind of monetary circulation, I would argue that personality and material relationships become inter-dependent again.

The medieval guild, Simmel argues, included the two persons in the living community in occupational, social, religious, political, and many other respects. With the inherent limitations of a comparison with present-day Romania, in the case of H2B, the block was an occupational community: most of the (initial) inhabitants had been colleagues at the Săvinești industrial centre, for which the building had actually been erected. In between these two extremes, the Inhabitants' Association had both the human elements of a tightly-knit community, and the coldness of a money-driven endeavour. In other words, it may be true that paying for the common repair may raise tensions, but also, when one died, Mr. Bud did collect money from everyone for the remaining family, establishing a relationship of safety and warmth. This ties in with Simmel's idea that money unifies interests, but also maintains a separateness of interests.

In the relationship between the social biography of the building (with the transformations in the windows, balconies, attics, etc.) and the social biography of the administration of the block, the thermal insulation project comes across as the most visible moment of block transformations, in which people came together in their associations to (1) apply for funds, and then to (2) insulate through their own means when they did not manage to access the funds (as discussed in the *Wall Insulation* chapter). The insulation layer becomes a metaphor for the lack of state protection, and the corrosive effect of neoliberal money economy. There is a strikingly literal parallel here with Simmel's idea of money as an 'insulating layer' that bridges the social and the material: "Since the interest of the individual participant in an association is expressible in money, directly or indirectly, money has slipped like an **insulating layer** between the objective totality of the association and the subjective totality of the personality, just like it has come between owner and property" (Simmel, 1991, p. 19).

In the context of economic relations at the beginning of the 20th century, Simmel argues that "the subject is freed from restrictive commitments, because it is no longer connected to the totality as an entire person, but principally by spending and receiving money" (Simmel, 1991).). In the close-knit community of the Romanian block of flats, we can deduce a contrary effect on Mr. Bud. It is primarily through spending and receiving money that he is 'restricted' as a person, but also that he asserts himself in the community. Of course, Simmel speaks of monetary relationships in a different, larger context, but we come to terms with his following statement as relating to the block: "When one laments the alienating and separating effect of money transactions, one should not forget the following: through the necessity of exchanging it and receiving definite concrete values for it, money creates an extremely strong bond among the members of an economic cycle" (Simmel, 1991, p. 20).

The decline of the welfare state

The Romanian example is by no means the only one in which people are directly involved in the fate of their buildings through practices of self-governance. In the UK, Hyatt has ethnographically documented the management of state subsidised housing in Britain, and the changing discourses around it (Hyatt, 1997). Hyatt argues that, since 1979, policies devised by the ruling conservatives have increasingly targeted the tenants themselves, as the agents best qualified to rescue their communities from an accelerated spirit of deterioration and decline which, by the mid 1980s, was widely recognised to have rendered most British public-sector housing estates virtually unliveable. The "Power to the people" slogan of the oppositional leftist movements in the 1960s fell in the hands of Conservative New Right social policies, as shown in the following parliamentary debate from 1987: "In the public sector the emphasis must be on greater consumer choice and more say from tenants"; "residents can themselves improve their quality of life" (HMSO 1987:1). The tenants are thus defined as consumers: once left to their own devices, it will be the tenants themselves who ultimately possess the requisite skills and relevant knowledge essential for improving "their quality of life".

The state's retreat from taking responsibility for the condition of housing is the common point between Romanian post-socialist neoliberal policies and what Hyatt terms "advanced liberalism" in the UK: "governing without governing society, […] through the regulated and accountable choices of autonomous agents" (Hyatt, 1997, p. 170), on the basis of the conviction that government can instil a capacity for self-regulation in people. It comes in contrast to the welfare policies which involved "governing through society" (Hyatt, 1997, p. 171). According to Hyatt, this unbalances the delicate equilibrium between the "authority of expertise" essential for the establishment of social norms and the job of governing. Consequently, poverty becomes something else than a social problem; instead, a new possibility is put forward, for poor individuals to experience 'empowerment' through the actualization of self-management.

In the Romanian case, the Inhabitants' Associations came in a package with the Socialist architectural project, as an interface between the inhabitants and the Local Council. In principle, the Association had the role of gathering the complaints from inhabitants, and reporting on them to the higher authorities. In actuality, many of my research participants spoke of the 'administrator' as the political police informant, who knows who was where, doing what — an in-depth, efficient mechanism of surveillance, which resonates with inhabitants to this day. In those days, when a pipe broke, people would file a complaint, and someone from IJGCL (*Întreprinderea Judeteană de Gospodarire Comunală și Locativă*) would come fix the problem. As a rule, an association would be comprised of multiple blocks of flats — and some associations in the present day still are. Overall, however, as seen in the example of the 4001 block, they tended to be formed in smaller units, which are easier to manage. After the 1989 change of regime, these associations took over more and more responsibilities, as the state retreated from the maintenance of the built environment.

Through her ethnography of the Lower Grange estate in Bradford, Hyatt uncovers the consequences of this 'advanced liberalism'. Because the homes were in poor state, the inhabitants looked for ways to modernize them. They were encouraged to find alternative management, as the Council did not have the resources, and they thus considered private developers. A housing consultant suggested that they found their own Lower Grange Housing Association, and they did, cooperating with a large

national housing association to access rehabilitation funds. Twenty-two households remained in the association, while forty were rehoused somewhere else. However, the remaining council tenants had limited education, with limited capacity for self-management:

> We just didn't have the expertise to [manage the houses]. […] I have to say, I wouldn't have liked to collect the rent from others… I don't really want to know nobody's business around here and I don't really want them to know mine… We did hear things about certain people knowing certain things they shouldn't be knowing (Hyatt, 1997, p. 180).

The inhabitants did not have any of the resources/amenities associated with management administration, in contrast to the skilful use of Mr. Bud's previous knowledge in industrial management. In this case, his administrative skills become a manner of asserting himself, but were also absolutely essential for the block's maintenance.

Most problematically in the English example, the tenants of Lower Grove realised that managing each other's houses essentially meant *policing* one another, as it became clear in a meeting about how tenants could become more actively involved in managing the estate: rowdy neighbours, messy gardens, noisy children. Many parallels can be drawn with H2B, and with the huge diversity of responsibilities in the hands of an administrator: from cigarette butts thrown from the top floors, to dirty elevators, etc. Addressing these issues will involve a relationship of opposition no matter what — of telling off other tenants, and taking action if they do not comply. "We'll wave them goodbye if that's the case", said a committee member from the Lower Grove association. This bears strong similarities to Mr. Bud kicking out inhabitants who are troublesome and do not pay their bills in an indirect manner, by calling the water company to cut their water, the gas company to cut their gas, etc.

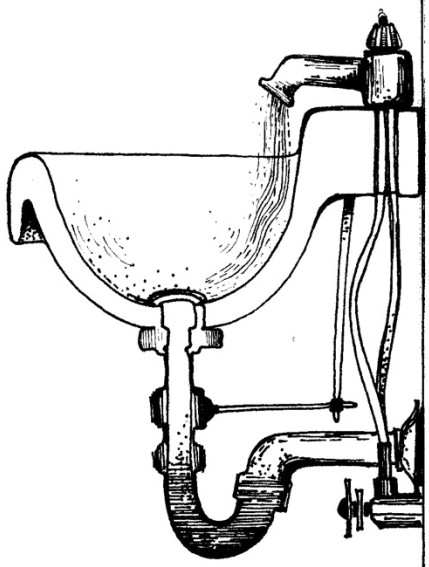
Hyatt noticed that, given their new-found access to formerly privileged information, many tenants who enter into a self-management process begin to construct a new sense of their own authority: "the paid welfare professionals who once 'ruled' poor communities are now being replaced by unpaid 'local experts': the tenants themselves" (Hyatt, 1997, p. 185). Authority or personhood — they become reconfigured in the local building management scene. This is not to be romanticised: as Hyatt well puts it, "the entire notion of the 'social' as a sphere of human activity amenable to governance through strategic interventions is being reconfigured, creating chaos and confusion within those communities already most battered by the disabling repercussions of the de-industrialization and economic decline" (Hyatt, 1997, p. 187).

The post-socialist privatisation of apartments and utility networks had multiple negative implications. Far from a simple transfer of ownership, this was a complex process trying out and negotiating basic rights, roles, norms, relations. In Romania, the home of the super-ownership regime, privatisation of housing has its specificities: some blocks were already built with the purpose of ownership, such as H2B. In Piatra-Neamț, some were even built by the inhabitants directly, especially if they worked in construction — architects/constructors. However, the privatisation of utilities rose prices to such an extent, that retired inhabitants could hardly keep up with their payments. This increased the role of the block administration, but it also increased the tension when they had to pay for communal work.

In a post-socialist context, our block bears great resemblance to what Laszczkowski noticed in Kazakhstan. In his article, *Scraps, Neighbors, and Committees: Material Things, Place-Making, and the State in an Astana Apartment Block*, he points out a similar process as in Romania: "households were suddenly burdened with the responsibility for building maintenance, while heat, gas and water were commoditised, breaking up taken for granted material background ties between residents and the state" (Laszczkowski, 2015, p. 142). The post-socialist uncertainty did not only limit itself to the content of the block, but it spilled inside municipal bureaucracies: who was responsible for shared spaces within residential units, such as basements, hallways, staircases, courtyards? Maintenance was left to municipal housing departments.

Currently, Astana and Piatra-Neamț have one thing in common: "The breakup of material and administrative chains of connection left both urban administrators and residents groping for ways to deal with heterogeneous mass of suddenly redefined material elements: buildings, pipes, wires, and so forth. This opened the way for scrappy ad hoc local infrastructures to proliferate" (Laszczkowski, 2015, p. 143). As a parallel with Mr. Bud, an inhabitant from the Kazakh block talks about the chair of the KSK (the 'equivalent' of Mr. Bud): "Counting money […] we tried to do it all at once, but… it's very hard to count all of this stuff, you need to know these things, and then — I've never done audit, I've never controlled anyone… And the documents, they always have to be signed by someone [else but him], but the chair comes when no-one is around to sign the papers, or, as it often happens, the grandmas (babushki) will sign them (without inspecting) … He often makes the documents after some time, it is only now that we see the bill for the stuff he bought in May (two months before). So, then, it's very hard to figure out what goes with what, if you didn't follow… **Some claim he's a thief, we should get rid of him — but no-one wants to do the job**" (Laszczkowski, 2016, p. 150; my highlights). This research participant's statement is an amazingly clear summary of the relationship that inhabitants have with the block administrator, both in Kazakhstan and in Romania. The close entanglement between people, money, materials, and things in a building are bound to create suspicions and intricate social dynamics.

In Romania, similarly, Inhabitants' Associations addressed owners, whereas during socialism, they mostly referred to people who were renting their apartments from the state. Importantly, although socialism is not discussed in terms of ownership in the housing literature, the H2B block, and many others built especially for industrial engineers were owned from the very beginning. H2B was a tight community from the beginning, mostly built for Săvinești engineers. As time passed, new-comers came to the block, especially as the elderly passed away, or as people moved out, such as the previous block administrator (who put the keys in the nail on the wall, and moved out because he could not stand the block dynamics anymore). Renters, fewer, usually do not socialise and do not participate in meetings; if anything, they are regarded as trouble-makers. Among the elderly, the inhabitants are nostalgic about how in the earlier days, communal work and administration were easier, not in the least because the state was more involved; but because they were a working community as well. The following chapter will explore precisely this tension between trust and suspicion within the setting of the block of flats, but also in Romanian society at large. Taking water consumption as an example, the chapter explores the vulnerabilities of a post-socialist context, in which privatisation and petty corruption make it difficult for neighbourly relations to remain friendly.



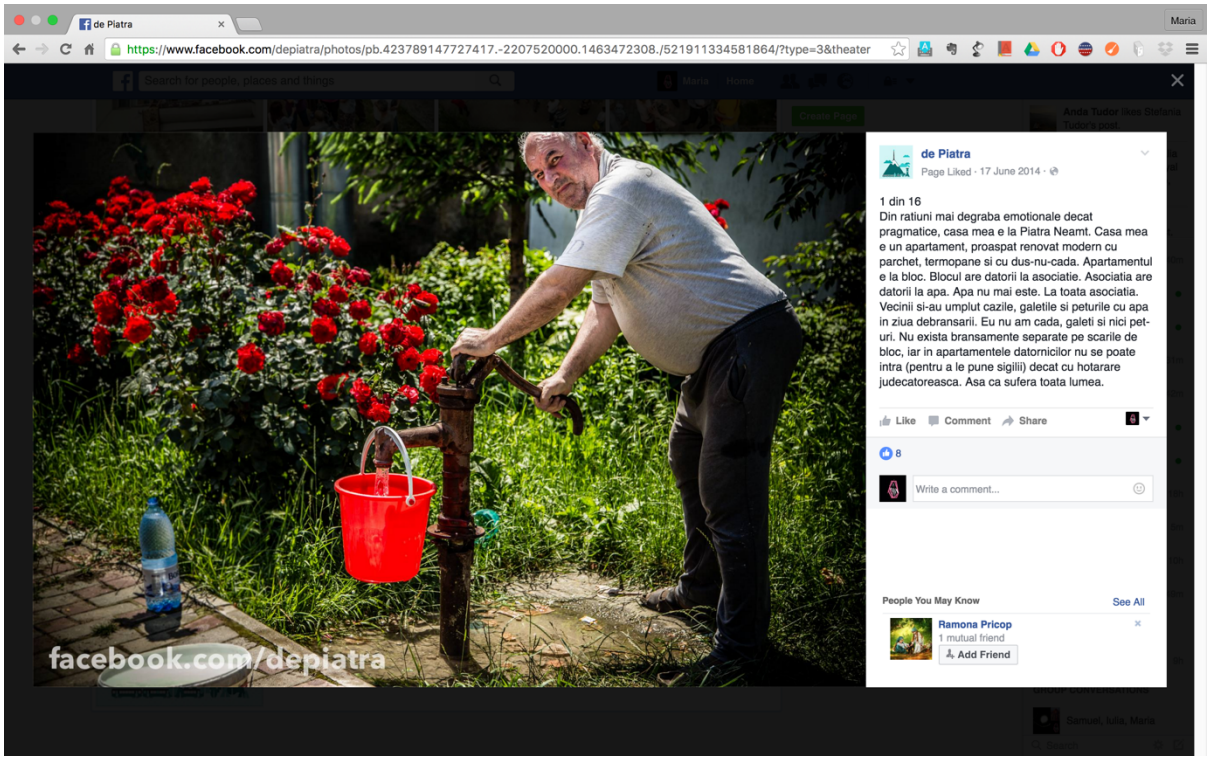
The Water Tap

In September 2014, in the neighbourhood of Mărăței, a few blocks of flats were disconnected from the water infrastructure, due to the debt incurred by the Inhabitants' Association towards the water company. One of the inhabitants was Andrei, a filmmaker in his early 30s who became known for *Constantin and Elena*, a documentary about his grandparents. Having travelled the world with his documentary, he decided to settle in his home town, Piatra-Neamț, in the apartment in which he grew up. He would travel extensively for his film projects, but would spend the bulk of his time at home, organising a yearly film festival which brought Piatra-Neamț in the national limelight. He had recently renovated his apartment, and built a standing shower in his bathroom — a rare sight in Romanian apartments, where the bathtub is omnipresent. When I visited him, his kitchen was still a construction site, but his bathroom was finished with the best materials and elegant designs. However, he was incredibly frustrated with not being able to use his bathroom. Why, I asked him?

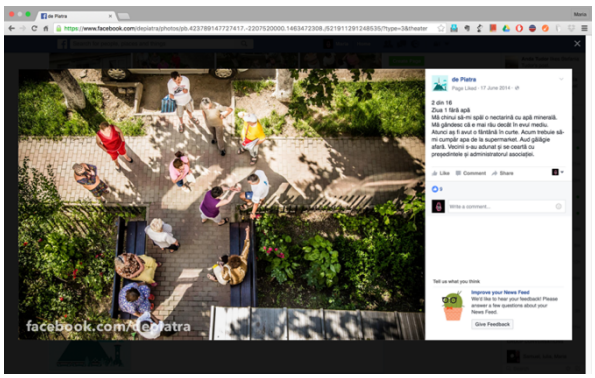
His block belonged to an association that was larger than Mr. Bud's and contained several blocks, each with restless inhabitants who were out and about, pumping water from the neighbourhood's wells (as seen on the next page), and filling their bathtubs with buckets of water. Having no bucket and no water, Andrei was annoyed to realise that everyone had to suffer because of only a few people who had not paid their bills. One would have needed a court order to enter the culprits' apartments and seal their water pipes. He thus created a Facebook page for the city's community, and took photographs of the events surrounding the water cuts. He added them on the page each day, and engendered strong reactions from his fellow Facebook members.

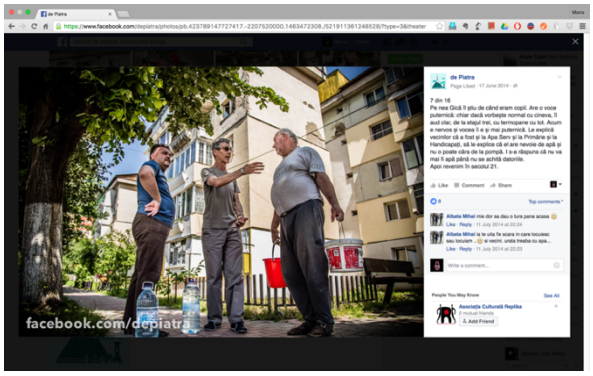
As days passed, the hubbub outside his window got louder and louder: his neighbours would gather around the administrator, blaming him for the situation. One day, wanting to take a shower, he went out to ask his neighbours about tips and updates — an old lady shared her solution with him, thrilled that she could help: all he had to do to deal with the crisis was to take water from the vertical tap that had been installed by the water company (see photo on the following page). Andrei was disappointed. The measure, he thought, was profoundly inefficient from both a social and a financial point of view — he would have loved to consume and pay for the water, and so would most of his neighbours. Since they did not consume, they did not pay, and the loss for the water company, APASERV, was deepening.

Throughout the week, life continued without water in the neighbourhood of Mărăței, as people carried bottles and buckets to their apartments. Mr. Giga, whom Andrei had known since he was a child, was frustrated with his multiple visits to the City Hall and to the water company offices. He in vain tried to explain that due to a physical handicap, he could not carry the water from the street tap to his apartment. While under his window the heated discussions became the norm, Andrei was wondering which one of his friends to ask for permission to shower in their home. In the meantime, a team from the local television station arrived, as one of his neighbours yelled "Come here and talk to them, if you just sit around, you won't solve anything!"



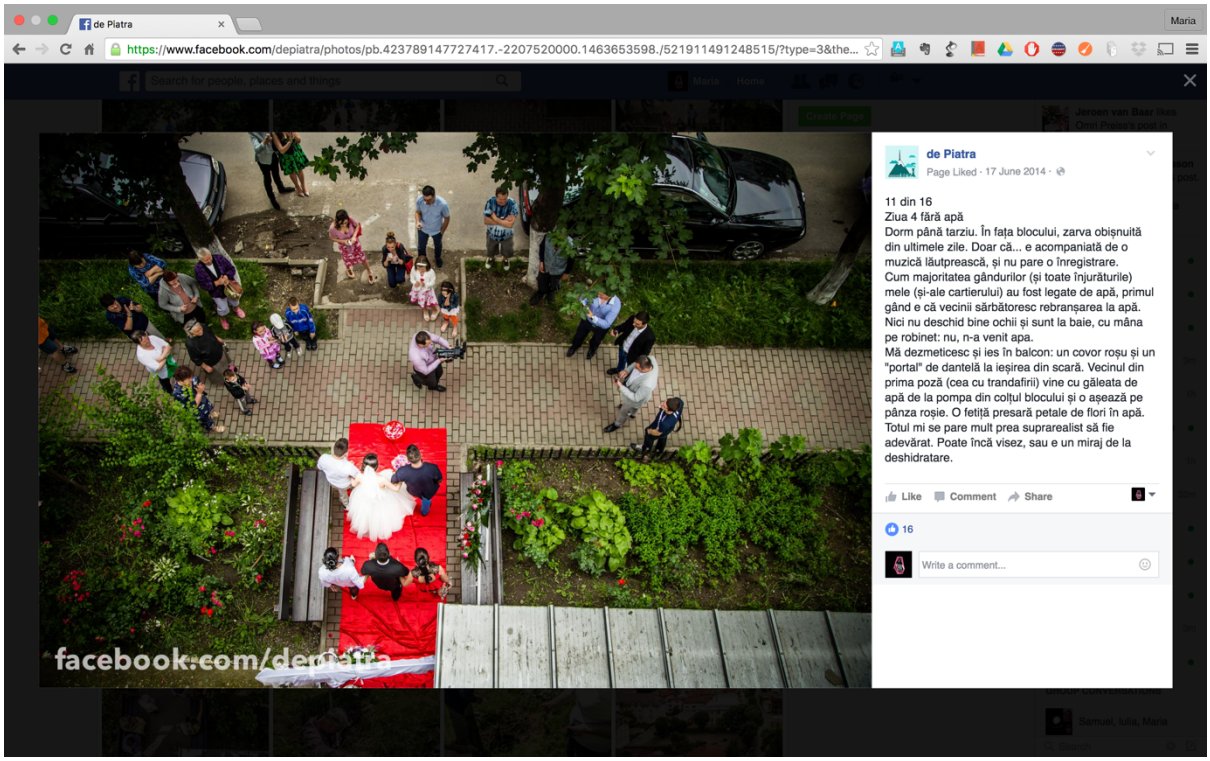
One day, as Andrei was sleeping in, he was woken up to loud cheers and fiddler music. As most of his thoughts (and swearwords) had been directed towards the recent water crisis, he was certain that the neighbours were celebrating the water's return. As he turned on the tap, he discovered with disappointment that it was not the case. He looked outside and could not believe his eyes: a wedding was taking place, and the bride was exiting the block on a red carpet. His neighbour had taken out water from the pump, and placed the bucket of water on a red carpet. A small girl then put white flowers in the water. Afraid that this surrealist scene might be a side effect of dehydration, he watched carefully. As the bride took a *turtă* (a bread cake) and ripped out a piece, a neighbour flipped the bucket. A symbol of wealth and good luck, this is a common ritual in a wedding. The water poured over the red carpet, to Andrei's sadness, who could not help thinking that it was a big waste, given the context. Still, most of his neighbours were participating in the ritual, perhaps brought closer to each other by the water crisis…





Water — a “luxury” good?

The chain of events recorded by Andrei in his block of flats was not uncommon in Piatra-Neamț. APASERV, the local water company, often interrupted the water circuit, either for reparation works, or due to users’ lack of payment, as in the example above. At the level of the pipes, this was very problematic. Water needed to continue flowing, in order for the circuit to remain robust. If water was stationary, corrosion would become a problem and the chances of flooding would increase. When the water was absent from the pipes, the pressure was lower, only to increase again when the water returned, with the risk of damage. Consequently, inhabitants were concerned about at least three things: (1) the lack of water for daily use, (2) the waste of water once the service was re-established, when the taps had to be on for a long time, in order to clear the “brown” water with rust in it, and (3) the long-term damage to the pipes.



When the blocks of flats were first built, paying for the water consumption was never worrisome. Each block had a metre, and the bill would be equally divided between the inhabitants: each apartment had to pay for a small amount. After the Revolution, the water company was privatized and maintained under the supervision of the Local Council. The water prices rocketed, for reasons I will describe in this chapter, and people started to be concerned with their (lack of) capacity to pay for them. Inhabitants thus preferred to pay for their consumption in a more precise manner, and they embraced the appearance of water metres as a way to record an individual apartment’s consumption of cold and hot water.

This chapter explores the intricate relationship between water and the aging ‘network’ of pipes, buildings, lakes, bacteria and people. It takes a historical approach to building water infrastructure, and to the initial issues with water in the new apartment blocks, such as leaks or lack of pressure. It contrasts these issues with the discursive enthusiasm towards water utilities as a sign of modernization

and synchronization with the rest of the socialist world. I then describe the recent institutional developments which triggered the high price and low quality of water, and introduce the water metres as part of a larger individualization of utilities metering — a complex reaction to the state's lack of control over basic services. Water consumption as reported by inhabitants is tainted by lies and technical imprecisions. I will describe the way in which it shapes social relations in the block. Apart from the water metres, the water infrastructure itself is active in transforming relationships between the inhabitants. Faults in the aging infrastructure, leading to floods, damage both the apartments, and the neighbourly terms — thus leaving us to ask, what do we learn about inhabitants when the water infrastructure breaks down?

Following these incidents of flooding, the suspicion of the neighbours also regarded the cost of the water that had been wasted — if the neighbour who was responsible for the flooding did not report the huge water flow, it meant that the costs had been divided among the rest of the inhabitants. The adversity was thus not only restricted to the damage to the building, but extended to the additional water costs. These are not to be ignored, as the water in Piatra-Neamț is the 4th most expensive out of 42 Romanian counties: 8,2 lei (£1.4) per cubic metre (m^3). Therefore, an average family consuming 10 cubic metres would pay 80 lei (£14) on cold water alone.

Why was water so expensive? Five years before, the local water company, APASERV had applied for a EU project in order to update the city's water infrastructure to new standards of quality. Such a project required local funds: the EU would supply 75%, the beneficiary 25%. However, the company did not actually hold their share of the money; they were going to acquire it by increasing the price each summer by 10% or 15%. In 2014, a big scandal was ignited and people protested against such an increase (which took place nevertheless). On the 22nd April 2014, the then president of the Local



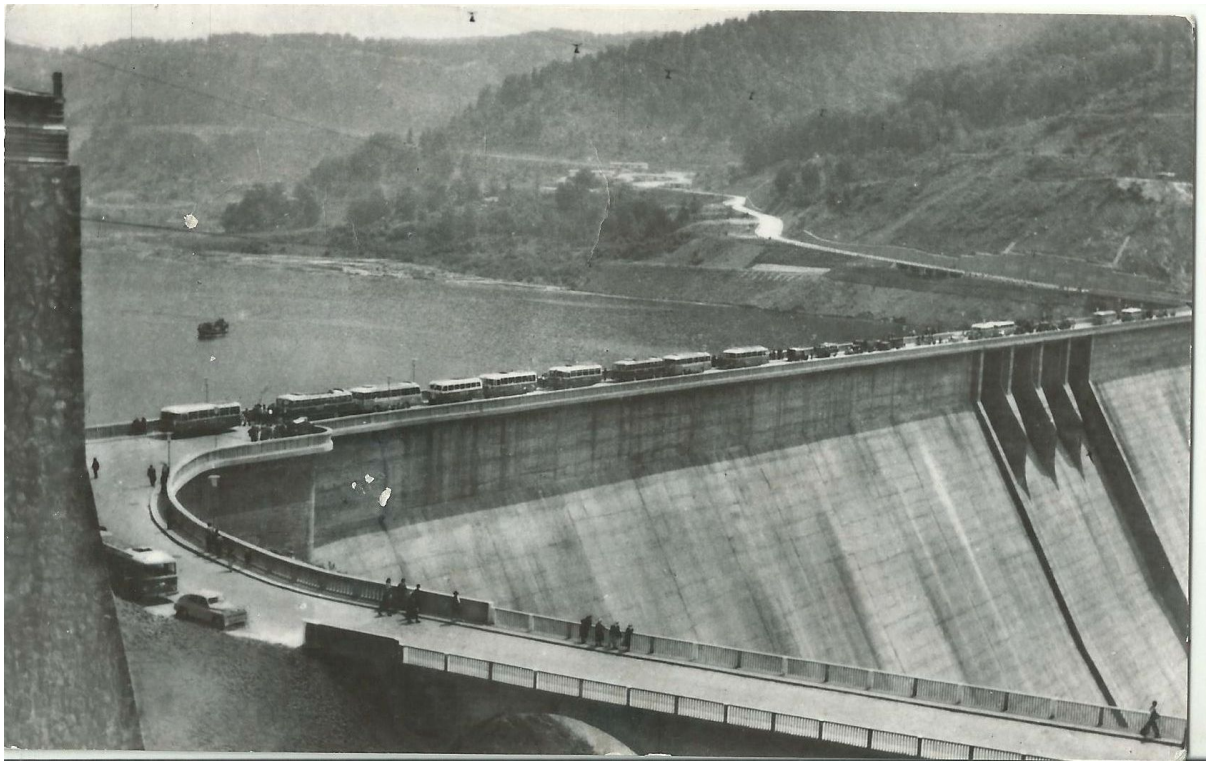
Wall degradation in the staircase due to a water leak in a different block of flats.

Council, Culiță Tărâță, filed an official request to APASERV in the name of a few blocks of flats (among which H2B), asking for an explanation for the high water price, and a proposal for cost reduction, "in order to protect the inhabitants with limited incomes." On the 15th of May, Mr. Bud received a letter from APASERV, directing him towards a copy of their reply to the Local Council. Among the paperwork, the organisational structure was attached, indicating an overly complex managerial system. The diagram counted a huge number of executives (many of them in the Local Council themselves), revealing the overly inefficient manner of expenditure. In the local press, and in informal conversations, this has become one of the main critiques towards the water company, which is suspected of corruption and nepotism.

Water infrastructure during socialism

The high price of water was a new worry for people who lived through socialist times. Before 1989, the water distribution was state regulated, and the price of the water was never a worry — in many dialogues with elderly participants, they reminisced about the times in which they did not need to worry about paying their water bills. One of my research participants, a retired man with a career in the services industry, was profoundly surprised by the recurring need to close the water circuit in the city due to repair work. In his early career days, in a discussion with an engineer from the Water Institute, he was assured that the newly installed pipework in the city would last for 100 years. Why, then, was it failing them so swiftly?

The local newspapers at the beginning of the 1970s were, indeed, sprinkled with articles boasting about the extension of the water pipes throughout the county. Almost each day, one would find an article discussing either a neighbourhood in Piatra-Neamț, or a nearby village receiving water, and this



The water dam in Bicaz (next to Piatra-Neamț), built between 1950 and 1960

development was linked with modernity, and the new ease with which household tasks could be attended to. Water management was part and parcel of the socialist project: "As water flowed, so too would the abundance of socialism flow to the masses" (Schwenkel 2015). As Kaika and Swyngedouw put it, "Dams, water towers, sewage systems and the like were celebrated as glorious icons, carefully designed, ornamented, and prominently located in the city, celebrating the modern promise of progress" (2000:121). In the neighbouring town of Bicaz, one of the largest water dams in Romania was built with great sacrifice of both human lives and homes: indeed, when the water reservoir filled, many villages were destroyed and countless inhabitants had to be re-housed. As Walter Benjamin describes in the Arcade Project, such construction icons contributed to the image of modernity, one of a sublime power and capacity to build a better tomorrow for the modern citizen. This way, the development of infrastructure was hoped to result in the transformation and betterment of daily life, thus generating an *enchantment* with large-scale infrastructure projects (Penny Harvey & Knox, 2012).

For my research participants who moved into the blocks right after their construction, readily available tap-water was one of the largest appeals of life in the block. For instance, Ms. Ionescu had always dreamt of living in a block of flats. She grew up in a house without running water, and had had a hard time washing her clothes and her body with water from the well, which had to be warmed up on the stove. Carrying water for all the house chores was an effortful endeavour, and washing her long, rich hair was a complicated process. Similarly, Ms. Mihalache told me about the time that she lived in a house in Piatra, and of the many occasions in which she would have to bring water for her animals from the pump, only to find that the water container, filled to the brim, had leaked overnight. Such problems no longer existed in the block.

However, the old problems of the countryside were replaced by new ones. For instance, many complaints in the Ceahlăul newspaper of the time addressed the lack of water pressure and flow in the new blocks. A different news piece from 1973 reads: "For 881 apartments, […] we found deficiencies which prove a lack of responsibility towards the common property or of a preoccupation towards the block associations and the inhabitants in general. We found hundreds of broken sanitary installations, curved floors, poorly maintained bathrooms and kitchens, and laundry rooms which are used unreasonably" (*"nerational"* = "irrationally"). The article continues to point out that in most apartments, the water tap would either leak, or would be kept flowing with the aim of cooling certain vegetables, which led to water waste, the increase of the shared expenses, and made it so that the inhabitants on the higher floors were deprived of water altogether.

The same concern with water waste and failing infrastructure is expressed in socialist movies at the time, such as *Serenade for the 12th floor*. In a key scene, as people move into their flats, a group of





menders knock on everybody's doors, asking them if they need any fixing. A university professor, newly moved to the block, is dictating messages to his wife, to be typed and pasted on his front doors, for strangers to read: "I'm not interested in: Buying anything! Selling anything! Grouting the windows! Lacquering the doors! ..." As he is sharing his frustration with the several disturbances during his first day in the block, the bell rings and a plumber walks in, looking around for things to fix. After a long pensive pause, he yells: "The hot water seals are broken!" and rushes towards the bathroom. "And the batteries are bad." "The seals are in perfect condition, we just moved in." "That's impossible, listen to this" — and they both listen to the water drip in the sink… "Even the sink is broken! And you know that you get fined for water waste." The topic of water waste came up again and again in discussions with inhabitants — I was often scolded for leaving the tap on, in a high flow rate, while doing the dishes. The carefulness towards water consumption is not new — it is rooted in a long-term socialist project of saving awareness, but also in the water saving policies of the 1980s, as explained by the Onofrei family.

In the D block in the city centre, Ms. and Mr. Onofrei welcome me in their living room, which is packed with plants to the ceiling. They tell me about their daughter, who lives in Bucharest with her family, of which pictures in the living room abound. They firmly opposed the idea that their children or nephews would leave the country, and they managed to pressure them to stay. They have lived in the block since it was built in the 1970s. During socialism, when the government saved energy in the 1980s, she would look out from their 10th floor balcony, and would see dark skies all the way to Săvinești, and fear would pervade her being. Her husband used to work there, he was a colleague of Mr. Bud. Like many people of their age, they are slightly nostalgic of that period, although "then you had money and no food," and nowadays most people experience the reverse. They were lucky to have large enough pensions, but what could most people do with 200 Euros per month?

They missed the trees in front of their block — like the ones in front of H2B, they were cut to make way for new parking lots, and the dust of the street gathered on their shiny living room table. Living on the top floor of their block, they loved the sight of the arches of the tall trees on the ground floor. That was perhaps the only advantage, otherwise they had problems during the rainy season — water would infiltrate from the rooftop, and buckets were a common sight in their living room. "At least it is God's water, and not my neighbour's!", Mr. Onofrei said nostalgically. This resonated with my experience growing up on the top floor of a block of flats in the 1990s, when I was nervous every time a rainy cloud appeared on the sky. The recurrent flooding was one of the main reasons why my family and I moved to a different apartment — also on the 4th floor, but covered by an attic.

Socialism has been discussed in terms of shortages (Burawoy & Verdery, 1999), but my data nuances this — despite the state often wanting to save water and energy, interrupting the water circuits for many hours/day often had the opposite effect. Inhabitants' flats would often be flooded due to a tap left on. A neighbour could have been checking to see if the water was running again, and have left the tap on by mistake — leaving the home to go to work, or to do groceries, they would find the entire section of the block flooded by their tap. After the Revolution, they stopped having this problem, but by then the pipework had aged (like in Mr. Bud's block, and in most other blocks). Mr. Onofrei, the administrator of his block, would receive phone calls in the middle of the night, with demands for help — he had learned how to fix the pipes himself, he still had the equipment. As we climbed on top of the block for me to take a picture of the city, I asked Mr. Onofrei why there were buckets everywhere

— he told me that he was collecting water for his plants. "Everyone knows that rainwater is better for plants than tap water!"

The breakdown of water infrastructure

Urban infrastructure was presented in the past as a "spectacular socialist achievement" (Schwenkel 2015), which stood as emblematic of progress and contemporaneity in the (socialist) world. Urban infrastructure appropriates human labour and material resources to transform "nature" into "city," turning water from "natural resource" into "consumable commodity." Offering a frame as a bio-political tool of the Romanian socialist state for managing (and civilizing) the newly urban population, water had the great potential for emancipation, and comfort, in the home. This considered, water taps and pipes did not always represent links as expected in socialist housing. The failures of water infrastructure exposed the bonds between the neighbours, as they tried to mend recurring issues. As Schwenkel so well puts it in her ethnography of water pipes in urban Vietnam: "Infrastructural breakdown and neglect thus catalysed a collective ethos of maintenance and repair as the state shifted responsibility for upkeep to disenchanted tenants" (Schwenkel, 2015, p. 520). Following Barry, 2013, she explores the technical objects of infrastructure which become the centre of urban disputes between state and non-state actors, and which sustain social and political life. She describes the *technopolitics of visibility*, that is, the strategic use of technology as a visual tool to "constitute, embody or enact political goals" (Hecht, 2009, p. 15).

Taking the lead from Graham and Marvin (Stephen Graham & Marvin, 2001), who discussed urban life as mediated by assemblages of network interconnections and their failure and collapse, Schwenkel looks at the generative effects of a breakdown in the public water system. In discussing the visibility of the damage, she re-considers the Heideggerian concepts of "ready to hand" (Zuhanden) and "present at hand" (Vorhanden) — the first meaning the invisible, taken for granted utility of an object, and which manifests itself as the latter, through episodes of interruption or breakdown (Heidegger, 1927). She successfully differentiates between the taken for granted connection between visibility and non-existent/damaged infrastructure; and between invisibility and good performance. As my data shows, damaged infrastructure can be very much invisible — out of sight, out of mind — until it breaks down, and it becomes visible. The lengthy process underlying damage makes such a distinction hard to make, and inaccessible to solely the sense of sight (Robbins, 2007). As follows, I will continue with the manner in which the block administrator of the H2B block managed to negotiate social relationships with regards to the payment of the bills.

During many of my visits to the H2B block, I was welcomed by billboard messages threatening inhabitants with disconnection from the water pipes, just like their neighbours in the beginning of the chapter. In reality, Mr. Bud tells me, they have always been far from this risk; he always carefully calculated the water bills before the invoices came in, and made sure that the bills would be paid. The threatening messages only had a rhetorical purpose. He also shared the archive of his messages on the billboard at the entrance of the block, among which there was a threatening letter from APASERV, in which he had highlighted the following: "We are hereby reminding you that on the date of 05.04.2013, you owe us 3.356,64 lei (£575). We ask you to urgently pay the above-mentioned amount; otherwise, we are forced to disconnect the water service." In blue marker, he had written "Addressed to the owners with large debts."

ApaServ

Operator Regional
Zona Sud Piatra Neamț - tel: 0233 233340; fax: 0233 218937
Zona Est Roman - tel: 0233 743212; fax: 0372 879548
Zona Nord Târgu Neamț - tel: 0233 790539; fax: 0233 790641

Nr. 9040/2530/08.04.2013

SPRE STIINTA
Dlor Proprietari cu MARI RESTANTE

CATRE,
ASOCIATIE DE PROPRIETARI NR. 78-H2
Piatra Neamt, str. Traian, nr. 78, bl. H2, sc. B

Prin prezenta va reamintim ca la data de 05.04.2013, ne datorati suma de **3.356,64 Lei.**

Va rugam sa achitati de urgenta suma mentionata; in caz contrar in perioada imediat urmatoare vom fi nevoiti sa procedam la sistarea furnizarii serviciului de alimentare cu apa si de canalizare.

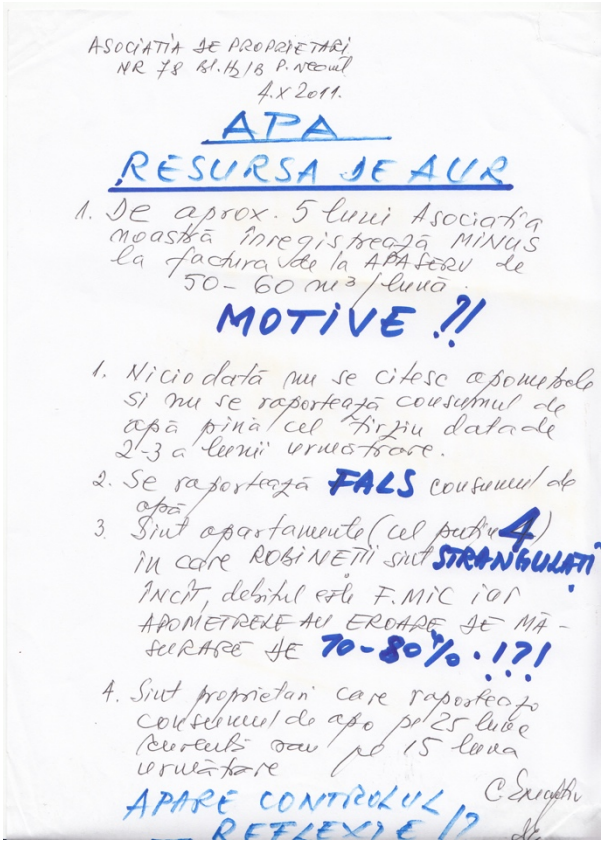
In conformitate cu prevederile Legii 241/2006 – Legea serviciului de alimentare cu apa si de canalizare, utilizatorii serviciului de alimentare cu apa si canalizare, au obligatia să achite facturile în maximum 45 de zile de la emiterea lor. Incepand cu a 46-a zi, utilizatorii care nu si-au indeplinit aceasta obligatie sunt de drept in intarziere si, pe langa faptul ca platesc penalitati, risca sa fie debransati de la sistemul public de alimentare cu apa.

SE OPRESTE APA !

Director Comercial,

COMPANIA JUDEȚEANĂ APA SERV S.A. Punct Lucru ZONA SUD Piatra Neamț - Bicaz Piatra Neamț

As in many other blocks, the H2B inhabitants had individual water metres, which allowed them to pay only for what they used. Mr. Bud established a system: instead of meeting with each inhabitant separately, he asked everyone to slip the water consumption form under the door of his office. He would then collect the figures before the 5th of the month, and make a balance sheet. The variety between people's consumption levels would sometimes be immense, from an old lady who saves endlessly, to a large family which is faking/fabricating their water markings. In any case, each month, he was unable to account for between 50 and 120 m^3 consumed. He would often write posters for the billboard at the entrance of the block of flats, to communicate his worries to the rest of the inhabitants. Sometimes, inhabitants would stop and read them attentively, sharing their concerns with Mr. Bud. Most times, however, they would walk on, not throwing a glance at Mr. Bud's carefully crafted works. One such poster, from the 4th of October 2011, stated: "Informing the owners with large debts: water will be cut out!" Truth was somewhere in the middle — they were never in danger of having their water provision interrupted, but the debts were indeed worrisome.


ASOCIAȚIA DE PROPRIETARI
NR 78 Bl. H2/B P. Nou
4.X.2011.

APA

RESURSA DE AUR

1. De aprox. 5 luni Asociația noastră înregistrează MINUS la facturile de la APA față de 50-60 m^3/lună.

MOTIVE ?!

1. Nicio dată nu se citesc apometrele și nu se raportează consumul de apă până cel târziu data de 2-3 a lunii următoare.
2. Se raportează FALS consumul de apă
3. Sunt apartamente (cel puțin 4) în care ROBINETII sunt STRANGULATI ÎNCÂT, debitul este FOARTE MIC iar APOMETRELE AU ERORI DE MĂSURARE DE 70-80%.!?!
4. Sunt proprietari care raportează consumul de apă pe 25 luna curentă sau pe 15 luna următoare

APARE CONTRAZICERE !? REFLEXIE !?

WATER
GOLDEN RESOURCE

1. For approximatively 5 months our Association has been recording a deficit of 50–60 m^3/month. REASONS?!

1. The water metre readings are always brought in late, on the 2nd or the 3rd of the next month
2. The water consumption is falsely reported
3. There are apartments (at least 4) in which the water taps are constrained, creating a restricted outflow, and a measurement error of 70–80%!?!
4. There are owners who report the water consumption on the 25th of the current month or the 15th of the next month

THE CHECK WILL ARRIVE
REFLECTION!?

I asked Mr. Bud to explain how the water metres were read by the inhabitants, and he took out a huge folder with many small slips, and went through them with me:

> One poor lady comes in with her cold water expenses; let's say: 3,1264. And I tell her, don't come with these: either 3, or 4. If it's 3,5, you write 4. How can a woman — who needs to wash, to cook — consume 3 m^3 of water in one month? Out of which you also get warm water. You know what European norms say? If you don't measure the water with the water metre,

> each citizen needs to consume 5,4 m^3 of cold water and 3,0 m^3 of warm water each month. So, this means 8.5 m^3. And you come with 3.

Indeed, this inhabitant had consumed minimal amounts of water and carefully kept track of her spending. However, in the H2B block, one finds the opposite situation as well: a young family with a daughter in 6th grade. The husband, who worked in thermal systems, would systematically bring in a slip with 2 m^3 of cold water (no hot water, he is one of the people who have their own apartment heating system). Mr. Bud would take the slip and write 5 or 6 instead of 2.

> But you know why he says nothing? Because he juked the water metres - because you can adjust them as you want. And he has a seal. And he does that. And he doesn't say it, but I know it. And he knows that I know. And when I make the balance sheet, I tell the girl who writes the file - write it this way; and he never says anything. So, you see, the diversity of people!



On the left, a box for the collection of water meter readings

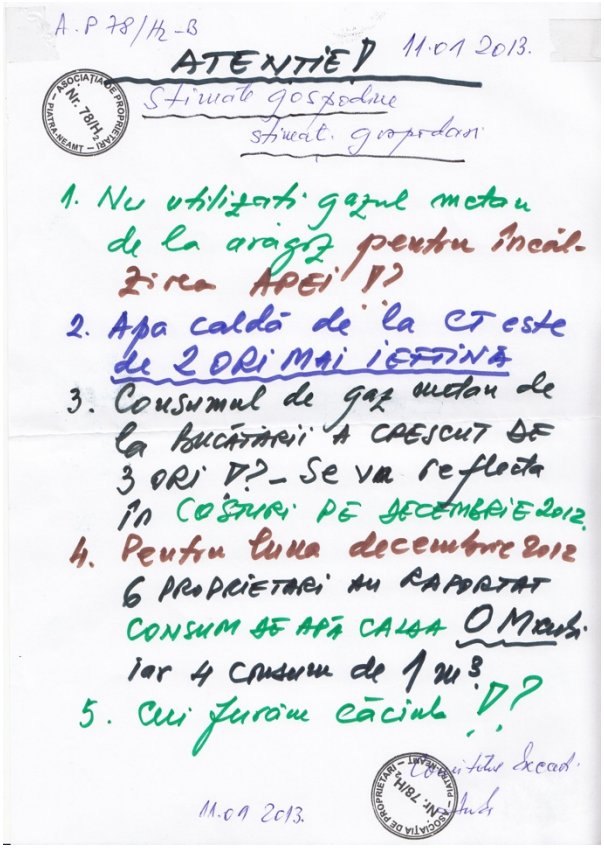
In between these two extremes, examples abound. Mihaela, for instance, living with her mother and her daughter, would very often do laundry and leave it to dry in her open balcony. Being transparent and honest about her water consumption, she would spend huge amounts for water alone, reaching peaks of even 14 m^3 of cold water, and 9 m^3 of warm water, especially in the summer and during the Christmas and Easter holidays. She would openly share her difficulties with paying those large amounts, and would pay penalties for failing to do so in good time. Following a difficult divorce, she had moved back with her mother and her daughter in H2B (where she herself grew up). A painting teacher at the local Art School, she was in the process of taking her final exams in order to receive

tenure. The stress of preparing for an examination which would determine her financial independence was apparent, and she was under a great deal of pressure. Her folder was full of lesson plans, biographies, semester planning, student diplomas, PowerPoint presentations, and it needed further additions… All this while teaching full time and taking care of her daughter, her mother, and the house too. Her daughter's homework would often take four hours, and she often struggled with keeping her active and away from computer games. Her mother was in the hospital, and she realised that she would have to take good care of her too — while she was in the hospital, she did not even tell her that she herself had been sick. This made her frustrated with her brother, in Italy, who did not call during that time, not to mention help with the bills.

Mihaela's tidy laundry was always greatly admired by the neighbour across the street, Ms. Țolea. Like her, Ms. Țolea would tidily put her wash to dry after cleaning the drying string from dust — large items towards the street, intimates towards the home. This was always preceded by a complicated sorting process, aimed at saving as much water as possible. She would let the laundry gather and wash it every two weeks, carefully sorting it in categories: whites, blacks, coloured, wool. She had a multitude of detergents, one for each category. Her washing machine, now 20 years old, would throw the used water in the bathtub — this way, she could re-use the resulting water for washing carpets, or for soaking larger items before washing them. That is how she had always done it — "maybe with the new machines it's no longer possible," she hesitates. She had repaired it multiple times, but by now the parts were no longer available, and the repairman had advised her to take good care of it, as everything presently on the market was made to last for maximum 5 years. Because she had always used good detergents (*Ariel*), she never needed to add *Calgon*, a water softener. After washing everything, she prepared the *apret* for the shirts and bed sheets, a water mix with a bit of starch or wheat flour which made the cloth harder, and thus more formal.

Hot and cold water

Back in H2B, as Mr. Bud was puzzled by the absence of hot water use, Ms. Tomin was telling me nonchalantly that she never used hot water from the tap. For washing, she used water that was warmed up in bottles on her heater, which were always boiling anyway. Similarly, her neighbours, two sisters in their 90s on the 8th floor, gave Mr. Bud a reading of 11 m^3 of cold water, and 0 m^3 of warm water. "How is that possible? Don't you wash your dishes? Your clothes? Yourself?", Mr. Bud asked, as he was starting to turn red. In fact, as he had found out in 2013, they boiled the water on the stove — a complete waste of finances and resources, and a health hazard. His discovery was swiftly followed by a billboard announcement.


A.P 78/H-B

ATENȚIE! 11.01.2013.

Stimate gospodine
stimată gospodină

1. Nu utilizați gazul metan de la aragaz pentru încălzirea APEI!?
2. Apa caldă de la CT este de 2 ORI MAI IEFTINĂ
3. Consumul de gaz metan de la bucătării a CRESCUT DE 3 ORI!?_ Se va reflecta în COSTURI PE DECEMBRIE 2012.
4. Pentru luna decembrie 2012 6 PROPRIETARI au RAPORTAT CONSUM DE APĂ CALDĂ 0 Mc. iar 4 consum de 1 m³.
5. Cui furăm căciula!?

Comitetul Executiv

11.01.2013

ASOCIAȚIA DE PROPRIETARI Nr. 78/H

ATTENTION!

Dear housewives,
Dear husbands,

1. *Don't use the gas from the stove to heat up water?!*
2. *The hot water from the tap is twice cheaper*
3. *The consumption of gas from the kitchen stoves increased three times — it will be reflected in the costs for December 2012.*
4. *For the month of December 2012, 6 owners reported 0 hot water consumption, and 4 owners reported 1* m^3
5. *Whose hat are we stealing!?*

Executive committee,
11.01.2013

On the 22nd of June 2012, Mr. Bud posted a newspaper article on the billboard, which read: "Hundreds of families don't have a drop of hot water in their showers." The article goes on to say: "These days, in the middle of the hot season, the doctors advise us to stay in the shade, hydrate ourselves and take multiple showers per day. For some, this is possible, but for others it is simply impossible […]. Only half of the associations are currently getting hot water, and not many people can take a cold shower. It is even not recommended, due to the risk of myocardial infarct. The fact that many inhabitants from the city centre wash from a bucket comes as no surprise." Mr. Bud used the article to highlight that each apartment would be checked by a committee of inhabitants (led by himself), who would look at the hot and cold water metres.

Suspicions about the water quality

Apart from the high water price, people were starting to worry about the water quality. Mr. Bud himself would often leave a glass of water on the table, and look at what remains on the walls of the glass. The result was worrisome — the water was charged with impurities, he concluded. Indeed, many research participants either used a filter, or put a silver coin in the water (as they read on Facebook that it helped). Similarly, they would also buy their water from a shop. In Bucharest, that is common practice, the city being renowned for the bad quality of its water. In contrast, Piatra used to be well known for how good its water was. Having changed the cold-water pipes in 2009, Mr. Bud still noticed deposits in the water — despite all efforts to make sure that the building's pipes are clean, the properties of the network make it so that it is difficult to delineate the influence of one actor or another — be it social or infrastructural.

At the same time, when I spoke to Ms. Miclăuș, an engineer from the Environmental Security Agency, she emphasized the thorough quality control at the source. It was during transportation inside the invisible infrastructure of water, that the quality could have been lost. She argued that, at least at the source, the quality of water has not changed. The pervading perception that the water is getting worse and worse, to her, was a mental construction. Granted, in Mărăței there had been a few problems where the pipes had not been changed in a long time, and bio-derma had been gathering on the inside — no matter how clean the water was, things like this would still happen. But in general, Piatra had good water, she told me.

When I told her that many research participants compare their water to the one of their acquaintances living in a different part of the city, she was genuinely surprised and slightly amused. The city gets its water from two sources — a deep level one, in the groundwater of Vaduri (the main component of the drinkable water), and a source from the Bâtca Doamnei lake, from a protected area (where no boat is allowed, and no swimming takes place). This water mixes — there is no neighbourhood in the city that feeds on only one source. The idea that the neighbour has better water is part of the local imaginary: there are slightly different proportions depending on the location in the city, but the source is predominantly the groundwater.

Piatra-Neamț, with its green hills and beautiful scenery, surrounded by water sources coming out of the mountains nearby, had been known as a town with one of the best-tasting waters in the country. When I was young and my family from Bucharest came to visit, they were mesmerized by the sweet, clear taste of our tap water — or better said, the lack thereof. Over the years, I would see more and more people walk into their blocks with bottled water, weary of the decreasing quality in water. Over the past two decades, there has been an increase in crises related to infrastructural development, as described in this chapter. One cannot but ask - how does this compare with Ms. Miclăuș' allegation about the water being the same in quality as years ago? Do people buy water instead of drinking the one at the tap because of popular imagination?





Indeed, Ms. Miclăuș criticized the water company, APASERV, for raising prices. She suspected it of corruption, as did most people: every manager hires an uncle, a niece and a grandmother, and they create "investments" which are not thought through. The water at the source, however, was checked thoroughly — "no-one wants to risk having a local epidemic." In contrast, she confirmed that a large city like Bucharest, in the dry, flat South, has poor tap water, with exceeding nitrates. Here, buying water would be madness, she told me. The events in the summer of 2016 contradicted her words. Her own mother continued to buy bottled water, despite her explaining that the water was fine. The water in the bottles is checked once a month, whereas the tap water is checked every two hours. This opens up discussions treated by Wilk (2006) in *Bottled water — the pure commodity in the age of branding*, and leads us to his discussion of the paradoxical interpretations of water: commodity vs. idea of water as a right/necessity. Part of the inhabitant's resistance towards the tap water comes from the fuzzy boundaries between market and non-market.

Many people shared this concern about water, and increasingly bought bottled water. However, that did not solve the problem of confidence — some of the water companies were thought to take water from radioactive sources, or to sell little more than tap water. I was repeatedly told that *Borsec* was good water, but *Izvorul Muntelui*, owned by Coca Cola, was not. Even more, *Borsec* in a glass bottle was better than *Borsec* in a plastic bottle. The same suspicion was raised with regard to neighbourhood shops which mineralized tap water, such as the one above. Having grown up in the neighbour, I myself have memories of walking towards this small shop with empty two litre bottles, only to return with them full of bubbly tap water, *sifon*, used by my parents to mix with syrup or wine (many Romanians had their wine mixed with water, be it white or red).



Mr. Bud, the H2B block administrator, in a local TV show titled: "The price of water dries our pockets"

An alternative in a city like Piatra-Neamț was to bring water from some of the few neighbourhood pumps, or from the neighbouring springs. I asked Ms. Miclăuș about the pumps between the blocks — as I intuited, those were from the old houses that were demolished for the building of the blocks, but most of them were connected to the pipe system of the city — the same water as the one from the tap. This put a new perspective on the daily effort of some inhabitants to take water from there (although, of course, they are saving money). Having said that, towards the mountains there were indeed many pumps that pull water out of the deep structures of the mountain (such as the one close to the lake), known for their good taste and purity. Mr. Bud shared that he loved to drink mountain water: when he went to Oaș to a wedding (in the North of the country), he saw that a nephew was coming from his basement with a big bottle of water — he had brought water from the springs. They know that one is purer. The water from the taps there also comes from the mountain, but it goes through a system that is not well put together; so, when it rains, it is not pure. If that is the case, they go straight to the mountain to harvest water for the home. "Well done to them, because they paid attention!" This carefulness towards water quality was clearly appreciated.

"But here in Piatra, you can't continue raising the price, and decreasing quality," Mr. Bud told me in his office in the H2B block. Having been the head of the Quality Control Institute for many years, Mr. Bud had a great deal of authority in the local community. He had been invited to a TV show that had requested his expert opinion. In his view, the price of 8,18 lei/m^3 was a huge amount, especially given people's small incomes. The percentage of people who could not afford it was around 80%, he told me — these were the people who needed to carefully calculate their money. The main cause of this high price was the bad approach of the Local Council, who approved the afore-mentioned EU programme. The project needed an amount of local contribution, which the company did not have. Therefore, it relied on people's pockets, by increasing the price of water every year. The programme involved changing the pipe work (from iron to polymer fibre), but it did not do so consistently and



efficiently. They relied on the price hike to cover the percentage that had to be given to the EU for the project. Four years in a row the prices went up, again and again, despite protests. This was the main cause of the price increase and they needed educated decisions to allow for the price to go down. Not only did that not happen, but in the last five years, the structure of APASERV had also changed.

In what way? — I asked Mr. Bud. He explained that it had gathered more and more companies — from Roman, from Târgu Neamț, from Bicaz. All these companies used to be independent, and had now been merged in a huge corporation that was difficult to control. At the same time, the mayor — "all the respect for someone who ends up being a mayor" — applied for a project without having any knowledge of what it implies. "Many of the councillors have no education — at most, seven years of schooling. That wouldn't be a problem, if they had common sense and natural wisdom," Mr, Bud told me in an upset tone. Many towns found themselves with new water circuits, which they did not use because they could not afford to connect to them — they still used the fountain, and carried water on their backs. On paper, many towns and villages were connected to the water system, but only on paper. This reorganisation was disastrous — and the incomes of the water company executives went up, higher and higher. This way, the company has even higher expenses. By now, the European project was finished, but they were still trying to raise the prices.

The rumours that circulated involved executives paying themselves more instead of allotting money to the water project. Since there was no assessments post-project made public, and given the sacrifice made through higher prices, one question rooted in people's minds — was the EU project worth it? From an EU standpoint, this is an essential question which I will take up again, when discussing the EU-funded wall insulation projects. While there is no question that people suffered by paying more, it is equally true that the EU contributed 75% into a project that showed little to no improvement to the quality of water, and the availability of water through the new circuits. Was it worth it?

In the case of his block (and most others in town), the contract with the water company was through the association, not the individual. Even if one wanted to stop the water connection with an individual apartment, one could not, because of the infrastructure of the pipes. Therefore, if someone had huge debts, everyone was in trouble, as discussed in the introduction. Within the block association, it was Mr. Bud who kept all the bills. He noticed that when it came to water, recent bills had been 25% larger than previous ones. That upset him, and he called the water company, asking to be in touch with someone responsible with the measurements. He gave them a detailed report of the averages, and told them that 100 m^3 is 25% more than what he usually measured. A few days later, someone from APASERV came in and replaced the metres, from the ones with a manual reading, to automatic ones. Mr. Bud would follow the difference in the coming months, to see if it was due to error by inhabitants, or a technical glitch.

"Whoever came up with the water metres made a big mistake," Mr. Bud told me. The error of measurement was huge for most readings — even if people were not lying, he feared that the machines were. They should be approved at the level of the state, but most of them are counterfeit: "In our block, 40 apartments out of 44 have metres. At least 15 of them are of a huge diversity, brought in from Turkey" (meaning: "fakes"). In the beginning of this relatively new practice, a few years before, they had to be approved by the Centre of Metrology. Some of them were, but more often than not, people used their own, without formal approval.

He was really upset because of this topic, and went back to his notes on the water metre reports: his neighbour, Mr. Costică gave 5 m^3 all the time — out of which he got hot water as well. Mr. Vieru, the colonel, only reported every three months — and then the law required him to put in the same number as the previous time. His next-door neighbour always gave him 2 m^3. He felt ignored and despised, after having put a great deal of effort in the relationship with him: "He is as tall as the door, how can he use 2 metres? It is what it is. Then Ms. Baghiu, 4,048204 m^3 — the opposite of all this: why would I need such a precise measurement?"

The Raicas, a family of three, always reported 2 metres of water only. He always would write 5, but they would never comment. For two years he had done this, but they never said anything. Three years ago, they had changed their metres — and came to him with the paperwork. He had an intuition that they had tweaked the metres (Mr. Raica works in this domain). Once he confronted him, and asked him how he washes for 2 metres. He told him he washes a little bit on the chest and around the armpits: "He stinks all the time. If I don't wash thoroughly, I don't feel good." Last, but not least, Ms. Tomin reports on 3 m^3 of cold water, and 0 m^3 of hot water: "She didn't wash the whole month? How can I have my numbers together… if another person comes in, they'll be in trouble… These random numbers turn into money."

Mr. Bud confessed that if he had a choice, he would take all the metres out: they only complicate things. Since their first uses, the water consumption has not gone down; on the contrary, it had become impossible to control —


NIVEA

> Out of all these reports, 5 are correct. What I decide goes into the computer, not what everyone says. In the house of a person living on the ground, on their own, no-one gets in — but here you live in a condominium, and you are responsible for a certain kind of sociality. 44 apartments, full of ideas, full of mad people. When I walk through that front door, I need to be aware of the fact that I will meet 44 other people. When I turn the water tap, I need to know that I share the pipe with others. You've been here since this morning — people have walked past these workers so many times — has anyone stopped and asked what's going on? Who pays for these people? This is life.

Mr. Albu, a fellow administrator from a nearby block, was initially very enthusiastic about the water metres, and continues to have faith in them. For him, they successfully made the difference between how much someone consumes in contrast to someone else. They were extremely popular, because people wanted to pay an amount that was close to what they actually used, in order to spend less. But unfortunately, he agrees that they often end up paying for more than they spent, because of the calculation method. What is the base for calculation? If it is not rigorously done, or applied to the reality on the ground, it can become an area for manoeuvres. There were companies who took advantage of the inhabitants. But Mr. Albu still had faith in the technology:

> I wouldn't blame it on the equipment — that one did its job. I believed in it, and I thought it could be a good idea. Any equipment has some errors. But if the human element, or the calculation technique, which is also made by a man… there you have problems. There are examples of bad companies, which created problems, and which led to the people's loss of belief in the system.

Going back to Mr. Bud's office, he explained to me that once he collects all the numbers that people give him, he adds them to a personal document he made for each inhabitant. He then adds all the cubic metres, and compares them to the number of inhabitants in that month. He then reports these sums to Locativ Serv. He prepares a paper with the comparison between the water company's reading and his own readings. If an inhabitant does not have a water metre (like himself), he calculates the numbers according to the law — 5,4 m^3 p.p. for cold water. If there are water losses (and there are always water losses), he goes back to the initial numbers and adjusts what people report — the purpose of this gesture is to minimize the difference between what people report and the grand total. "Or, if I am really upset, I take the entire difference, and I divide it between all the inhabitants — I divide the 100 m^3 between the 85 inhabitants." This means that the people who were fair and gave a correct report now have to pay for the amounts that the others get rid of. However, this not always due to bad intention: there are also situations in which the people are not guilty, like with technical incorrectness. No matter the reason, inhabitants were terribly frustrated with having to contribute to costs they were not responsible for, caused by either technical imprecisions or the dishonesty of others.



Water is important not only for washing and cooking, but also for warming up the apartments — the block's heating system relies on water to carry the heat from one apartment to another. Ms. Tomin comes into the office — she seems upset. She is wearing a brown hat, a brown scarf, a black coat and golden glasses, over which she looks at Mr. Bud strictly:

> Ms. Tomin: I can't even take a bath, the water is always so cold... Yesterday it was so cold, that I went to my daughter's and took a shower there. But the heaters are boiling! Is it a different pipe? At least we should have a schedule for warm water.
> Mr. Bud: But there's always hot water.
> Ms. Tomin: I left it to pour, and gathered half a bath tub — still cold!
> Mr. Bud: Around 8 am I shave — and it's cold. Then I brush my teeth, it turns a bit warmer; then I take a shower and it's hot. It takes a while.
> Ms. Tomin: Well, I took it from the bath tub, because it was clean, I warmed it up, and I washed like a cat. But otherwise, it's cold.
> Mr. Bud: That's because no-one uses it, and by the time it goes up, it takes a long time. When I use it, I activate it for everyone else. They simply don't use it!
> Ms. Tomin: I also don't use it apparently… I don't wash vegetables in the kitchen with warm water.



Mr. Bud starts counting the neighbours on her section of the block — they are either gone, or they have their own heating systems.

> Ms. Tomin: Well, again, when I needed to wash my hair, I went to my daughter's…
> Mr. Bud: At 8.30 in the morning, there's always warm water, because that's when I shave.
> Ms. Tomin: OK, then I will know, and I will wash at the same time. I don't want to leave the house. I realised this, indeed. I woke up one morning and I could wash my hair. And I thought to myself — Mr. Bud is using it now. On a separate note, please turn off the heating, it's unbearably hot… and I feel bad, because I paid this much…
> Mr. Bud: I stopped it — since the 20th of March, it's been out.
> Ms. Tomin: It's been too hot, are you trying to cook us?

This difficulty in maintaining a constant temperature throughout the building will be discussed in detail in *The Heater* chapter, but for now I want to point out the implications for hot water provision. During a block meeting, another neighbour complained that he gets no hot water in the kitchen. Mr. Bud explained that he lives on the 5th floor, and he always gets hot water. On the 6th floor, the man has been in Italy for 25 years, so "of course that if you live on the 7th floor, you get no hot water." This points to the very concrete consequences of inhabitants' absence from the building.

The absence of inhabitants and its infrastructural implications

The absence of inhabitants on certain floors was a problem with multiple implications. During a block meeting, the extent to which the block is inhabited was extensively discussed. Mr. Bud shared the results of his small analysis, showing that the degree of occupation is 39%: apart from 10 inhabitants who were gone, 3 were renters — *"and we all know what renters mean."* Apart from that, there were about 20 people who had houses in the countryside and were gone half the time. Therefore, for half a year, no-one lived in half of the block. The consequences were important when it came down to the general costs, because many expenses were per person. The accounting software's structure was such, that when one marked a '0' for an absence, that meant that one was not consuming anything. However, most people go back and forth between their house and their apartment, thereby affecting all expenses, especially water and energy costs ("and, well, we all know that they are large, and increasing").

On the same 6th floor, he emphasized the negative example of Ms. Filip, the neighbour who lived above him, and who de-dusted her carpet above his balcony, dusting his plants. He had received a written request from her. For the three months of October, November and December, she was asking to be counted as "0": absent. "But I saw her around these last couple of days," Mr. Poenaru said. "She is here all the time", Mr. Bud nodded approvingly. "I did see her around," another neighbour added in disapproval. Mr. Bud and his neighbour had had a long relationship, in which he deemed himself supportive. When her granddaughter was born prematurely, weighing 700 grams, she stayed at her apartment together with her daughter. At the time, she went to Mr. Bud, to announce the extra inhabitants — Mr. Bud, however, asked her to only count herself. As a personal rule, he never charges new-borns (despite being required by law to do so). Mr. Poenaru, also in the meeting, was another example. He would be gone for most of the summer, taking care of his countryside house, so that his

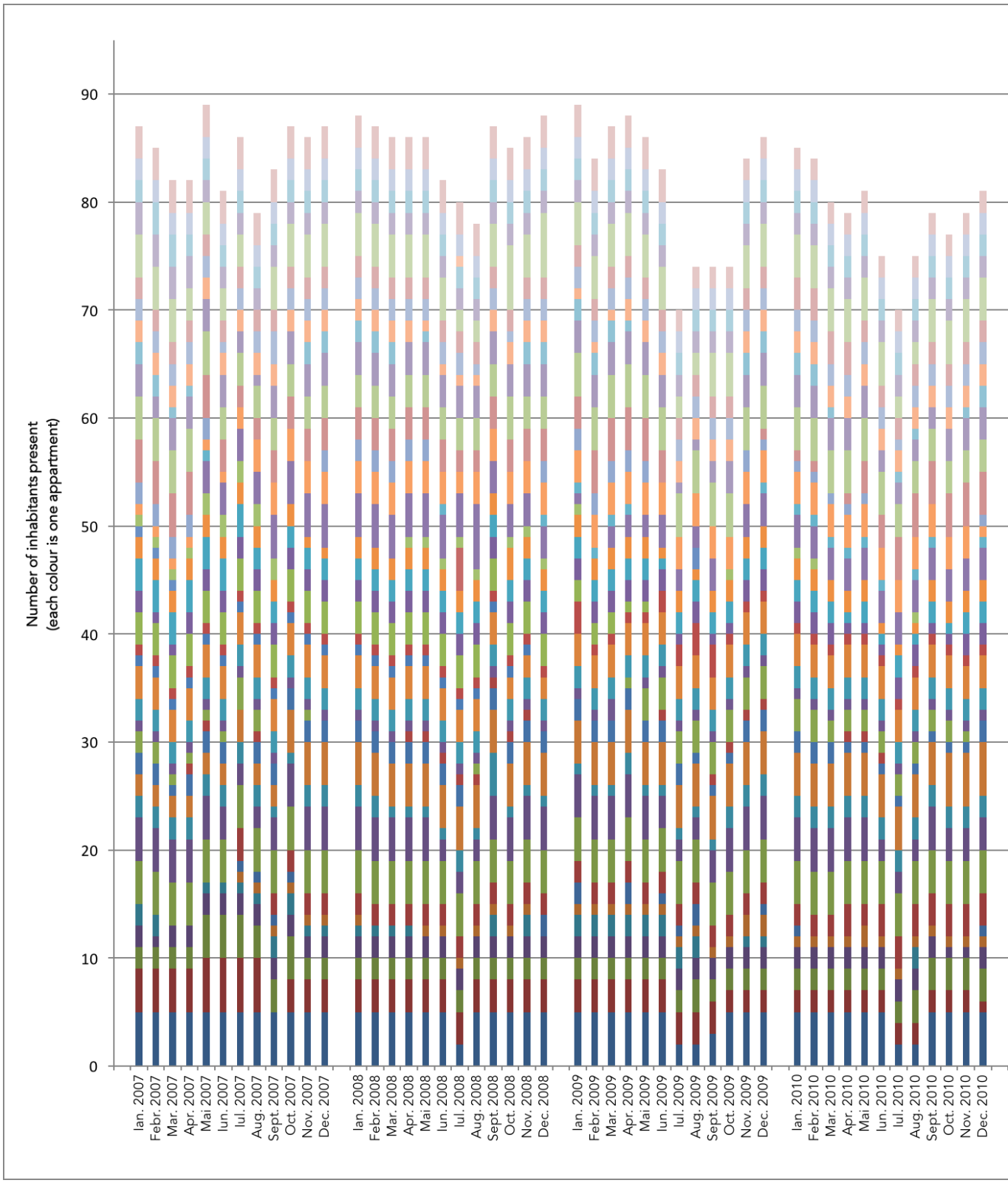
daughter, a medic in Brasov, could have a well-taken-care-of holiday home. Every 3 or 4 weeks, he would come to his apartment to water his plants. As he would park his car, Mr. Bud would already spot him from his office on the ground floor and come out to greet him, only to see him bring in a huge bag full of laundry. Mr. Poenaru, in his discussions with me, would judge such behaviour; nevertheless, I myself would often observe this process of laundry 'cycles.' Whereas typically Mr. Bud would close an eye to this cheeky process of 'water laundering,' sometimes, when upset, he would charge him for the water that he assumes was used in doing the laundry.

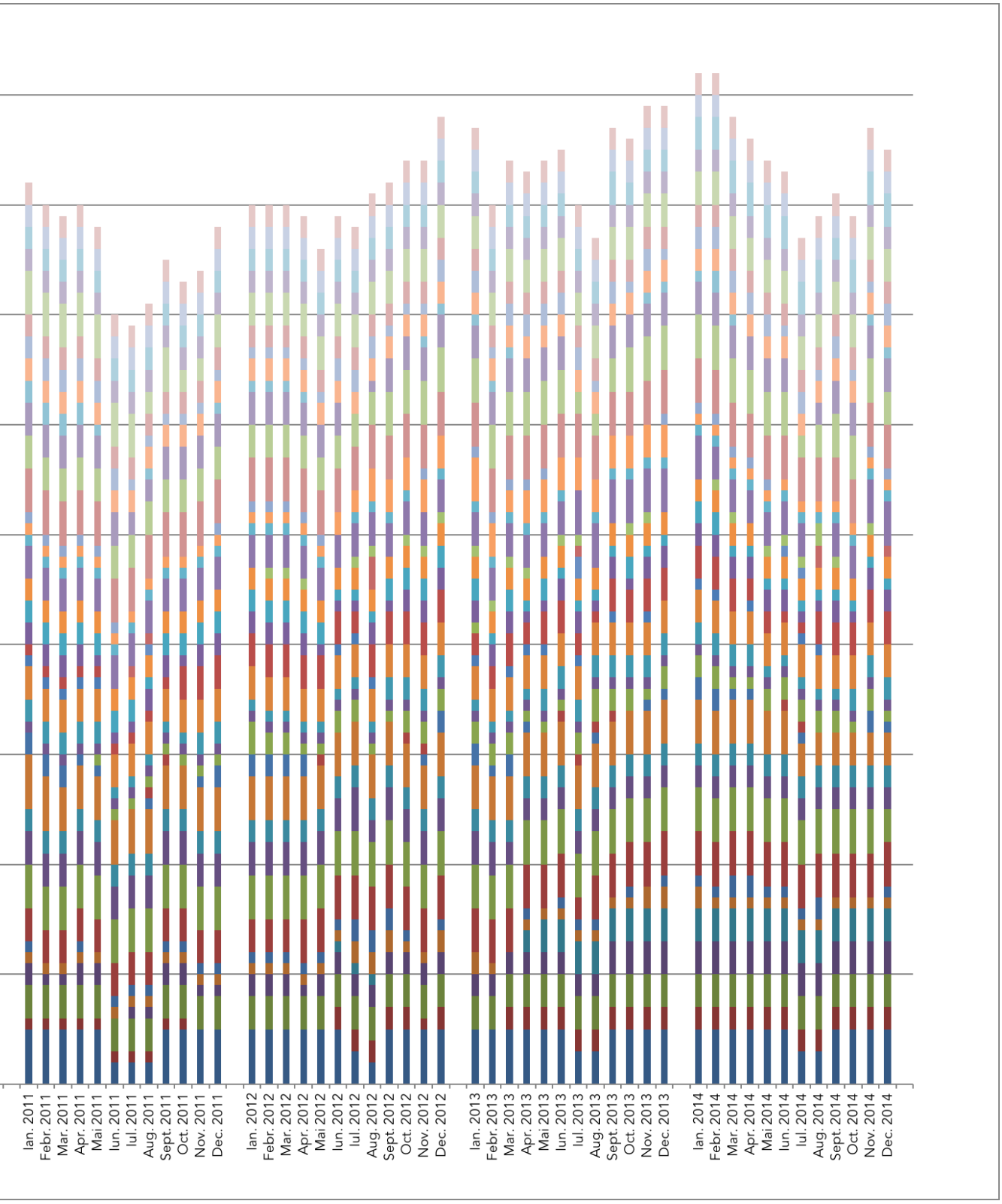
The payment of utilities, and of water specifically, becomes problematic at different times of the year. Indeed, during the summer, although some inhabitants would stay in the block, many others would spend the majority of their time in the countryside, in their parents' old houses. The absence was considerable, as can be seen in the plot on the following page. Each colour represents an apartment, with the size of the bars denoting the number of people reported as 'present' during each month, between 2007 and 2015. Each year, the month with the fewest total number of people present is either July or August (with the exception of 2012, when May had the fewest people). This trend persists across the years, despite the large fluctuations between years in the average number of people in the flat (presumably due to deaths and departures of old inhabitants, and arrivals of new inhabitants).

Another topic Mr. Bud raised during the meeting was the apartment on the 6th floor owned by Tapalagă (who had been in Italy for 24 years) and rented out, always to trouble makers, some of them taken out by the police. Most of them had debts of 10 million lei and higher, and would leave without paying those debts (leaving Tapalagă to pay). The most recent tenants were also suspicious — a bit coloured in the face (he is hinting at the fact that they are gypsies), they had not handed in a copy of their IDs, like the procedure asks. Instead, the man had a copy of a document released by the Bicaz police. Seeing this, Mr. Bud asked for birth certificates for the children, knowing that there are two. — *There are three!* — a neighbour points out. Indeed, Mr. Bud confirms. He also has a child with a handicap — poor thing — a child of his wife. That is not a problem, he would not charge for that child, Mr. Bud reassures, but he should know what is going on — What if they don't pay their water bills?

Water contamination in the city

On the 13th of February 2016, a water crisis in Piatra-Neamț made the national television news: Water in Piatra-Neamț infested with Clostridium bacteria, the same as the water systems of Dâmbovița and Prahova. The online text of the news pointed out that it was the same bacteria as Breaza and Pucioasa, where more people fell sick. In Piatra-Neamț, there was no official hospital reporting, but many people declared that they fell ill after drinking the water. The aired video begins with an elderly block inhabitant, saying that she had been in bed for many days. "After drinking the water, with everything in it… With abdominal pain, with headaches… My family doctor told me that my intestinal flora is gone. I have a bacterium." At the same time, the video shows a note on the front door of the block, stating: "The company APASERV informs its consumers that the water provided in the distribution network poses no risk for the consumption of the population." Specialists suspect that the bacteria might have settled in due to the high temperatures in winter this year. While the sub-prefect assures the TV reporters that the water provided to the citizens only comes from deep groundwater, and not from the infested lakes, inhabitants seem reluctant, and describe the colour and smell of the water as


Number of inhabitants present
(each colour is one appartment)
0
10
20
30
40
50
60
70
80
90
Ian. 2007
Febr. 2007
Mar. 2007
Apr. 2007
Mai 2007
Iun. 2007
Iul. 2007
Aug. 2007
Sept. 2007
Oct. 2007
Nov. 2007
Dec. 2007
Ian. 2008
Febr. 2008
Mar. 2008
Apr. 2008
Mai 2008
Iun. 2008
Iul. 2008
Aug. 2008
Sept. 2008
Oct. 2008
Nov. 2008
Dec. 2008
Ian. 2009
Febr. 2009
Mar. 2009
Apr. 2009
Mai 2009
Iun. 2009
Iul. 2009
Aug. 2009
Sept. 2009
Oct. 2009
Nov. 2009
Dec. 2009
Ian. 2010
Febr. 2010
Mar. 2010
Apr. 2010
Mai 2010
Iun. 2010
Iul. 2010
Aug. 2010
Sept. 2010
Oct. 2010
Nov. 2010
Dec. 2010


Ian. 2011
Febr. 2011
Mar. 2011
Apr. 2011
Mai 2011
Iun. 2011
Iul. 2011
Aug. 2011
Sept. 2011
Oct. 2011
Nov. 2011
Dec. 2011
Ian. 2012
Febr. 2012
Mar. 2012
Apr. 2012
Mai 2012
Iun. 2012
Iul. 2012
Aug. 2012
Sept. 2012
Oct. 2012
Nov. 2012
Dec. 2012
Ian. 2013
Febr. 2013
Mar. 2013
Apr. 2013
Mai 2013
Iun. 2013
Iul. 2013
Aug. 2013
Sept. 2013
Oct. 2013
Nov. 2013
Dec. 2013
Ian. 2014
Febr. 2014
Mar. 2014
Apr. 2014
Mai 2014
Iun. 2014
Iul. 2014
Aug. 2014
Sept. 2014
Oct. 2014
Nov. 2014
Dec. 2014

being dubious — most of them prefer to take water from the nearby spring. At the same time, a man is shown approaching the dirt gathering on the surface of the lake.

City Hall tried to ameliorate the crisis by providing the elderly with bottles of water, but resources were limited, and the crisis extended over many weeks. In March, a local newspaper read: <Unprecedented damage in the water system! The entire city might be affected!> It soon became an issue of expertise — no-one knew how to fix this, and conflicting opinions and interests delayed the process. For most of my research participants, this has engendered great stress. They often told me on the phone that they are tired of buying bottled water, but afraid to use tap water — when they tried to boil it, a dirty foam would gather on the surface. For the elderly, who have limited resources, and strict health restrictions, the water crisis was symptomatic of poor governance.

In the meantime, Dragoș Chitic, the mayor of Piatra-Neamț, was very active on Facebook. Almost each day, he would write a post updating the inhabitants on the work being done on the water circuit, and putting pressure on them through social media, rushing them to find a solution to the infestation. As a comment to his update, someone wrote in disparaging tone: "I don't think we want to continue drinking from Bâtca. We've lost faith in this corporation that takes our money and gives us bacteria in the tap. At least the deep-level water in Vaduri is safer." As a response, he assured her that once the problem is solved, there is no reason to distrust the water company. He himself would drink tap water when the two sources are combined again. Other Facebook users were suspicious of the delay with which the reparations were taking place in the middle of an election campaign: "Is a pipe really breaking each day? Are these reparations not aimed at playing with our minds? The common man does not know that APASERV is not under the Mayor's coordination, but under that of the Local Council. Is this not a political game?" Another comment, which received many 'likes,' followed in the same line: "I continue to believe that the water distribution problems seem to be pieces of the puzzle aimed at sabotaging the mayor. […] I think the avalanche of 'faults' will continue." An inhabitant from abroad said: "I'm afraid to come home with my husband, when he will see that there is no running water in the city I take pride in, as a European, beautiful, civilized city!"

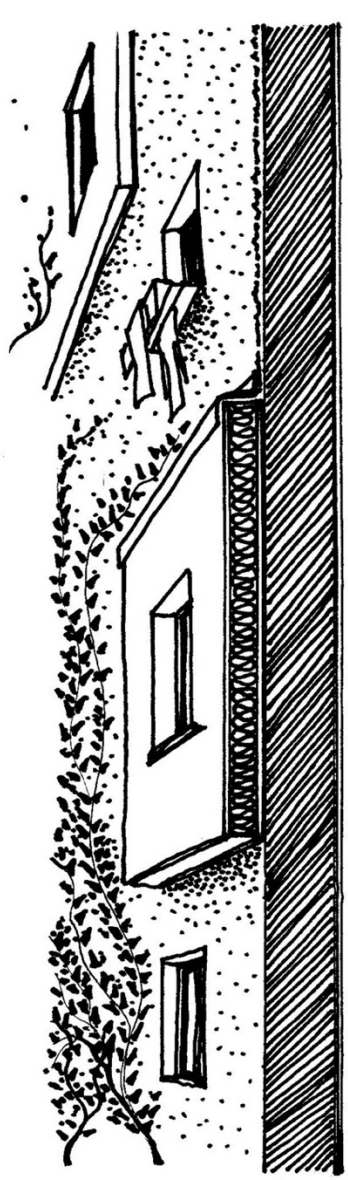
***

Anthropologists tend to regard water as a "total social fact" (Mauss, 1969), that cuts across virtually all domains of society: "religious, juridical, and moral, which relate to both politics and the family; likewise, economic ones, which suppose special forms of production and consumption, or rather, of performing total services and distribution" (Mauss, 1969, p. 5). While this approach has emphasized the importance of the topic, it hasn't always been productive: water is often regarded in broad, abstract terms, and it is linked with notions of connectivity and flows, which don't always do justice to social and material life. Instead, in this chapter, I wanted to point out that something as simple as getting water from a tap depends on a complex infrastructure and a bureaucracy ranging from the inhabitant's association to the local and national governmental actors. Water, threatened with losses (such as leakages) and with contamination (such as the above-mentioned bacteria) is a surprisingly unstable commodity and natural resource. Water quality emerges as a social construction — if indeed a 'fluid' one — which is shaped by the social and political climate in Piatra-Neamț. Consequently, inhabitants' suspicion of the water quality has a lot to do with the lack of trust in current governance.

The suspicion towards the local government and the water company stem from moments in which infrastructure fails their expectation, and no-one is there to help. This chapter has framed this mistrust in contrast to the initial socialist enthusiasm towards building the water infrastructure, and the rapidly occurring issues such as leaking. Given the aging pipe system, these issues repeated with higher frequency. As the state retreated from the maintenance of the blocks of flats, inhabitants were left with both the responsibility, and with limited funds to re-build the water infrastructure of their block, knowing that the pipes they were fixing could easily have other, invisible problems along the way. The role that the pipes themselves have in providing/limiting access to water, and the quality of it, is a paramount one.

In anthropological research, although a great emphasis has been placed on big water crises, such as lack of urban water infrastructure or floods and water refugees, little attention has been paid to everyday engagements with water, and the small crises which do not attract the headlines, but which are widely distributed. By "following" the water in order to illuminate the "human and social context" (Appadurai, 1988), I hope to contribute to discussions of non-human actors in anthropology. It has been argued that water plays as much an active part within social systems as it does within ecological systems (Wagner, 2015). Latour has argued that the durability of a social system depends as much on the objects included within them, as on the social ties among the human actors within these systems (Latour, 1993). If that is the case, what do we make of technical systems, which include water, that literally corrode the pipes as well as the social relations around them?

In the following chapter, the topic of water will return in a multifaceted way. On the one hand, the water that is released through internal processes of cooking and bathing condenses on the walls of the apartments, even more so now that thermal insulation with polystyrene is a common practice. Research participants have left on holiday, only to return finding a wide layer of mould on their newly insulated walls. On the other hand, water that comes from the exterior of the block, from rain on the top floors, or from the ground water in their basements, threatens the well-being of the building and its inhabitants. In this context, it is paramount that wall cladding, one of the most striking recent additions to the Romanian blocks of flats, is analysed in detail, not only as an aesthetic transformation, but also, very practically, as a functional addition that has complex consequences, both positive (energy saving) and negative (long-term building degradation or short-term dangers).



The Wall Insulation

On the 30th of October 2015, the *Colectiv* nightclub in Bucharest caught fire during a concert of the metal band *Goodbye to Gravity*. The club was set in a previous shoe factory, in the city centre. The fire killed 64 people: 26 on the spot, and 38 in the hospitals during days following the fire. The fire was never considered an accident. The owner had two more clubs, which had both caught fire in the past, but with no victims. On the 1st of November, a march of solidarity in Bucharest called out in unison: "Corruption kills". The next day, 35,000 people protested in Bucharest, asking for the resignation of the prime minister, which did eventually resign. Even after his resignation, they continued to protest, 35,000 in Bucharest; 10,000 in Timișoara, and even about 20 teenagers in the small town of Piatra-Neamț. Why did the fire hit such a nerve? What did the feeble infrastructure of a burning shoe factory mean in this context? How did the material condition of the urban fabric relate to the social difficulties people faced after the fall of state socialism?

Days and weeks after the accident, as the number of deaths due to severe burns increased, it was clear that the Romanian state didn't have the infrastructure to care for the wounded, who were flown to several EU countries, and often didn't make it to their destination. Months after the accident, it was revealed that the Romanian hospitals who did host the wounded were not prepared, and had diluted their disinfectants hundreds of times. Whereas this took time to uncover, something else alarmed Romanians all over the country. Following the fire, the Romanian General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations conducted more than 1000 inspections throughout Romania, closing hundreds of bars, clubs, cinemas, etc. They had found 3200 violations — lacking fire permits, firefighting equipment, etc. Videos of burning blocks of flats in Baku started spreading online, warning Romanians against the polystyrene that most blocks of flats were covered in. Whereas in principle, the material should be fireproofed, architects and firemen all over the country were warning that it was extremely flammable.

Safety legislation was in place, but, as the *Colectiv* fire had shown, it was not being well-regulated. In the case of the *Colectiv*, the band's pyrotechnics had ignited the club's flammable polyurethane acoustic foam. In the case of the blocks of flats, doubts were shed on the use of polystyrene. The caption of the article below reads: "VIDEO — WE ARE ALL IN DANGER! SEE HOW THE THERMALLY INSULATED BLOCKS OF FLATS ARE BURNING! We were shocked to see that a club could burn in such a way, but few of us know what material the blocks are thermally insulated with. See in the images below how these materials burn. After we showed you how the acoustic foam of the club burned in the case of the Bucharest club Colectiv, today we will show you terrifying images with the façade of a block of flats, burning in just a few minutes. The block of flats is from Baku and is thermally rehabilitated, like tens of blocks of flats in Bucharest. This fire is not the only one, there were more fires due to this material in Budapest".

This strongly resonated with an article that appeared in the Guardian in 2011, titled "Lessons from Romania: ticking housing bomb". The author (incidentally, Emil Constantinescu, Romania's ex-president) described the transition from housing as entitlement for all, provided by the state during socialism, towards mass privatization in the early 1990s of state owned homes to the sitting tenants at extremely low costs. Like in the rest of Europe, housing felt the impact of the financial crisis. Romanians

faced declining incomes, rising costs of living, energy price increases, and the loss of benefits and subsidies. Additionally, they faced the challenges of a largely dilapidated housing stock, frequent floods and other natural disasters, rising energy use, etc. Most importantly, he argued that they were not prepared to face these challenges: "The new homeowners were not ready to take responsibility for their decaying apartment blocks, nor had the financial, legal or social means to do so" (E. Constantinescu, 2011).

In this context, the EU funds for building rehabilitation were very well received. In 2009, the EU adopted a wide-ranging package on climate change that member states had to achieve by 2020, including a twenty percent cut in domestic energy consumption[15]. To promote energy-efficient housing, the Commission initiated national and local co-financing schemes worth more than 120 million Euros[16]. Among them, the Energy Efficient Building European Initiative (E2B EI) was specifically created to "improve the energy performance in buildings"[17]. City councils throughout Romania started to implement E2B EI right away: the EU provided 50% of the funding; the Romanian government, 30%; the inhabitant was left with 20% to cover. Between 2010 and 2012, the City Hall of Piatra-Neamț commissioned a few building rehabilitations, especially on the main boulevards of the city centre. Both the inhabitants and the constructors took issues with the process, as I will describe in detail in this chapter - among inhabitants' complaints, there were the unreasonably high cost of the work (which meant that 20% became a huge amount) and the low quality of the work.

Having said that, most inhabitants did not even manage to access the funds, which quickly ran out. Still, seeing that their neighbours, who had managed, were paying considerably less, they took initiative and started contacting construction companies themselves. The contracts were often established with individual apartments, without getting permission from the State Inspectorate in Constructions or City Hall. This way, bit by bit, the city's urban fabric gathered layers and layers of polystyrene, one more colourful than the other. Whereas the Romanian legislation framed the rehabilitation projects in terms of both "increasing the energetic performance" and "ameliorating the urbanistic appearance of the cities", as the EU policy trickled down to the local level, and the markets got a taste of the potential of this new material, polystyrene was becoming pervasive, and unaesthetic.

In this chapter, I will assess how this EU energy saving policy affected both social life and infrastructure in urban Romania. Among the predominant social and material issues related to insulation, are the degradation of buildings due to lack of air permeability of the polystyrene used in the insulation, but also fire danger because of the high flammability of this material and the occurrence of several health problems as the result of mould in apartments. Another important issue I would like to raise in this chapter is how energy saving policies such as wall cladding, that transgress the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the home, have resulted in a production of new forms of status distinction and social fragmentation in the local community. What was involved in the actual rehabilitation of these blocks of flats? What was the experience of the constructors who implemented it? How about the inhabitants? How did this urge to cover the buildings in polystyrene begin in the first place?

[15] EU Climate Package Explained. Retrieved May 2, 2012. From http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7765094.stm.
[16] Energy Strategy for Europe (European Commission). Retrieved July 21, 2012 from http://ec.europa.eu/energy/index_en.htm.
[17] E2B2 Association, Retrieved October 14, 2012. From http://www.e2b-ei.eu/default.php.



A constructor's perspective

It was 7.30 a.m., raining cats and dogs, on a cold November morning, when I entered the building just outside of town of a construction company that was commissioned by the City Hall to thermally insulate the blocks of flats in the centre. These buildings, called the D blocks, were some of the first buildings made in Piatra-Neamț, constructed specifically for the workers at the Săvinești factory. They are prominent — 10 floors tall, and in the centre. People had told me that City Hall insulated these with EU funds, because they were on the main road, and thus very visible. Also, they used to be in rather poor condition (see below). After being insulated, they were the subject of great criticism, both from the press and from inhabitants: the work was poorly done, they said, and expensively so. They had been insulated for the mere purpose of electoral propaganda, everyone said. Sometimes the work was purposefully left unfinished, so that they would continue in the next electoral period ("blackmailing" people into voting for them).

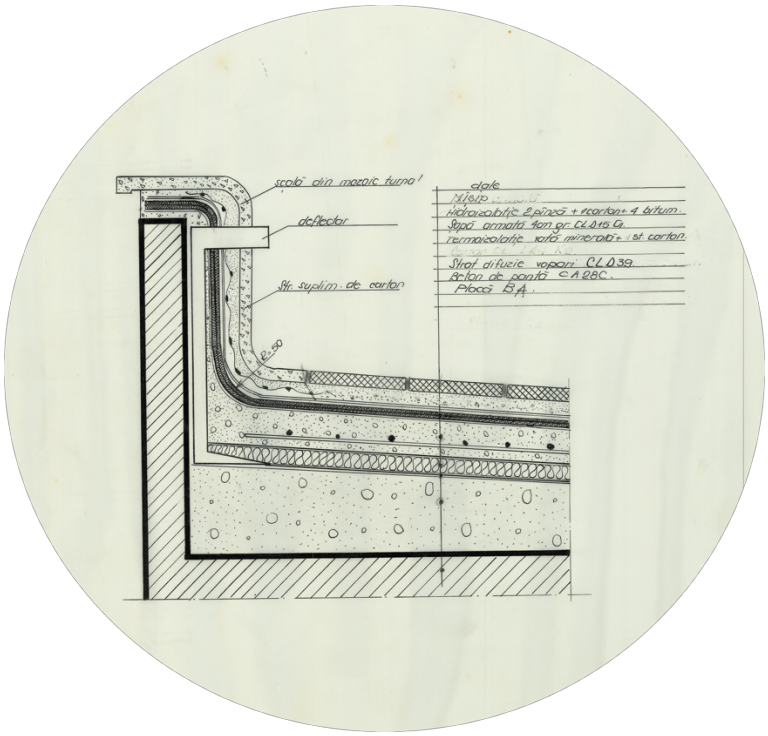


The D blocks in the 2000s

I got in touch with the constructor who insulated the blocks through the father of a friend, who was the president of the County Council, but also had a car repair shop. Each day, before going to the Council, he would check on the everyday chores at the shop. At 7.00 am, I was to go to this repair shop, for him to introduce me to the constructor. For this reason, the constructor was very trustful of me, and allowed me with no hesitation to place by my bulky recorder on his desk. He was surprisingly critical, attacking the use of cheap materials that the City Hall had encouraged. He particularly accused polystyrene as being a poor choice for a material. Why? I asked him. Because it does allow the building to breathe. "*It is like putting a Nylon bag on someone's head.*" The moist that comes out of the bathrooms and kitchens especially goes into the building's structure and so it can degrade. The moist inside, especially at night, can reach up to 80%.

For the blocks of flats that are entirely made of concrete, polystyrene insulation was a disaster, he pointed out. "Concrete is permeable - much too permeable. It has no thermal properties. It therefore

maintains no warmth. The transfer of heat is thus easily made, and it stumbles across the insulation layer, this rendering moisture, and then mould." The technique he recommended instead consisted of two walls, with insulation in between. However, this would have to be done from the very beginning, like in the case of the 4001 block original construction plan:



He placed the D blocks he had insulated, in contrast to houses he was working on at the time. Nowadays, a house cannot be sold without it being evaluated from a thermal point of view, he explained: it is essential to assess how well it is built in terms of heat transfer. However, the new specialists who determine the energetic value of a building rarely know their job. Unless they are trained as traditional constructors, they won't know much about the thermal properties of a house, which also depend on orientation and shape for instance (see vernacular knowledge on house thermal properties in *The House and the Block*). He pointed out that Romanian peasants would know more about this — traditional materials (such as a mix of mud and cow dung) combined with wood would do a much better job — but authorities don't allow it, concrete still reigns. How would wall insulation affect a building's 'life'?

> I'm not sure that insulation would prolong a building's life; it might shorten it. We don't have a history of insulation work; it's relatively new. We don't have buildings which have been insulated for 20 years. Outside the country, this doesn't happen too much. And expanded polystyrene does not have too long a life. There are not many producers, so the quality is quite weak.

Given that one rarely saw a block that was not at least partially covered in this material in Romania in the last few years, this seemed like a ticking bomb.



The operation of insulating needs to take into account many factors. For instance, the plasters one would use would differ according to the surface. On a big surface, one needs to make grids — otherwise the newly installed layer cannot be uniform, however much one tries. The lack of uniformity on the buildings he insulated in the centre was, wherever possible, aesthetically fixed by means of colour grids. *"If you end up with a simple plaster in one colour, you can see the lack of uniformity. You must have noticed, no?"* Once the building is insulated, it still needs a few spaces to breathe through — for instance, it needs a few tiles on the roof which allow the building to breathe, or, at least, ventilation grids. In contrast, in many kitchens I saw during my research, the small round ventilation holes were covered in paper, so that the kitchen would stay warm. By his books, this was a terrible idea: *"It's about a building's behaviour; when you insulate, you need to be careful with ventilation. If you don't have good ventilation, it's a catastrophe."*

The discussion of ventilation in Romania came about when *termopan* (double grazed windows) became popular. It was then, that people saw moist on their walls and windows much more than before, when the wooden window frames were not as intact. I have met inhabitants who purposefully left the old wooden frames, after hearing stories from their neighbours, about leaving for one month and returning to find 10 cm of mould on the walls of their kitchen. Interestingly enough, in the case of double glazed windows, the initiative came from the people, and not from an institution, such as the EU, through City Hall: people could feel its efficiency, and see its visual impact, he told me. I asked him about the block he had worked on:

> I felt sick at the thought of the block I worked on. It was terrible. People were difficult, few of them had common sense. But they did say yes, last year I was paying 300, 400 lei [on heating], now I pay 200 lei (approx. £40). When it's for free, it's really hard to work with inhabitants.

For instance, the inhabitants would be upset if the constructors didn't begin on their side. While the constructor was telling my how difficult inhabitants were, I could not help but think of my discussions with those very inhabitants, who were baffled at the slowness of the work, and the superficiality of the approach. I invited him to tell me more about those controversial blocks. He was more that wiling to get a rock off his chest. Working with the City Hall meant that they were paid with great difficulty, and that there were many compromises: they wanted to build as cheaply as possible, despite having a large budget. He would then speak to the architects of the buildings, trying to create a grid from the insulation process, in order to break down the big surfaces. However, there was never enough money. An element of pride in his talk was the fact that at least he hadn't attached the polystyrene with mortar, but with polyurethane foam. Being foam, it would allow for the transfer of heat.

An important problem he pointed out, and that I then followed through, was the fact that birds and rats could eat through the polystyrene and go underneath. Interestingly enough, when I asked him for the wall insulation drawings, he told me that there were none. It was several months later, after many insistences in City Hall, that I managed to get a hold of the paperwork.



City Hall's perspective

I thus went to the City Hall and ask about the project documentation. I was warned by many of my research participants that I would be kicked out through the front door, which actually happened, but I managed to get back through the back window, and not only once. The first time I went, I stood in line in the Urbanism section, and a temp, younger than me, was extremely dismissive. I had little chance of getting my hands on anything, because the files were already in the archive, she told me, and the City Hall no longer had a budget for thermal insulation. "That, I know, but I would like to speak to someone in the urbanism department, not only about thermal insulation, but also about the city's maps." "Wait here." I waited for 15 minutes, only to be brought to the chief architect's office, after handing in my ID details to the guard at the entrance.

The chief architect, looking like he came straight out of the 60s, with grey long hair, and fair blue eyes, was talkative, and seemingly open. He told me from the onset that he wasn't in charge when the wall insulation was put into practice — he was relatively new in the City Hall, and he was concerned with other things, such as remodelling the city centre — making a big square, with a street underneath (which took place, and was heavily criticised). His next ambition was closing off one of the main streets in the centre, and turning it into a square. Apart from that, in line with EU policies on noise control, he was excited about giving me documentation about noise. I gave him a USB stick for whatever document he deems relevant, but he was reluctant, not least because so many trees had been recently cut to make room for the new parking lots, and inhabitants had been complaining about the street noise bothering them much more than before — *that* was something to tackle, I thought. All in all, I left home after a convivial conversation, feeling like I learned little about what I set out I uncover.





A few days later, while I was in a supermarket, a woman in her 50s approached me. With short, grey hair, and a shy appearance, she told me she had seen me in City Hall, and that she also noticed that I received little of the information I was hoping to get. She told me discretely that she could help me, and that I should come the next day and ask for Ms. Popescu in the Urbanism Department. With genuine regret in her voice, she told me I should have picked another town for my study: the colours of all the patches of polystyrene unequally covering the blocks were out of control, and the city was "turning ugly and uncivilized".

The next day, I went to the City Hall to look for Ms. Popescu. She looked tired and stressed, and told me she couldn't talk to me because she was busy finishing work on something that was sent in the previous day with the ridiculous demand that it be finished in one day. She asked me to return the next day, but before that, to tell her what I need exactly. She was looking at a fixed point in the wall, listening carefully, but also shyly avoiding my gaze. I told her I was interested in anything about the thermal insulation process, especially the projects themselves. Additionally, any documentation on the history of the blocks could help me. She told me they used to have a register with each year in which the blocks were made — but another employee had it, and they left (so often during my research, documentation was misplaced, destroyed by water leaks, etc.).

First of all, she told me that she didn't want to be blamed for taking initiative in this, and doing things by herself — everything had to be done through an official request. We thus headed towards the chief architect's office, where we found no-one. He was in the office across, where the atmosphere was very busy. He came out to speak to us, slightly annoyed and distracted: then and there, Ms. Popescu turned quiet. I then reiterated that I would like to ask for access to documentation about the EU rehabilitation projects. He told me there was nothing — there should have been yearly plans, but the project got cancelled, so they didn't get to do much. Then Ms. Popescu became firm, if slightly upset — "But there were buildings rehabilitated under that EU project! And we could show her the documentation". "Yes, but by now it is in the archives and I don't have the time to look for it. I'm sorry. I really can't help you." He smiled a friendly smile and his light blue eyes really did seem to be regretful.

The moment he left, Ms. Popescu gently told me that she would look for the files, and that I should return the next morning. She was really sorry for not being able to help me then and there, and that this would probably take a while. On my way home, I found it incredible that, however friendly the chief architect might have been, he seemed to be so reluctant to share anything on the insulation projects with me. While being so preoccupied with the changes he wanted to make to the already taken care of city centre, blocks were crumbling down at the periphery. I called Mr. Bud to ask him to postpone our meeting the next day, because I was in the process of finding documentation for the insulation projects. Thinking that I was referring strictly to his block, he told me there was none. Although the City Hall had a programme that allowed blocks of flats that invested money in rehabilitation to get a tax exemption, the procedure itself was so expensive, that they would have lost money, instead of saved some. Thus, from this perspective, H2B stood in fuzzy illegality, just like the heating system.

The next day, back at the City Hall, I signed in, gave my ID to the guard, and waited for Ms. Popescu, who came in rushed and told me she would help me, but in bits and pieces, because it was a very busy day. There was a Council Meeting that day (as it happened once a month), and the place was a mess.

She took me to her office, which was very dusty, with a smell of mould pervading the air. She apologized for the mess. It was indeed impressive to see how much paperwork was stacked in such a small place. She tidied a desk, dusted a chair, and even put a piece of paper on the chair to make sure I don't gather too much dust: "Sorry that I'm setting you up like a student, but if someone comes in… I don't know how things are like abroad, but here they are very un-transparent. All sorts of things are being done outside the rules. I will help you, but I have to be very careful with what I say. And I have to be upfront with you, my boss might not collaborate in all aspects. But I will help you as much as I can, bit by bit, in time." I told her that I understood, and that in any case I would keep her anonymous.

I sat down at the desk, and she gave me a piece of legislation which clarified what kind of construction work required authorization from the City Hall. Her office was in charge of releasing these authorizations, working on huge files of paperwork each day, while people came in and out of the office. She took me through the law step by step, towards the category that described the exceptions, which stated that the buildings which do thermal insulation and are under 3 floors (P+2) were excepted from authorizations. "Hmm, P+2…", I say. "Well, are those in town P+2? No. Then draw your own conclusion." Indirectly, she was telling me her office had not released authorization for anything outside of the insulation programme (including Mr. Bud's insulation).

She also showed me the Urban General Plan (PUG), which was made in 1990, and had been prolonged without revisions, despite the city's morphology changing drastically. Seeing that I was taking photographs, she brought me a nicer copy. She asked me to return on Monday, around 10.00 a.m., hoping that her colleague would give me access to the archive, to check the files of the insulation process. "You will see the files, they should contain a thorough rehabilitation plan, not just the façade. Unless you make sure that the infrastructure is also sturdy, the heating itself is not efficient. It is even problematic." On multiple occasions, she made the same reference — that 'rehabilitation' usually stopped at the level of the facades, and that the inner mechanisms of the building were ignored, and left to degrade in an invisible manner. "This is all one big compromise. It's a piece of work with materials that won't last in time." She continued to look for legislation, but could not find the continuation of the paragraph she had just shared with me. "I have a saying, <nothing is nothing>".

In the meantime, at least five people come in and out of her office. Some came with invoices to be signed, which she would sign, one after another, without having the time to look at them. Others asked about intricate issues of land division. At some point, a colleague called and she was on the phone for 15 minutes. She was friendly and charming: "OK, after you see the railway, you take a right. Then head North… You don't know which way North is? You haven't brought a compass with you? Always bring a compass." As she went in and out of her office, her colleague, a young, slender and talkative lady, took the time to explain to me why this was such a hassle, and how hard it was to finish something (usually, authorization documentation) with so many other things happening at once, in a chaotic department. She asked me if I was Ms. Fodor, and I said no. She had been told that a certain Ms. Fodor will come to gather certain information. I then realized that what I did — walking into City Hall, and asking for information — is just not done, unless someone introduces you. Perhaps that's why Ms. Popescu stopped me and offered her help?



Ms. Popescu came back, and suggests that I go talk to the firemen, to ask about polystyrene regulations. It turned out that it is highly flammable — indeed, something to worry about after the Colectiv fire. We headed out of her office, and she told me I should put on my coat, as we would go into a separate building. First, we stopped at the Cadastre office, to ask about the city maps. She walked in, to talk to the person in charge. As I waited for her, I noticed files on top of files on the hallway, forming stacks of paper everywhere. That's what the City Hall was actually. Corridors and files up to the ceiling. In front of the next door, she stopped with her hand on the handle and told me this was where all the paperwork had been done for the rehabilitation projects: for the contracts, for following the actual wok, everything. As we walked in, she first discussed a few of her own professional concerns. I was baffled by this room: walls covered in wood, and papers everywhere — on the floor, on the shelves, on the desk. Ms. Popescu introduced me to a reluctant man, in charge of all this paperwork, and told him I would write the official permission on Monday, but that she would like him to listen to what I might need. "But then she can come back on Monday, right?" "Please take 5 minutes for this now." "OK…"



When I told him what I needed, he brought a big stack of files that he then gave to me. In the process of searching, he was holding falling files on his head, while 10 other files were falling from the tall shelves. He swore (at the files), frustrated with this whole search. When I asked for an example from Mărăței, he really didn't look very happy. I told him I would return them on Monday, and I asked him if the rehabilitation was done as a whole, including the pipework. "That was the initial plan, but… You know, it's impossible to do anything with people. They want everything done for them, and for free. What a mess, this rehabilitation. Some blocks still haven't paid (2009-2013)." "But I thought they were supposed to pay first." "No, only to show proof that they started raising money. And now they dare make complaints. That they have mould I don't know what not. Of course they do, if they don't air the

rooms! I'm not going to also educate them now! The constructor told them when they finished the work".

He told me that each block was insulated by a different company — "If you look at each block, the constructor left a square of colour: the initial colour of the block. He then looked at the hand-written notes in the rehabilitation files, which he kept for himself. His colleague, across the desk, told me that the City Hall shouldn't even be doing these kinds of things for people. People themselves should take care of their property. "I told you just how much we had to pay for cutting those two trees in our back yard, for example. Others would expect City Hall to come in and do it for free". At the same time, inhabitants in the Mărăței neighbourhood were disappointed at how City Hall does nothing for them: they are the ones planting the flowers, cutting the grass, etc. They often refer to the past, when these things were very well taken care of by the City Hall during the socialist regime. Returning to Ms. Popescu's office, she had printed out a map of the two blocks in the centre that were well rehabilitated with City Hall's help: "This was done better, but the ones around them… I won't say anything."



I told her that I managed to get my hands on the D block, and block 140. "But we didn't authorize the 140, I told you" I was worried that I might have forgotten, but I don't think she had actually told me that. Instead, she told me they only authorized the Ds and a few others (vs the list I got from Investments office - compare). How is that possible, if I have the files saying the City Hall contracted the work? I built up the courage and I asked her. Her answer came swiftly: "There's not a lot more I can tell you, but you should speak to the Inhabitant's Associations." I thanked her for all her help, and she shared: "I saw that the chief architect had no intention to collaborate and was hiding something. So, this is not without its problems." After the adventurous process of knocking on all possible doors of the City Hall, I went home to analyse the rehabilitation files I had managed to access. I had chosen the files from a few blocks of flats: each one in different parts of the city, each one carried out with



One of the D blocks after rehabilitation

different constructors. To my surprise, each file was identical, despite the different characteristics of each block. Hundreds of papers, full of signatures, stamps and tables with materials, quantities, prices — all identical to the previous one.

The City Hall in Piatra-Neamț had been the topic of great criticism: it was left bankrupt after the mandate of Gheorghe Stefan, a mayor now currently in jail for traffic of influence. Stefan was responsible for a great deal of the urbanistic changes in the city - especially for making parking lots, but also for a gondola which would take tourists directly from the train station to the top of one of the surrounding hills. Nonetheless, my research participants were wary of the infrastructural work being done — "it's easy to steal when you deal with cement — no-one can check the foundation of a new work, to see if the amounts were respected." Other City Hall accountants testified to that. They considered the rehabilitation projects in the same category, in which the count of resources was particularly flimsy, to the advantage of the authorities — for instance, when the amount of adhesive which keeps the polystyrene plaques on the walls was halved (hence the need to build cheaply as mentioned by the constructor).

The climax of the mistrust towards City Hall came when the Central Market, the centre of the sales of fruit, vegetables, meat or cheese, burned to the ground in suspicious conditions. The sellers lost all their stocks, as they didn't have any insurance. They were not the only ones without an insurance — the City Hall itself did not have the resources to re-build the market, which was left as can be seen in the image above for more than a year. Slowly, the space was cleaned, and the sellers came back, using improvised stalls. Some people suspected the City Hall of burning it themselves, so that they could sell the land to dodgy developers.



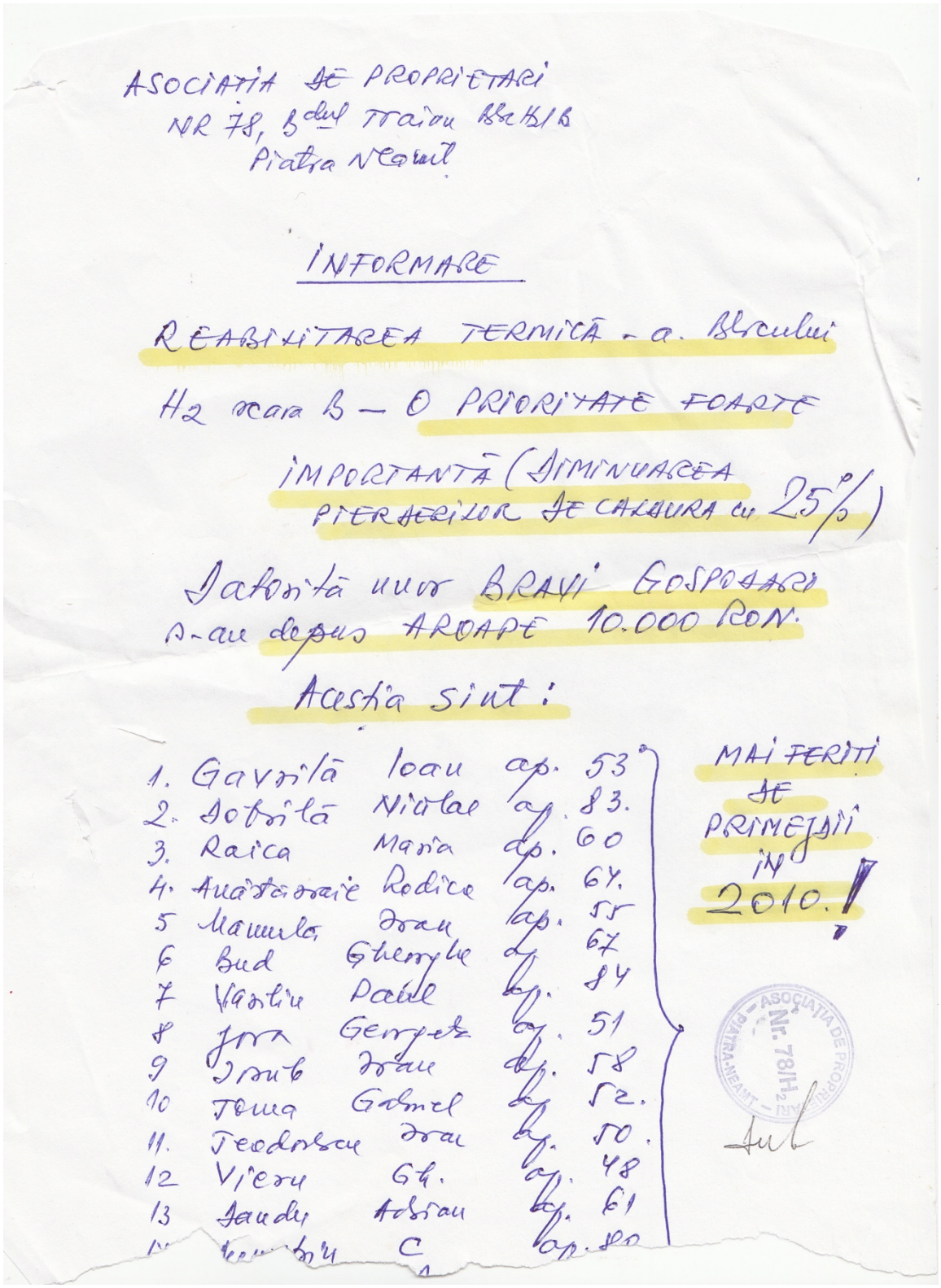
In the meantime, the State Inspectorate in Construction was not appreciated either, given that they had allowed the city to change so drastically. When I went to talk to the Inspectorate's director, he gave me a stack of legislation; when I asked him how that legislation is implemented with regards to the rehabilitation throughout town, he told me light-heartedly that it's out of control: "You know what they say, you can't oppose progress", it will happen no matter what. He then suggested they were understaffed, and could not afford to deal with something more than complaints about renovation works that were threatening the structure of the building (as discussed in The House and the Block). For any other building transformation, "progress" was bound to take happen and there was little they could do to control the mushrooming insulation works that did not respect Romanian legislation. As a block administrator well summarized the process:

> Same with the insulation: the government had some ideas, but the application had many problems. These money, well administered, could have served more blocks. When they evaluated the work, they realised that the funding was gone, and it was finished. When people saw that insulation was efficient, they started wanting it, so they found ways to do it for themselves. And everyone started doing what they wanted, randomly. They forgot about aesthetics, and efficiency. And the State Inspectorate in Constructions didn't intervene.

Insulation in the H2B block

Mr. Bud initially tried to approach City Hall, to insulate his block like the D blocks, but by the time he went, there was no money from the budget. Having had leadership positions throughout his career, he was well connected, and so he went straight to the Director of Investments at the City Council, where he was added to a waiting list to access the EU funds for rehabilitation. He would visit him from time to time, and check what their place was on the list — theoretically, their place on the list would depend on how much money they managed to raise for the 20% they had to pay (see Figure 1). Frustrated to see that from no. 9 on the list, they would magically drop to no. 16, Mr. Bud went to his acquaintance one more time, who told him: "Mr. Bud, had you come yesterday, I would have changed everything: I sent a proposal to Bucharest yesterday for the approval of documentation." It was thus clear that he had reached the limits of all the strings he could pull. "Seeing what *Mr. Director* said, I went and informed people. And then we decided to do this by ourselves. It took two years before we decided to do it on our own."

Having studied the work that the construction company had done two blocks down, he decided he could trust them: they had worked well. The boss from Cișnădie, Sibiu, but the market there was oversaturated and he started looking around Piatra-Neamț. He "wasn't the biggest specialist in the domain of construction material", but he followed his men closely. He observed him for a week to see how they respect each step, how people work, how disciplined they are — "because many people mess about". He asked the constructor for a great deal of technical documentation concerning the quality of the materials — after all, he had been in charge of the county's quality control institute for many years. He then fixed a date and announced everybody on the entrance billboard that the meeting would be at 6.00 p.m. ("this is usually the time, so that the working people have time to get home and catch their breath").



ASOCIAȚIA ~~DE~~ PROPRIETARI
NR 78, B-dul Traian Bl. H2/B
Piatra Neamț

INFORMARE

REABILITAREA TERMICĂ - a. Blocului
H2 scara B – O PRIORITATE FOARTE
IMPORTANTĂ (DIMINUAREA
PIERDERILOR DE CALDURA cu 25%)

Datorită unor BRAVI GOSPODARI
s-au depus APROAPE 10.000 RON.

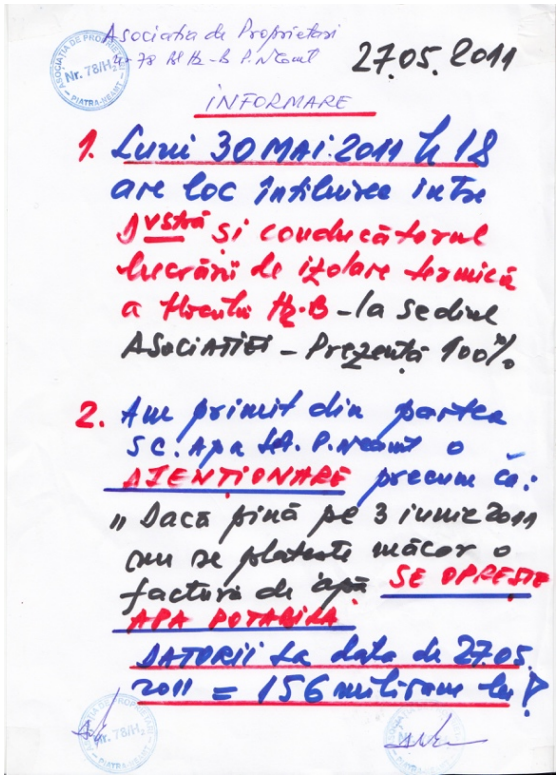
Acestia sunt:

1. Gavrilă Ioan ap. 53
2. Sobrilă Nicolae ap. 83.
3. Raica Maria ap. 60
4. Anăstăsoaie Rodica ap. 64.
5 Mamula Ioan ap. 55
6 Bud Gheorghe ap. 67
7 Vasiliu Paide ap. 84
8 Jora Gerget ap. 51
9 Iorub Ioan ap. 58
10 Toma Gabriel ap. 52.
11. Teodorescu Ioan ap. 50.
12 Vieru Gh. ap. 48
13 Gaudy Adrian ap. 61
[illegible] C ap. 80

MAI FERITI ~~DE~~ PRIMEJDII IN 2010.!

ASOCIAȚIA DE PROPRIETARI Nr. 78/H2/B PIATRA-NEAMȚ

NOTICE: the thermal rehabilitation of the H2B block - an important priority (the decrease in heat losses by 25%) Thanks to a few gospodari (good housekeepers), we have gathered almost 10000 RON (£2000)- they are protected from danger in 2010!


Asociația de Proprietari [illegible] 27.05.2011

INFORMARE

1. Luni 30 MAI 2011 la 18 are loc întâlnire între [illegible] și conducătorul lucrării de izolare termică a blocului H2-B - la sediul ASOCIAȚIEI - Prezență 100%.

2. Am primit din partea SC Apa Serv P.Neamț o ATENȚIONARE precum că: „Dacă până pe 3 iunie 2011 nu se plătește măcar o factură de apă SE OPREȘTE APA POTABILĂ. DATORII la data de 27.05.2011 = 156 milioane lei!

27.05.2011

NOTICE

1. Monday, on the 30th of May 2011 at 6PM, a meeting will take place between you and the leader of the insulation process of the H2B block, at the headquarters of the Association — required presence: 100%.

2. We received the following warning from SC Apa Serv Piatra-Neamț: "If at least a fracture of the water bill is not paid by the 3rd of June, water will be suspended."

Debts on the 27.05.2011 = 156 million lei!

After he fixed the date and the time, he added the announcement on the billboard: "Discussion about thermal insulation". He kept the meeting short: "people will ask questions, they are diverse and often unknowledgeable". Realizing that the meeting had taken place in 2011, three years before the moment in which we were having the conversation, Mr. Bud was content with how the work passed the test of time:

> And you can tell from a distance and from close by how well it was made. And they all say: 'Oh, but this is Bud's.' Because I live there. Yes, but I was there in overalls from 6.00 a.m., when the guys would arrive and call me on the interphone. I would come down, let them in - because they had materials in the basement — and I would stay with them until it would get dark. Even at 12.00 a.m., I wouldn't leave until the last man got off the scaffolding on the 10th floor. — *So, you got to know them* - Of course. They were also afraid of me. But there are portions of the work — and I can describe them in detail — that they had to remake 6 times.

Throughout the process of insulation, he carefully observed how well the building would interact with the natural elements. For instance, because he didn't like how they worked on one of the sides - they didn't provide with a slope for draining — he told them: "No-one gets down until I carry out a test." He took two flasks of water of 10 litres each, he went to the end of the gutter, and he poured this water to see how it drains. At the beginning it would not drain, it would stay there. He then told the workers: "What if it rains heavily?" It might just as well not be there, he concluded. The constructor then brought a man from Sibiu who knew tin-smiting and they worked on it until it passed the test. And for three years it's been working well, he told me proudly.

And so, the work on insulating the block began from his side of the block — not because that would give him the most advantage, but because through his social bonds he had managed to convince 16 people out of 21 from that section to pay upfront. In a week's time, the rest of the inhabitants who at



the time lived in the block came up to him to pay the advance. The ones who lived abroad had at least one person in the country to take care of their house, to pay the remaining bills. He thus spoke to them and asked them to get in touch. Should they have any misunderstandings, he would clarify them over the phone. He gathered as much money as he could: if one had the full amount, 52 million lei (£1000), he would collect it; but that was rare, in proportion of 15%; typically, people would pay in instalments, that Mr. Bud would administer and give to the constructor every Friday[18].

Convincing each apartment to pay as much as 52 million lei was very laborious, and the key to running this maintenance work properly. He pointed out to me that in the rest of the city most buildings are unequally insulated, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. He judged the other block administrators for allowing such patchwork: "It's not nice. And it's not technological." In his case, he knew each family in his block well, and he knew their financial possibilities. For instance, there was an old woman who lived with her son of 45, who was not working, and had recently divorced. She had a small pension, having worked all her life as a librarian. She had a misfortune: she had signed a few bank loans for someone from their block, who made loans in chain — he would take from one, put in another one, until he got stuck; and reached an 8 billion lei debt. One of the people who loaned him some money got him out of the apartment. Mr. Bud suspected that she had signed as a guarantor for this man, because she had to pay about 300 million for this man. This way, Mr. Bud knew she didn't have any money. When the constructors reached her floor, he asked her to bring the contract to his

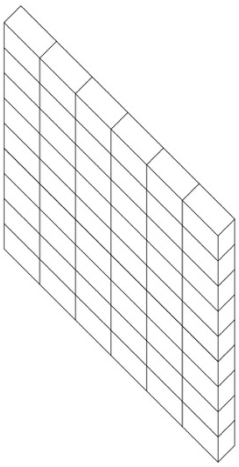
[18] Because the constructor saw that Mr. Bud is good with gathering money, he would later come and ask for loans — even during my fieldwork, he would often ask Mr. Bud for money during winter (the season in which it is impossible to do construction work).



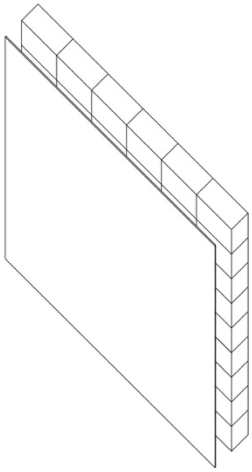
office. Having asked her how much she could pay each month, he introduced that to the conditions of the payment — she would pay 100 lei each month. He technically paid in advance for her, and he got his money back over the years to come. There were some more difficulties, for instance from two sisters living together in an apartment, one 94 and the other 96 years old.

> I think I went to see them 20 times, to explain to them. I've been grey-haired since I was 30, but I think I grizzled some more... And they didn't want to. At some point, one said: "Mr. Bud, I have the money — it's there, but I won't give you the advance payment until the scaffolding doesn't reach my apartment; what if they run?" "But ma'am, they can also run after the scaffolding gets to you. But don't worry, no-one will run". And indeed, when the scaffolding was there, she gave me the advance.

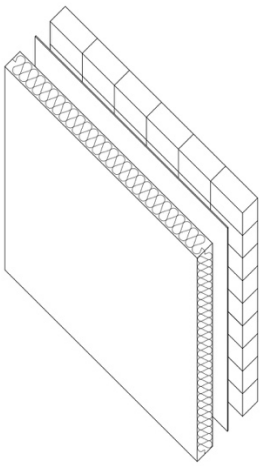
From the beginning of work, until it was done, Mr. Bud was on the side of the block in overalls. He led all the phases of the project: at each phase, what materials go in; with each material, everything about the quality of the material, namely technical data, the style of work, the certification of quality, etc. His focus was not mere insulation. That was the main job, but he asked the constructor to also pursue the following others: the consolidation of the basements and of the walls of the foundation, the rebuilding of the entire water draining system. The block was 35 years old — along the years, because of winter freezing and rain, those had degraded. They had eroded all the way until the rebar [fier beton]. All of these needed to be remade. They need to be re-consolidated, re-plastered. Above all, they added a galvanized foil wider than the caisson, so that the water that drips wouldn't fall on the wall and create infiltrations. Each apartment had a certain surface the constructors were going to insulate. According to that, the constructor came up with the amount, divided it by half - how many lei do we add to each square meter? Two lei. This way, they incorporated everything. And, this way, they began their journey, in eight steps, as illustrated by arh. Irina Nicolescu.



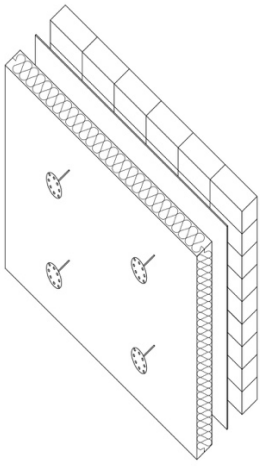
(1) Cleaning the walls. Done carefully, according to the granulation of the walls. Preparing the surfaces for plating with polystyrene. There were surfaces of the block where, on the left side of the 10th floor, the apartment was covered, but the previous constructors didn't provide adductions with water all the way down. It therefore corroded the block - it even permeated the plaster of the block. After the rehabilitation work, they re-made the entire surface, as if the block was new.



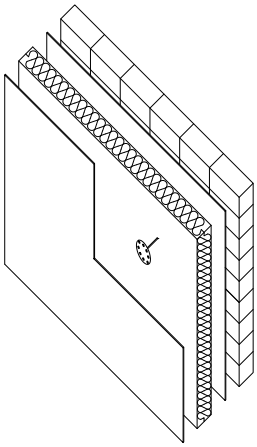
(2) Adding a layer of adhesive. The workers used a bucket to prepare adhesive for the polystyrene boards. The mortar they prepared was specially made for installing polystyrene to outside concrete walls. The workers would fill one third of the bucket with water, and then add the premixed material. They would often leave the bucket with the adhesive for several minutes, before mixing it. They told me that, this way, water would activate the molecules and they would get a better adhesive.



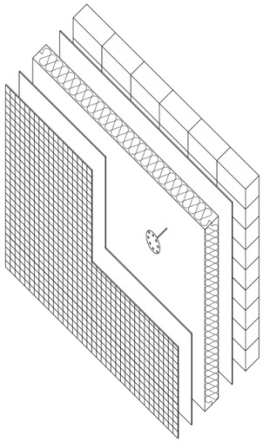
(3) Fixing the polystyrene, brought in from Germany. Mr. Bud would check the technical indicators to make sure the constructor hadn’t replaced anything. With one occasion, he had done so, having run out of money. Mr. Bud then scolded him and assured him that if such a mishap takes place again, he would be fired. Ever since, the constructor always used only high-quality materials.



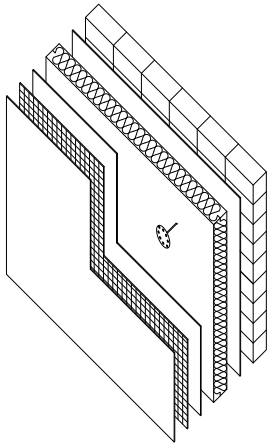
(4) Applying the dowels, which went over the polystyrene (like nails with a pipe in the back). As an architect pointed out to me, it is mandatory that they go into the wall of the block. They need to go not only into the plaster, but into the structure wall. Some constructors neglect it, because it's harder to get into it. Mr. Bud used to send people back to work: “you need to put in at least 6 per plaque; and they would put two”.



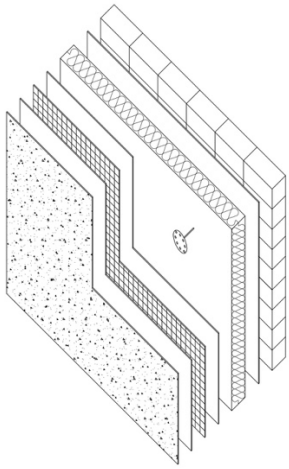
(5) Applying a special plaster before applying the glass fibre net. According to Ms. Popescu from City Hall, this was sparsely used by construction firms working with the local administration. Mr. Bud used one that was high quality and imported, three times more expensive than the average price: “The Knauf... — see, they're all German; even if they're made in Romania or in Hungary; the technology is German.”



(6) Adding net made out of glass fibre. The workmanship is more expensive “because they have to go over it three, four times. On the same surface. I would check that it goes over the attic. I would stay on the terrace - I would be there for 10 hours even. When they would reach the 11th floor, they had to bring the net over the attic. And they would say: <we never did it this way>. <Listen, I'm not interested in what you did before - here, you do what I say.> And then they were convinced.”



(7) Applying the primer. “Also German; but it's also made here; then what matters it to see how they respect it in the fabrication process.” The primer prepares the surface for the last step, assuring adherence and a good performance on the long-term.



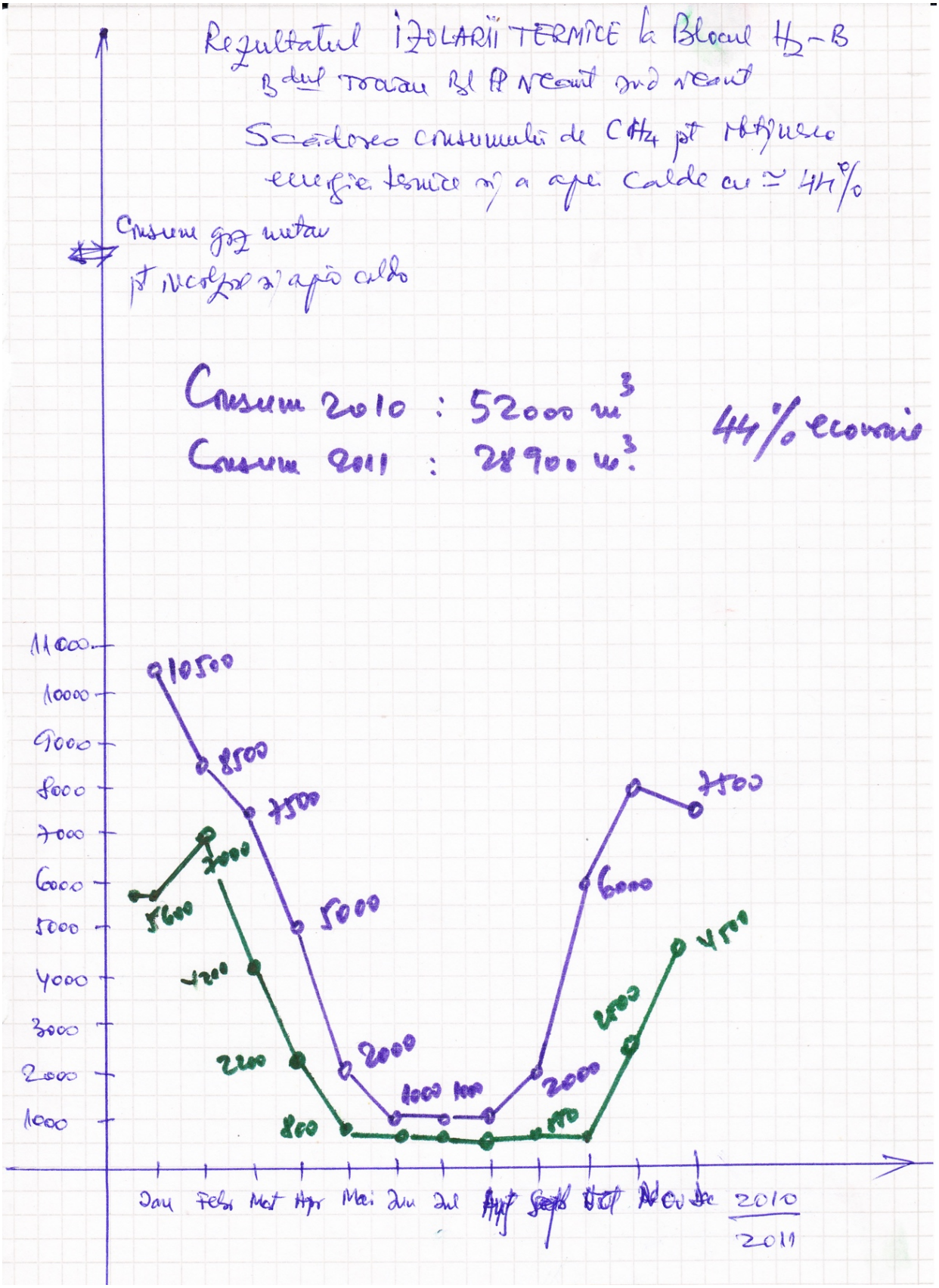
(8) Applying the decorative plaster. According to Mr. Bud, a very difficult process. The plaster takes over all the dilation — vertically and horizontally — during variations of temperature; from -20 to over 35 °C. The structure on the wall of the building suffers multiple transformations. “If this product takes it over well, you have no flaw: that is, no cracks, dislocations, etc. So, the quality is really important.”



The H2B building during the final stages of thermal insulation, 2011

The above-mentioned process finished with applying the washable paint. This is easier, but one needs to know how to do this. When the constructor brought in the washable paint, he told him: "Look carefully, only this one should be used. Don't think of changing the flasks, or mixing them." He could immediately tell if the paint would be too diluted or too concentrated. In terms of colour, he followed a democratic process of voting: a few ladies from the block were given colour samples, and they expressed their preference. Apart from aesthetics, the paint is for protection against humidity and protection — it is permeable, it allows for dilatation when it's warm on both horizontal and vertical axes, so that it doesn't crack. And also, for times of freezing — "It's very important, we even have -25 °C. And we also have 35 °C. So, you need to work with this interval," tells me Mr. Bud in all seriousness.

For one of the meetings with me, Mr. Bud prepared a drawing to demonstrate the effects of the thermal insulation work he had carried out. He titled it: *"The result of THERMAL INSULATION in the H2B bloc, Traian Boulevard, Piatra-Neamț, Neamț County — The decrease in CH4 consumption for thermal energy and hot water by app. 44%"*. Marking the year before insulation, 2010, with purple, and the year after, 2011, with green, Mr. Bud followed the block's gas consumption each month and concluded that his hard work had rendered great results. Mr. Bud then added a similar graph to the billboard at the entrance of the block, and took pleasure in explaining it to his neighbours in the rare occasions when they asked about it. As suggested in *The Administration Room*, Mr. Bud was establishing his leadership through visible markers, be they the construction work itself or billboard messages such as the following one:


Rezultatul IZOLARII TERMICE la Blocul H2-B
Scaderea consumului de CH4 pt încălzire
energie termică și a apei calde cu ≈ 44%
Consum gaz metan
pt încălzire și apă caldă
Consum 2010 : 52000 m3
Consum 2011 : 28900 m3
44% economie
11000
10000
9000
8000
7000
6000
5000
4000
3000
2000
1000
10500
8500
7500
5000
2000
1000
1000
2000
6000
7500
5600
7000
4200
2200
800
800
2000
4500
4500
Ian Feb Mar Apr Mai Iun Iul Aug Sept Oct Nov Dec
2010
2011



Indeed, the work had been well done, and his fellow inhabitants were very happy with the results. In private conversations with me, many of the confirmed that the quality of their life in the block had increased after the insulation. Among the statements I gathered:

> "First of all, heat went up a few degrees. We used to have a few corners with small marks of moist — they are now gone; and the last one is the external appearance, which has improved."
>
> "I think there are only advantages."
>
> "You can feel it when it comes to expenses."
>
> "This thermal insulation was a very good thing. First of all, the temperature is more constant, the variations are smaller. And everything is dry. The costs are smaller. We are therefore very happy with it, and we need to thank Mr. Bud, he was very committed. And a good job was done."
>
> "I was looking at other blocks — you can see from a distance how badly the plaques were mounted. I heard people in other places complaining. That they have mould, etc. So, it depends a lot on how it's made."
>
> "We didn't pay that much in comparison to the advantages we now enjoy."

At first glance, this looks like a success story — and to a great extent, it is. Despite the lack of City Hall support, here is a building that was insulated with high quality materials, with great care and supervision and with a consistent improvement in energy efficiency and the quality of life, as testified by the inhabitants. However, this does not take away the fact that insulating a tall building with polystyrene is not allowed in the Romanian legislation, which has come under great scrutiny after the Colectiv fire, and even more so, after the Glenfell tragedy.

The dangers of thermal insulation

On the 14th of June 2017, Glenfell tower, a 23-storey block of flats in London burned in a fire that, at the time of writing, is believed to have killed 80 inhabitants. The building, made in 1974, the same year as the H2B block of flats in Piatra-Neamț, had been refurbished in May 2016, with a layer of thermal insulation (in the media referred to as "cladding"[19]), added for the purposes of energy efficiency and aesthetic improvement. The cladding contained aluminium composite panels with a plastic core and an aluminium coating (see materials scheme below). These materials came under close scrutiny as fire experts established that the cladding played a key role in quickly spreading the fire, with eye witnesses saying that the fire spread within minutes on the outside of the building. Most poignantly, the constructors had chosen a material that was £2 cheaper/m^2, that was less fire proof, saving £5,000 in a £8,600,000 project.



Source: http://www.studioe.co.uk/?portfolio=grenfell

Initial reports from the Grenfell fire suggest that the gap between the cladding and the external walls of the building acted as a chimney, funnelling flames up the side of the building, with a safety expert stating: "[a fire] doesn't travel up concrete, does it, so it's got to have travelled up something […] so prima facie the cladding has been the cause of the fire spreading up the external parts of the building"[20]. Inhabitants from the neighbourhood were pictured in the media holding burned pieces of insulation from the building, stating that "they didn't listen to us", seeing that the residents had repeatedly warned against the fire dangers of the newly rehabilitated building[21]. Following the fire, sixty towers across England were found to have unsafe cladding after failing combustibility tests[22], and

[19] Cladding is the layer of aluminium on top of the thermal insulation.
[20] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/15/cladding-in-2014-melbourne-high-rise-blaze-also-used-in-grenfell-tower
[21] https://grenfellactiongroup.wordpress.com/2016/11/20/kctmo-playing-with-fire/
[22] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/25/revealed-60-towers-across-england-found-to-have-unsafe-cladding

some buildings were evacuated[23]. A similar cladding had been found responsible for a 2014 blaze in Melbourne, Australia, which killed 17 people. Fires involving a similar cladding had been reported in residential towers in France, the United Arab Emirates, South Korea or the US[24]. In fact, in the UK a House of Commons Report dating as early as 1999 warned against the dangers of synthetic insulation and suggested its replacement[25]. This followed the first known cladding fire in the UK, in 1991, in Knowsley Heights, Manchester.



Source: http://www.studioe.co.uk/?portfolio=grenfell

In this context, the conditions of the fire resemble the Colectiv tragedy in Bucharest with which this chapter opened, and the worries of possible fire dangers in domestic buildings due to polystyrene insulation[26]. Unlike in Romania, there was no discussion of corruption, and the fire did not bring thousands in the streets, asking for (and achieving) a change of government. The tragedy did, however, sparkle extensive conversations about social inequality in the UK, the building being an island of poverty in otherwise the richest borough in London: Kensington[27]. Where the aesthetic and the infrastructural combine, it is striking to read the building's rehabilitation project reasoning for the cladding. A 2014 planning document produced ahead of the works carried out on Grenfell Tower read: "Due to its height the tower is visible from the adjacent Avondale Conservation Area to the south and the Ladbroke Conservation Area to the east. […] The changes to the existing tower will improve its appearance especially when viewed from the surrounding area."[28]

[23] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/23/camden-to-evacuate-taplow-tower-over-fire-safety-fears-after-grenfell-disaster
[24] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40283980
[25] https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmenvtra/109/10907.htm
[26] http://www.replicaonline.ro/ai-apartamentul-izolat-fara-autorizatie-ai-actionat-in-afara-legii-si-s-ar-putea-sa-te-usture-buzunarele-247929/
[27] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40301289
[28] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/cladding-fire-risk-grenfell-tower/

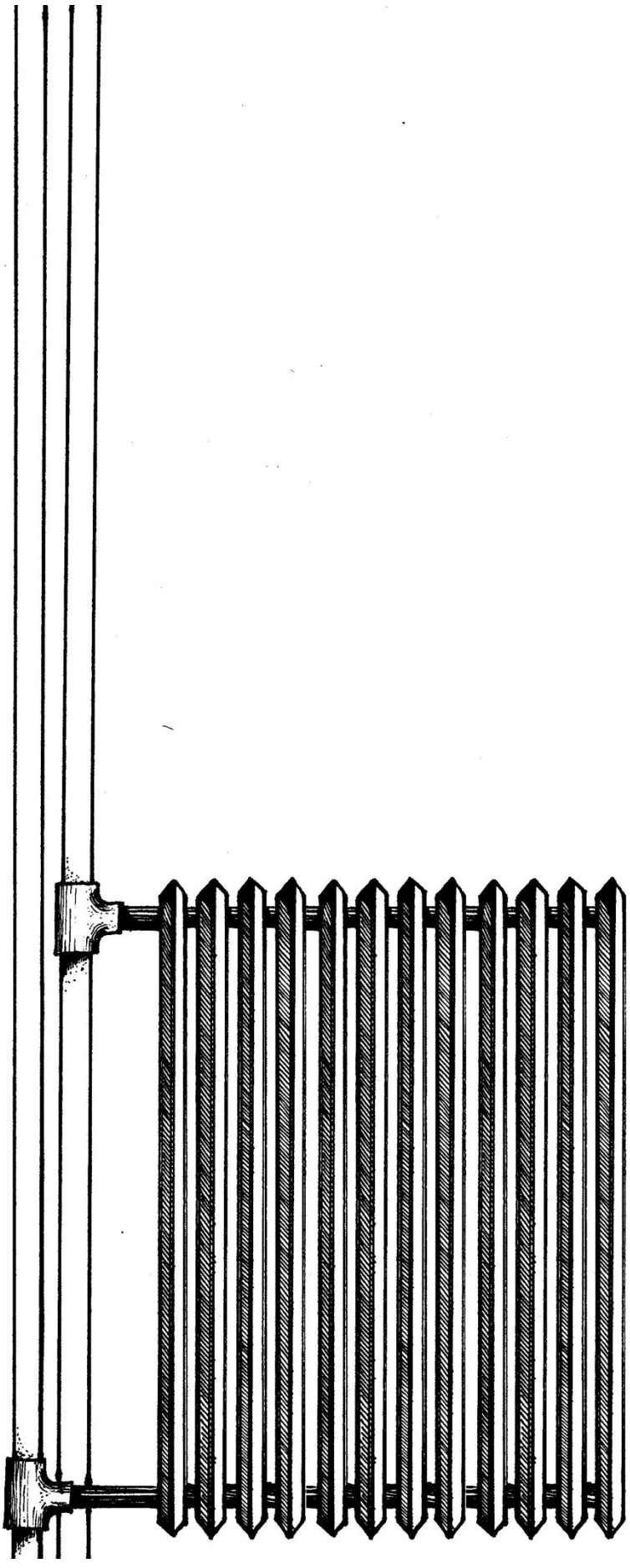
In terms of materials, reactions from Germany, for instance, warned against government-subsidised external insulation of buildings using synthetic insulation, pointing to reduced ventilation which creates problems of dampness and mould (as described in my thesis) and to an increase in fire risks[29]. Additionally, commonly used classes of synthetic insulation as "toxic waste" — in the case of removal (or fire), property owners being charged with huge bills for clean-up and disposal requirements. The writer points out, however, that the building lobby is so strong, that things are unlikely to change. Similarly, in Romania, following the Colectiv fire, a governmental report suggested the replacement of polystyrene with mineral wool[30], which is less flammable and more breathable, only to find that polystyrene producers (standing behind an industry worth 100 million Euros) were warning against an increase in price for apartments and the disappearance of thousands of work places[31]. Whereas mineral wool would have to be imported, polystyrene is produced in many factories in Romania (4 million cubic meters/year), such as the one pictured below, producing and storing the insulating material next to Piatra-Neamț.

Polystyrene is in the same family of materials as the insulation panels used in the Glenfell tower. Arnold Tarling, a fire expert in London, pointed to the elephant in the room, namely the flammability of the insulation panels used to clad postwar buildings in order to bring them up to date with today's thermal standards. "We have been very concerned about the introduction of highly combustible products into buildings," he says. "They are often being introduced on the back of the sustainability agenda, but it's sometimes being done recklessly without due consideration to the consequences. It's not uncommon for buildings to have blocks of polystyrene up to 30cm deep on the outside, which is an extraordinary quantity of combustible material to be sticking on to a building"[32] (my highlight). As mentioned in The Wall Insulation chapter, not only are Romanian buildings covered in polystyrene, but many apartments have been insulated on the inside as well with the same material, as far back as the 1970s.

Given that, following the recent decentralisation of heating (described in *The Heater* chapter), an overwhelming majority of apartments have individual boilers, the danger increases. Although the boilers are supposed to be checked every year and replaced every ten years, I have often come across home owners who cannot afford to do so. Given that the boiler market stated changing the heating landscape about 15 years ago, we are now at a turning point, in which regulations need to be reinforced, seeing that approx. 33% of domestic fires in Romania take place due to faulty heating boilers. In the recent past, newspapers are full of incident reports all over the country, with fires in blocks of flats in 2009 (Bacău[33], Brașov[34]), 2011 (Ivănești[35], Hunedoara[36]), 2012 (Iași[37]), 2015 (Sibiu[38]), 2017 (Cluj[39], Timișoara[40]). This is but a selective list, pointing to the spread in time and in space, but it

[29] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jun/14/grenfell-tower-fire-and-cladding-dangers
[30] http://www.mdrap.ro/userfiles/Normativ_Partea%20I.pdf
[31] http://www.capital.ro/producator-legea-care-interzice-polistirenul.html
[32] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/14/disaster-waiting-to-happen-fire-expert-slams-uk-tower-blocks
[33] http://zdbc.ro/incendiu-de-la-o-centrala-termica/
[34] http://www.bzb.ro/stire/incendiu-de-la-o-centrala-termica-pe-strada-grivitei-a33480
[35] http://www.ziare.com/stiri/explozie/explozie-din-cauza-unei-centrale-de-apartament-in-mures-un-mort-1135199
[36] http://www.ziare.com/stiri/explozie/explozie-la-o-centrala-termica-din-hunedoara-1126010
[37] http://www.ziare.com/stiri/explozie/explozie-intr-un-bloc-de-locuinte-din-iasi-un-ranit-16-apartamente-avariate-1152747
[38] http://www.ziare.com/stiri/explozie/explozie-intr-un-apartament-din-sibiu-oameni-evacuati-masini-avariate-1356747
[39] http://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/explozie-intr-un-bloc-din-cluj-din-cauza-acumularii-de-gaze-un-tanar-a-ajuns-la-spital-toate-locuintele-au-fost-avariate.html
[40] http://www.tion.ro/incendiu-intr-un-apartament-din-complexul-studentesc-din-timisoara/1774028

constitutes a discourse of fire and safety that has been internalised by my research participants in Piatra-Neamț, who were weary of the combination of heating boilers and synthetic insulation in their blocks of flats. As follows, I will describe this process of heating decentralisation and I will ask why Romanians ended up paying higher and higher amounts for heat the put them in a risky situation.



The Heater

Ms. Tomin, living on the 7th floor, was a retired school teacher who was typically very critical of Mr. Bud, but congratulated him on his contribution to the thermal insulation. One evening, she invited me to her place. She brought cake and home-made white wine for us. On her way to the table, she stepped on the cat, and scolded her for being in the way. The plastic roses on her living room table set the atmosphere, in contrast to a big book case on the whole wall, full of porcelain figurines — a *nai* (Romanian wooden flute) sat next to a porcelain cat. Her walls had small glitters, and small paintings from place to place. Leather frames circled leather flowers, imitating a painting. Plastic flowers sat in a vase on the table, and many dolls kept her company. The cat would usually watch TV with her and sit on her aching bones when she was ill.

Being the middle of winter, which can reach -20 °C, I was warmly dressed, with multiple layers to protect me from the cold winds outside. Little did I know that her apartment would be steaming, and that the following five hours of discussion would be a test of my physical endurance. In contrast, she was wearing an embroidered T-shirt: "Look how I dress in the house, in a short sleeve — when I die, I will be in the ground — now I want to dress lightly." She felt that they pay a lot - she paid about 450 Lei for February's utilities (approx. £90). She would add all the bills and pay all of them as soon as she would get her pension. She suspected that I, living across the street, must have seen that she opens the windows a lot. That wasn't (just) to air the house, but to release some of the heat. She contrasted the heat of her home with many other apartments in other blocks, in which people wear many layers, and still feel cold. In contrast, she would often scold Mr. Bud for heating up the block too much: "are you trying to steam us, Mr. Bud? It's too hot! The moths will eat my blankets; I never get to take them out anymore". This considered, I also witnessed a few occasions in which she complained about the warm water tap, which would only provide her with cold water (see description in the Water chapter). The pipework of the block would hardly allow for uniform heat provision for everyone, on each floor.

Why was it so warm? I went to Mr. Bud and asked him about the heat in Ms. Tomin's apartment, and about the heating system of the building.

Heating in H2B

Looking over a detailed plan he just drew from me, Mr. Bud starts telling me the story of the heating system he had been exploiting for 15 years. He took the initiative, having the technical knowledge, to design one. After getting all necessary approvals and raising the money from his neighbours — 110 lei (approx. £20) at the time — he mounted it. All high-quality materials, all imported: the electrical equipment from Switzerland and the boiler from Italy. Whereas now this was a rarity, it used to be more common: at least 12 such building systems existed ten years ago, and where now rubble. Why? "They had quarrels like gypsies and they all got apartment heating systems. They disagreed on how to divide spendings. How to pay for gas, energy, water." This, despite their increased efficiency: "Here, I produce water with 18 lei per m^3 of warm water, And Pinalti, the mayor, does it for 60 lei. Then how could it be efficient? And what does 18 lei mean; the laws of thermodynamics say: 1 Gcal is produced by transporting 15 m^3 at 60 °C. If I pay 18 lei, that means 270 lei per Gcal. The mayor does it for 600."



The bed set that was never used, due to the excessive heat



The living room of Ms. Tomin's apartment



Mr. Bud showing me the heating system he designed for H2B

Apart from the price, he was very preoccupied with lowering the cost of heating through low consumption: if the temperature is lower than 0 °C, he uses the automatic settings, directing them from his office (through a small screen that in the meantime broke). According to the temperature in his office, the boiler automatically starts for two hours, then pauses for one hour. If the temperature is higher than 0 °C, the automatic setting is not economical. If it is cold, he starts the pump manually, for about an hour. It then creates a circuit for one hour, and so the heat reaches the 10th floor. On an automatic setting, it would be maintained there. By allowing the circuit to continue on the basis of the 'specific weight' of the liquid in the pipe, "according to the laws of physics". The difference in the temperature between the *tour* and the *retour* creates a difference in density, which propels the circuit. This means that he doesn't have to actively push the heat through the pipes, but also that, as we will see later in the chapter, the higher floors of the building sometimes don't get enough heat.

What the block spends now is divided over the general consumption, as explained in the Administration chapter. Mr. Bud takes the readings of the gas counter on the heating system and the gas counter at the entrance of the kitchens, and calculates the expenses each month. He proudly told me that the day before he met me, he had added the expenses on his computer and printed everything out. This month he saw that the spending for September was smaller than the ones from August. He would compare the bills for gas from three years before, and see a huge difference in price: "With all the increase in price in gas — this is what comfort is about. I even made graphics for people — after all, I'm an engineer. I still am, I haven't lost it!"



The gas meter of the building

From the block in which I lived, right across from his, I would often see him, even in his suit, coming from an official meeting in town and going to check the parameters of the heating system. A few times a day, he would unlock the heating system and walk in — sometimes even at 3.00 a.m., if he felt that something was wrong. In fact, he told me in a slightly worried tone that the law actually requires him to have 4 fire engineers, but, clearly, he cannot afford it, and no-one had picked up on it, so he remains the only one taking care of the heat in the block. Together with the missing paperwork for the thermal insulation, this is a good example of a financial grey area. He is therefore also responsible for the uniform heating in the block, which is a more complex task than one would think. The top floors are difficult to heat up, on the one hand because of the loss through the top of the building, on the other hand because of the gravity preventing the old, clogged pipes from carrying the hot water all the way up. If he wants the top floor to be warm, he needs to overheat the apartments from the bottom and mid part — which was the case in Ms. Tomin's apartment.

Together, separate

At the beginning, everyone was connected to the building's heating system — all 44 apartments. As in any collective, one day there was a discord, Mr. Bud explained. A difficult neighbour — in fact an employee of his from Săvinești — was the one to pull a separate pipe and pay only what she measured; she then encouraged others to get individual heating systems. A signed letter of approval was necessary from the block committee and Mr. Bud signed it with the condition that she adds a regulator, so that she does not disturb the pressure of the gas on the heating system. She refused to, and Mr. Bud talked to someone from the gas company, who offered to send him one. Interestingly enough, this turned into a money-making occasion for her:



Mr. Bud setting the pressure of the block heating system

> After she created discord, she got her money back on the pipe about 5 times. In what way: 26 apartments stayed on the block heating systems; 10 of them are not inhabited, so you have 36 — until 44... 8 of them have apartment systems. So, it's a mixed thing. Everyone who got an apartment system had to use her pipe; for each contract, she asked for €150 — they couldn't get an approval on the technical documentation until they paid €150 to her. OK, at first 2 or 3 did this; let's say that you ask for this fee; but after 10 years, she still asks for money?!

Ms. Tomin also recalled the days in which everyone shared the block heating system, put in place by Mr. Bud (as described in the following pages of this chapter). She was happy with the idea of sharing the costs and the responsibilities with the neighbours, and was disappointed that this social and technical arrangement didn't last long: "The idiot below me had connections and got her own heating. And we woke up one day with a trembling block, we thought it would collapse. She didn't tell anyone she was going to disconnect and she didn't get approval from the City Hall. I didn't agree with others getting their own system. Now half of them got their own." The main implication for the rest of the community is that there are less people to pay for the maintenance of the central heating system. This considered, Mr. Bud actually advised some to disconnect from his system and to get apartment boilers, especially on the top floors. After several discussions with inhabitants from the 10th floor, who needed more heat, and with inhabitants from the 4th, who wanted less heat, he actively encouraged some neighbours to disconnect, in order for the system as a whole to regain its balance.

The fragility of Romanian heating systems resonates of Fennell's ethnography on heating in Chicago, in which she describes the high temperatures that inhabitants got used to in Horner, a public housing project (Fennell, 2011). In the words of her participants, heat was "hot", "free", "blazing all the time" — the heat costs were included in the rents, so people had never paid a heat bill until the process of demolition and redevelopment began in 1999. Horner's project heat owed its high levels to design miscalculations - its designers had not accounted for concrete's heat-retaining capacities. Additionally, Horner's heat engineers and firemen subsequently had a hard time calibrating interior temperatures against the fluctuating exterior temperatures of Chicago's temperamental winters. Thus, they pumped heat into buildings at abundant levels, making extreme heat a total sensory fact of everyday life at Horner: "When wearing light clothes or adjusting radiator valves gave no relief, the Horner Homes' residents would crack open their windows. Many Extension windows remained ajar all winter because it was the only way to throttle the heat" (Fennell, 2011, p. 50).

The imprecisions of the technical system of heating provision are very similar to my findings in Piatra-Neamț. When she speaks of her participants socialising outside all year round, she refers to elderly participant explaining that one could 'go out and see the birds along the building, singing, because, [there was] no snow! Everybody be standing over the pipes, talking because it's warm, standing out all winter long' (Fennell, 2011, p. 50). Having grown up in Piatra-Neamț, I cannot but remember the cold winter days in which a trail of melted snow on the sidewalk would point to the location of the heating pipes. As a child, I loved following their path, especially during heavy snows. With a researcher's eye, I see how these trails were nothing but losses of the system, part of the 30% that was wasted from the DH system to the apartments. Apartment boilers did one thing right, namely they shortened the distance between production and consumption — inhabitants become producers and consumers in a time in which the gas prices where rocketing, thus often choosing to heat their homes less and less.

These constantly high temperatures bear similarity to my experience in H2B. Indeed, similarly abundant heat was enjoyed by inhabitants as a privilege of living in that block. Ms. Tomin wore a T-shirt inside the house, and often opened her window to cool the house. This comparison brings home one point about research methodologies: how much knowledge do you need to have in order to interpret a simple gesture as opening a window? I used to think this was all about ventilation, but it turns out it was an excess of heat — which I would have never thought about, if I took into account all the headlines about energy poverty. I am not arguing for lack of energy poverty here, because there were, indeed, neighbours who could hardly afford to pay their energy bills — but the semi-centralized system allowed them to access heating nevertheless.



Open window in the H2B block

For some people, like Mr. Anton, the hot temperature in his flat brought back memories of the beginning of living in a socialist block of flats, when the heater would always be warm (he told me this while wearing a T-shirt in his newly renovated apartment). In the case of the socialist state, the constancy of the heat in the first years of living in the new apartments was associated with the socialist state taking good care of its citizens (both in the literature and in people's expressions). Equally, with the cuts of the 80s, people's disbelief in the socialist regime came from the lack of heat provision.

Here is where Fennell's analysis of the newly built homes comes in, with her emphasis on how new modes of heat provision reconfigure kinship obligations "in risky ways". In other words, her research participants sometimes felt uncomfortable inviting kin to their new homes, which weren't as warm as their old ones, despite being newer (Fennell, 2011). My data reveals that in Romania, lack of resources influenced social relationship with kin and non-kin alike, as research participants throughout the city felt frustrated with not being able to invite friends over in their uncomfortably cold apartments, and

without money for treats for their guests. In the case of elderly research participants, their limited pensions brought about greater degrees of loneliness.

This considered, I have also come across individuals who had the means to build a house in the beautiful mountainous outskirts of Piatra-Neamț. Interestingly, most of them couldn't live in their new houses during winter time, because of the soaring utility bills involved in heating up an entire house. They were thus brought back to their apartments blocks, where, for better or worse, they had less space to heat up, and they could enjoy the heat emanating from their neighbours' wall, where present. In the case of Ms. Tomin, even after thermally insulating the house with Polystyrene (the same technique as the block insulation), the incapacity to warm up her new house pulled her back to the city, to her apartment. All inhabitants who went to their summer houses (some, newly built; some, inherited from their parents) came back in winter due to financial pressures.

In the case of urban inhabitants who lived in houses (the few old ones in the city that escaped demolition; or the new ones towards the outskirts of the city), most of them used gas, and were very cautious — while interviewing the Petruca family in their house, I often asked for tea, to warm up, and made sure that I would dress well before going there. The cold temperature withstanding, they insisted that they don't thermally insulate, especially because they did not want the beautiful small details of their façade removed.

Keeping the entire building warm

During a block meeting, Mr. Bud reassured his neighbours that financially there was nothing to worry about — the bills were larger than the October ones, but that was only natural, as there had been more cold days. "In October and November, there used to be almost no difference in 2009 — it used to be warmer. In 2013, we had -4 °C in the first week in November, of course there's a huge difference! The cost for heating was smaller, because it was warmer. November from 2013 won't resemble the November from 2009." It was never an issue a few years before, he never had to turn on the heating system in October — sometimes, not even in November. And in March, he could turn off the system. Now, it was sometimes on until June. "All these things matter."

The maintenance of the H2B block heating system involved many costs, the responsibility for which fell upon the inhabitants as organized in the OA. As its president, Mr. Bud was trying to convince his neighbours to put money aside for the heating system's processor: a piece that would give 15 commands through the computer in order for the heating system to function, from ventilation until the closure of the whole system. The processor system was outdated, and these processors were no longer produced; hence the need to have a backup one, in case of emergency; they had an average life of 5 years (which made me realize, the heating system was not going to have a long life). The piece costs €350; he would look for it, but would not be able to pay for it himself; in fact, he was still waiting to recuperate 2400 lei (approx. €500) from his neighbours for the system's maintenance — people who had not paid him in three years, and who were now listed on the billboard: "Gavrilă from the second floor — I added him too, because he hasn't paid anything in 3 years. Since I added him, he doesn't answer my hello."

One of the key topics was the importance of having heaters in the common spaces; people complain about them because they have to pay for it, but they help the overall temperature stay balanced, and they create a nice atmosphere: a gradient of temperature for the child who walks out of the house to go to school. He gave the example of the 3rd floor; and the heater at the entrance: the first was stolen, the second doesn't work (because of a failed theft attempt). In the summer, he planned on re-connecting the second heater. In order to avoid generating tension among people, he had no intention to add these costs to the common expenses (as they rightfully are), even if there is gas consumption one should account for. Because that heat consumption needed to be paid for from somewhere, he intended to add it to the elevator's electricity costs (a big amount, so an easy way to mask an added expense). Such financial gymnastics were noticed by some of the inhabitants, and so the suspicions described in *The Administration Room* and *The Water Tap* chapters grew even further.

Given the huge amount of work going into administering the heating of the block, it's almost no wonder that other block administrators do not become as involved as Mr. Bud, and inhabitants get their own heating systems. One such case was Mr. Șum's from a block in the centre of the city, one of the most sought-after buildings. Their block was somewhat special, being exactly in the centre of the city, right across the Cultural Centre and the Central Hotel (see newspaper clip announcing its inauguration in 1979, titled *"A new architectural presence on the map of Piatra-Neamț"*). It used to be connected to a central heating system behind the block, but is now gone. They demolished it, because it was not very efficient — as people got apartment systems, the inhabitants connected to the central one were working at a loss. Mr. Șum himself got a heating boiler 8 years ago — he was proud of it, and enchanted by its main advantage of being able to control it. This was the reason behind everyone's choice, he thought: taking power over something that used to be state control — despite the inefficiency of each apartment producing its own heat, at least one could control it.



O nouă prezență arhitectonică pe harta municipiului Piatra Neamț: blocul turn din piața casei de cultură a sindicatelor.

Mr. Șum's living room, stacked with paintings, was the backdrop of our three-hour discussion. His home was warm and welcoming, almost completely covered in wood — some rooms up to the ceiling, giving me a slightly oppressive feeling, but cosy nevertheless. All in all, he explained that it was not easy to keep the home warm. The moment you open the front door, a cold draft comes in. Most blocks of this level had heating in the hallways; but because prices went up, a measure was taken to take them apart. This way, the core of the building is now cold. Before, even the pipes that used to connect all the apartments would emanate heat and render the building more uniform. Ironically, there had been discussions about thermally insulating the pipes that take the heat to the apartments; so that they do not waste heat. This way, they would not emanate heat in the neighbour's apartment, and inhabitants would pay less. But the warm pipes disappeared when everyone started getting heating systems. They were left only as remnants: now the pipes exist, but they do not emanate heat. The heaters also exist in some cases, but they also don't give off heat anymore.

Decentralisation of heating

In Piatra-Neamț, a great deal of inhabitants' efforts revolved around heat. From the retired French teacher in a block near H2B who would warm up her house by putting a brick on the stove; to the retired engineer who considered that his basic rights had been denied once he couldn't afford heating and had to sleep in a sleeping bag. These individual stories are sprinkled along a 20-year process of decentralization, in which slowly most people gave up the centralised district heating (DH) system, to then adhere to semi-centralised block heating systems, until finally most of them bought and installed individual apartment ones. More expensive, more polluting, and certainly very risky - they need to be replaced every 10 years, and during my fieldwork I have failed to meet someone who had done so.

How did we get here? The construction of district heating systems was a clear component of the technological frame of the centrally planned economies' energy sectors before 1989. Socialist planners built large, centrally controlled networks for the production, transmission and distribution of heat in densely built-up areas. The hubs of such systems consisted of energy plants that burned oil, gas or coal in order to produce hot water and steam that was then distributed to residential users (Velody, Cain, & Philips, 2003). The heating networks' inflexibility meant that they had to be mainly built in urban areas, thus becoming an inseparable component of Socialist neighbourhoods with prefabricated multi-storey apartment blocks. As many fellow Socialist states, Romania had built a complex network of district heating, in order to provide universally accessible energy service in the newly built housing units.

The newspapers from the mid 1970s, when most buildings were constructed, provide a great source of information on the socialist state's concern with the good running of DH systems throughout the city, and the training of thermal engineers that would run it. For instance, in an article from September 1978, titled "How will heat be provided in apartments?", the writer painstakingly describes the efforts to increase the productivity of all heating units, to train all the fire engineers and to decrease expenses.

> Despite this September embodying a late warm summer, we've scouted our county, analysing to which extent our heating systems are capable of providing our blocks of flats with heat when need be. Out of the communication with those responsible, we've painted a much… warmer picture than last year, although there are still some "cold" spots. The housing administration sectors, wanting to come across as *gospodari* in all regards, have long started their revisions and reparations on their heating systems and distribution networks, according to graphs and precise deadlines, being provided with the necessary funds (more than 1 million Euros).

At the same time, in most newspaper editions, there is also a complaint section, in which readers can report on the poor functioning of a radiator, or the low overall temperature in the building. Overall, though, the newspapers provide a good indication of heat as comfort as seen by both the state and the inhabitants.

Unfortunately, the post-socialist transition has been marked by the increase of the sector's numerous technical, economic and environmental problems, accompanied by its abandonment in favour of alternative methods of domestic heating. Although approx. 250 settlements in Romania had DH networks in 1990, approximately 1/5 of the households initially connected to the DH networks in these

areas had chosen to disconnect by 2004, with disconnection rates reaching 90% in some areas (Iacobescu & Badescu, 2011). In 2002, there were 184 DH systems in operation, which provided heat for 2,696,000 apartments. In 2004, the vast majority of localities with less than 20,000 inhabitants were no longer provided with DH systems (COGEN Europe, 2009).The low energy efficiency of the DH system (with losses of up to 30%) was mainly due to the losses in the heat transport and distribution networks (due, in turn, to the lack of investments)[41]. Additionally, the lack of service improvement and adequate metering[42] meant that customers were being charged ever higher prices for an increasingly poorer service (Government of Romania, 2004).



Old District Heating (DH) unit in the Mărăței neighbourhood

The lack of coherency in Romania's energy policy — thanks to which, for example, gas prices for residential consumers were consistently lower than those charged by DH companies — was coupled with the country's poorly designed and implemented regulation, as well as inadequate financial management and marketing in the DH sector (Nuorkivi, 2002). This meant that residential customers became increasingly difficult to satisfy and manage.

[41] The result was outdated equipment, oversized network coverage and irregular peak service.

[42] In 2004, only 55%of the apartment buildings connected to DH networks had meters installed, although they were compulsory under the legislation in place (2010 article).



Advertisement for apartment heating boiler, Casa Lux, 1993: "Heat, the final frontier of comfort, now surpassed by the digital heating boiler from Romstal"

Additionally, the Owner's Associations (OA) played a key role in the decline of DH systems, because they were the ones who received the invoice from the DH company. They were then responsible for dividing the invoiced amount among the respective apartment owners, in accordance with their individual consumption. Once the billed amounts had been recovered by the block administrator (someone like Mr. Bud), the OA would transfer the funds back to the DH company, informing it about any defaulting individuals. With this in mind, recuperating the unpaid bills from inhabitants would be truly difficult. Given that the bill recovery procedure was cumbersome, it led to non-payment and arrears that could amount to 70 percent of all receivables in some cases (also see Gochenour, 2001; Kennedy, 2005)[43]. The people who saw that, despite paying all their bills, they did not get warm water, looked for an alternative. This way, the heating boiler became popular. This created a situation in which individual gas-fired heating appliances became more competitive than DH networks. Advertisements such as the one shown on the previous page filled interior decoration magazines in the late 1990s, bringing in a new kind of modernity: "The technology of the future for the heat of the present", the ad reads. "Heat, the final frontier of comfort, now surpassed by the new digital heating boiler."

When people heard of it, they jumped at the chance to be in control of the amount of heat they could have, and the price of the bills they would pay at the end of the month. The first people to install apartment heating systems in their block did so around 1991. At first, there was some resistance from the authorities and the associations, and they tried to convince people to stay with the communal systems. They realised that these would become redundant, because the efficiency of the system would decrease. Since people disconnected from the core system, a lack of balance was instilled, for instance the water pressure became too weak. Payment also became complicated: the system needed the pipes, which would continue to run through everybody's houses, including the ones who had a newly installed apartment heating system, and who could turn off their heat and enjoy their neighbours' radiating heat, accompanied by the one in the running pipes. At the same time, people who stayed in the communal system would have to pay for the so-called 'losses' — the transmission of heat towards the people who had a different source. In time, that became better regulated, but Mr. Albu, a heating engineer, thinks it was already too late: "we always reacted too late to everything". According to him, there were many culprits, including the central heating company — they didn't change the technology (which became outdated), so they didn't increase efficiency; and the state, who didn't come up with an applied system of subventions.

For this reason, many people were not happy — the ones who stayed connected to the central system, but also the ones that got out; once the authorities started regulating this process, the latter were forced to pay a share, and that added onto their expenses. As Mr. Albu says: "You can't force someone to choose a certain source of heat. You have to do it logically, at least according to each stair. You could wait until everyone had the possibility, and change the system altogether. For my generation, the heating boiler became a trademark of the Romanian apartment, usually placed in the kitchen. In the cases in which the boiler didn't fit in the kitchen, it would be placed in the balcony, which would have to be closed, in order to preserve a constant temperature, and protect the boiler from the elements. While discussing my research with an art teacher during my research, he shared the same

[43] While OAs do have the legal possibility to file action against such households, in practice their priority appears to be the payment of utility services that can be discontinued relatively quickly and easily, such as water and waste.



Oil painting, Lucian Gherasim

interest in the omnipresence of heating boilers — he had even painted one as composition study, as he found it a telling element of material culture in Romanian domestic space.

Energy poverty

Importantly, the disconnection from the district heating in the favour of boiler often meant that inhabitants who didn't actually have the money for the gas bill would be forced to turn off their heating altogether. This brings me back to Fennell's study of Chicago public housing heating, where, as a condition of lease compliance for the new apartments, a transitioning resident would assume financial and physical control of her domestic utilities, including their heating. As inhabitants enjoy their freedom to turn their heating on and off, they are limited by their own financial capacities.

Thus, an additional consequence of the post-socialist transformation of Eastern and Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union is the emergence of energy poverty, a condition where households are living in inadequately heated homes (Buzar, 2007). Since 1990, the post-socialist states of Eastern Europe have been undertaking extensive regulatory reforms of their economic and legal systems, in line with the neoliberal prescriptions warranted by supra-national frameworks (Bradshaw & Stenning, 2000). One of the principal components of the restructuring process has been the reform of energy operations, to allow energy prices to be raised up to economically profitable levels. However, the lack of an adequate social safety net to compensate for energy price increases has forced many households to cut back on their energy purchases, often below biologically unacceptable limits. As a result, 'for many poor people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, fully heated homes have become a luxury rather than a necessity' (World Bank, 2003: 1).

A household is considered energy-poor if the amount of warmth in its home does not allow for participating in the 'lifestyles, customs and activities which define membership of society'. Such a definition comprises both the biologically determined limit of 21 °C necessary to maintain comfort and health (Boardman, 1991), and the subjective minimum below which an individual feels unable to perform his/her everyday life (Boardman, 1991, p. 225). Essential to my research, the number of households suffering from energy expenditure problems does not match official poverty lines defined by the state. This is because the amount of useful warmth in the home is also determined by factors such as the quality of the housing stock, heating systems, and daily occupancy patterns. Thus, aside from income, energy poverty-amelioration policies must also address technology and housing stock issues. Universal welfare support is insufficient to address the problems of the energy-poor, because it cannot resolve many of the root causes of the problem, such as inefficient homes, as well as inadequate technical and heating infrastructures (Boardman, 1991, p. 229).

Ironically enough, in H2B, while some are over-heating, others have a hard time keeping the small amount of heat in the house:

> There are people with apartment systems who wear [a thick woollen coat] in the house. I know a family - but she's single, poor one, she was in Italy for a while, she's a bit bonkers — she had a hard time and now she has a pension of 500 lei — poor thing; and then of course, how could you pay? She has an apartment system, but she never turns it on. She has many layers on and... Even in the countryside, you make a fire if you're cold.

For this reason, some still maintained the habit of heating up large plastic bottles of water, to keep warm under the blanket or wash in the morning, as described in the Water chapter. Given this variety in attitudes towards saving heat, when EU's subsidies for building maintenance became popular in Piatra-Neamț and the first blocks were insulated, the inhabitants of H2B wanted their share of polystyrene.

The transition between district heating and apartment boilers had its perks. As aforementioned, during harsh winters reaching -20 °C in the 1980s, apartments used to get very cold. Hence, during summer, people would add elements, or even entire heaters, to increase the heating capacity of the ones they already had. Before 1989, they got away with this, because the costs were divided equally — and they weren't too high in the first place. After 1989, as the prices started rising and a recalculation was necessary for individual use, they had difficulties accounting for the extra heat. The block administrator at the time then went to each house and counted the elements. Mr. Bud compared the heaters on the ground with the planned heaters, and calculated the difference. Therefore, there are currently 6 people with higher consumption, and therefore 6 people who pay more. People were actually wondering why he has less elements — because he left his heaters as the project advised. Instead of changing the heating infrastructure, he had insulated his home on the inside, and added windows. That's why he pays less. But new inhabitants are suspicious, especially if they pay more. Someone with more elements will pay more by even 1 million lei (25 pounds) during the harsh winter months — it's a huge amount, he tells me:

> And then they would come and ask me: "But Mr. Bud, why am I paying more?" "Because you added extra elements. Didn't you think that you were consuming extra?" But there are many

that still have that — there are many that even have a double heater. I was surprised when they called me — people ask me to come by and give my advice, especially elderly - and they were complaining that it's too warm. And I said: madam — poor one, she died about half a year ago — you have double the normal in your house, how could it not be too warm? The amount is defined by the one who has a normal one. What did she understand — she didn't even see well, she didn't even hear... 88 years old...

Cold in the 1980s

The interplay between the inhabitants and the building had always been one of losing or gaining heat. Even in 1974, when the building was erected in a quick process of pouring the cement onto the iron structure, the inhabitants had a hard time keeping warm. Mr. Bud has been living there ever since, after getting married: he got married in 1975 in spring, and moved in November. Ever since, he's been here. During the first winter, after his girl was born, he kept analysing their two bedrooms: one in this corner and one on the other side, at the entrance. He slept in the corner one; the little girl was on the other side, in the warmer one. But in the corner one, they began to have frost. So, in the first summer, Mr. Bud insulated all the outside walls on the inside. He put a layer of polystyrene and he re-plastered, this way insulating on the inside. The windows were all made out of wood, and the balcony doors; and so, he tripled the windows: he added another layer of glass on the outside. To his joy, the temperature increased by 6 °C. Hence, at the time of the research, Mr. Bud was insulated both on the inside, and on the outside - and he was not the only one.



"Insulate your home from moisture, cold, and noise"
Femeia Women's Magazine (1986)

Similarly, Ms. Tomin never closed the door of the balcony, because she had the flowers there, and so her living room extended by two meters into her balcony, which was also insulated on the inside. It used to be closed off with single glazed windows and metal, and now it had double glazed windows and plastic frame. I will discuss the role of the balcony in storing foods in the following chapter, but for now suffice it to say that some other neighbours had an open balcony, and could keep food there — she couldn't keep any, because hers was warm. However, she did have her storage room, which she insulated on the inside with thick polystyrene. It cost a lot of money, but she thought it was worth it: it rounded off to 400 lei, whereas the outside was 500 (£1000). And the double-glazed windows, 150 lei (£300), and the kitchen window, 5 million (£100) — that one was a present from her children. She never wanted any help from them, she was always very independent. But she was very generous with them, giving them land to build a house, and so they wanted to take care of her.

As Ms. Tomin showed me around the house, I asked her about the small black dots on her bedroom wall. Those were remnants of the time when the block was not insulated and the entire wall was black because of the mould created by the contrast of heat with the outer wall. Confused by all her insulation endeavours, I asked her when she started her efforts to maintain the heat inside the apartment. She explained that she insulated on the inside in 1987 by herself: added a layer of nylon, and a woollen carpet on top. Because it was the cold one, it had been impossible to sleep there. Because her initial insulation was not so efficient, she then added a layer of polystyrene on the inside. She then stopped having these problems, but there would still be strips of mould around the contact areas of the polystyrene plaques. Her nephew used to put pins in the wall when he was a kid, he realised he could easily pierce through — so she had to be careful that he doesn't hurt himself.

I was surprised by how much effort Ms. Tomin had put into maintaining all possible heat inside, while also complaining that it was too warm. Has it always been so warm? At the beginning of her time in the block, it had indeed been warm — this was one of the appeals of living in a block of flats, not having to worry about carrying wood to the stove. However, she had to bear with a great lack of heat in the 80s, when, for a couple of years, it was freezing in her house. Ceaușescu was in the process of paying all the country debts, she never judged the country's leader: "Had he finished that, we would have had a good life now. They made a mistake to kill him, because he built for the people. Of course, he had his own villa, but now all of them have many villas. And they use what he built (The Palace of the Parliament), but they destroyed everything — how dare they destroy the Săvinești Factory, where thousands of people used to earn a bread? People came from the countryside: they took their land when collectivisation came, but at least they gave them a job."

She used to sleep in the small room, with a blanket over the window, with socks and a hat, and a thick layer on top of the blanket. The kids used to sleep in the core room of the house, and they used to have the gas stove on. Many people recall the same experience, of co-sleeping in order to warm up[44]. In fact, cooking often took place during the night, when the flame would be strong enough (because the neighbours would be sleeping). Also, apart from being cold, it was often dark, and many research participants who were students in those times, recall studying by the candle, which provided them with both light and heat.

> Whenever you needed it most, there was no energy — the elevator, the same. We used to wash only in the kitchen. But I couldn't take off the blanket from the window until March, that's how cold it was. That was Ceaușescu's mistake. He reduced heat, light, and food. No-one died of hunger. But you used to wait for hours. Now shops are full, but no money.

Her neighbour from the 4th floor, Mihaela, now an art teacher in her 30s, remembered winters as a child: they would sleep in the middle room, because, being in the core of the apartment, it was protected from the cold walls. Her mother would sometimes turn on the oven in order to heat up the house, rendering a strong smell of gas. Due to this contrast between cold periods and quick ways of

[44] As a parallel, Japanese co-sleeping patterns in the home are often associated with functional reasons such as house size and lack of space (Caudill and Plath, 1986; Lebra, 2004), a purposive reduction of sleep disturbances in infancy (Kawasaki et al., 1994; Latz et al., 1999), and certain relational states such as close proximity, touch and intimacy, specifically *skinship* (Ben-Ari, 2005; Lebra, 2004; Rothbaum et al., 2002). The need to warm up in a situation of energy poverty does not figure in such ethnographies, however.



Sitting spaces outside the H2B block

heating, so much moist would be created, that the walls would turn black with mould, and her mother would wash them again and again. Ultimately, the solution, like in Mr. Bud's and Ms. Tomin's case, was insulating from the inside. Despite taking up space, that fixed the problem temporarily. Temporarily, because the mould would re-appear around the windows. Mihaela also remembered times of plenty when it came to heating:

> I remember being really small and having cold winters. I would go play in the snow with my brother, and I would be freezing. And my grandmother had made some woollen pants for us. And we would have underpants as well. When we would get home, we would take them off and they would be straight — frozen. And we would put them on the heaters to de-frost, so the heaters must have been warm. It was a pleasant atmosphere. Even if the block was not insulated. But society was different.

Having the stove on is recalled by Mihaela and Ms. Tomin as purely for heating purposed in this case, but more broadly, having the stove on for cooking had the additional effect of warming up the house, and so it became the centre of the home for many years. In an anthropological study of Romanian kitchens in Bucharest, Mihăilescu (2009) indicates that the kitchen in the Romanian socialist blocks of flats had become a place of refuge, due to the general lack of heating (Unlike the Hungarian kitchen that starts to open its walls towards the living room (Fehérváry, 2002). Therefore, the inhabitants of these buildings began to redesign the kitchen in order to provide for reunions with family or friends.

In contrasting socialist and post-socialist kitchens/living rooms, Mihăilescu argues that the social role that the kitchen had during communism mustn't be considered a mere 'survival' of a village model (Mihăilescu, 2009). The motives are mostly material: in the last years of the socialist regime, when



H2B before insulation during a harsh winter storm, 2006

heating was considerably reduced, families were obliged to take refuge into a smaller space that would be easy to heat up: the kitchen. It was such a commonly used space, that despite shortages, it frequently underwent refurbishing: specifically, in the shape of a corner couch around the table ("*colțar*"). This newly-revised space, small and multifunctional, became the space of family sociability. In contrast, after the revolution, this sociability left the space of the kitchen towards the living room. It is still cold, a change in temperature in the house is not the explanation; instead, the TV draws the members of the house towards the living room and consequently changes the kind of furniture: from large dining spaces towards coffee tables that allow for attention towards the television.

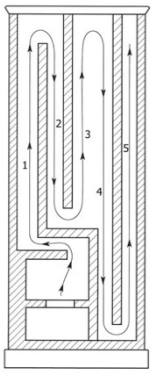
Based on her long-term ethnography inside Japanese homes, Daniels has analysed "back-stage bodily activities, such as co-sleeping and co-bathing, which generate 'social heat' and cultivate strong feelings of family solidarity and security" (Daniels, 2015, p. 2). To a great extent, 1980s Romania is a close example of "social heat" created through co-sleeping for example. Daniels also discusses the introduction of the "electrical *kotatsu*" in 1959, as a heating unit consisting of a low table covered with a warm blanket, with a heat source underneath. Through its design, it encourages sociality while warming up the body directly. Whereas a Romanian equivalent of warming up the body directly would be the electric blanket, it is in fact rarely used: most often, research participants have placed value on the overall temperature of the apartment, and the freedom one has to walk from one space to another — one particular inhabitant of the H2B block prided himself in always keeping all doors open and avoiding big furniture, to allow for space. What would come closer would be the "*sobă*", a ceramic heating unit based on wood (a log burner), which could also have a section aimed at cooking. Such an object (sometimes comprising of an entire wall in old Romanian houses) would bring the family

together, for warming up while cooking together around it, is similar ways to the *kotatsu*, as one of Daniels' research participants point out:

> When I was little we sat around a hori kotatsu [a kotatsu built into the floor] in winter. That was the setting (ba) of the family; and close by, there would be a hibachi (charcoal brazier). I really love the hibachi. We would gather around it and relax. We would place a mesh on top and bake dried potatoes, pounded rice cakes (mochi) and so on … Well, you know, today, it would probably be a room with a TV in it? (Daniels, 2015, p. 7).

Similarly, Romanians will foster feelings of nostalgia for the *sobă* and the charming way in which it would bring heat in the house. While visiting a friend who lived outside Piatra-Neamț, in his grandparent's old house, a fellow companion suggested making a fire. He took great pleasure in gathering the wood and putting it inside the *sobă*. As he was adding fire to the *sobă*, he said: "See, when I add wood to the *sobă*, I gain heat, and it's a pleasure! At home, when I turn on the apartment boiler, I lose money." He then took his time to emphasize the contrast between the embodied, active gesture of adding fire for the fire, contrasting it with the abstract, more passive gesture of pressing the button of a boiler that then makes your house warmer. As he did so, he kept touching the ceramic tiles of the *sobă* with his hand, checking if it had reached a uniform level of heat, while also warming up his body. As seen in the scheme on the left, the *sobă* works by circulating the heat and it has been pointed out by many research participants that it is meant to warm up both the space, and the body, through direct interaction with it.





In present-day Romania, in contrast with the Japanese way of creating heat in a social way, apartments abound with examples of separation in the inhabited space, or individuals living alone (it being a shrinking, ageing city). It is often the case that the husband and the wife sleep in separate rooms (usually, snoring is invoked as the reason). Even more commonly, they watch TV in different rooms (living room and bedroom). Although the TV set was also present in socialist times, advertised as a "fun, instructive and educational" means (see advertisement below), it was much less used. The two hours a day of state television did not make it a good competitor to Radio Free Europe, aired from Munich, which provided Romanians with both music and international news that would not be present on national television. During my fieldwork in 2014–2015, in contrast, the TV set would always be on, in almost every apartment I visited.

If the family is struggling with paying for utilities during winter, the rooms that are used the most will then be heated — typically, the ones containing the TV set, such as the living room or the bedroom. The rest of the rooms, on the other hand, might be left cold — for instance, the heater in the kitchen is rarely on, because during cooking the room warms up anyway, and it need to be aired well after cooking. For this reason, tensions can occur if a member of the family forgets that the kitchen door is open.

Wool and wood

Apart from the more straight-forward technique of insulating with polystyrene, the apartment of Ms. Tomin from the beginning of this chapter presented one with at least two more insulation techniques: wall carpets and wood panels[45]. As I walked into the small entrance room, I saw the window with a small embroidered curtain. A photo of her wedding was on the wall, on top of a wall carpet. Rooted in the Romanian countryside houses, fabrics that would keep warmth in would cover many of the walls of the apartments I came across during my research. This was her cat's favourite room, kept warm by the woollen wall carpet:



Women's magazines from the 1980s, carry a multitude of advice towards the socialist housewife, from decorations to storage space — most of these will be discussed in the Storage chapter, but for now I will briefly discuss the topic of heat insulation, as it is illustrated above: "Insulate your home from moisture, cold and noise". Revealing for my purposes, the article states: "Housewives know that in traditional formulas, a good insulating technique is covering the walls, especially the Northern ones, with woollen wall carpets. Additionally, one can use larger carpets for the floors, to make sure no heat gets lost through the floor" (Femeia 1986). In addition to this, the article advised housewives to cover the rims of their windows with cotton strips — a practice still common in Romania nowadays.

Her living room walls were covered in a big wooden bookcase, a distinctive sight of Romanian living rooms (Drazin, 2001). Additionally, the walls of her hallways were covered in wood: she put up the wall panelling in 1984 and covered the walls in order to avoid painting. It also became warmer, so she was pleased. Wood panels were very common in the Romanian apartments I visited in Piatra-Neamț, used

[45] Look up Romanian article about traditional ways of heating the house and old English article from Inge.



Oil painting, Lucian Gherasim

for both their aesthetic and thermal properties. Especially in a mountain area like Piatra-Neamț, that was renowned for its wood industry, it was a common way of covering the walls, second to wall papers. Not far from Piatra-Neamț, Adam Drazin conducted an ethnography of apartment blocks in Suceava in the early 2000s, investigating the "knowledge about and practices of wood" starting from the obvious wide spread of this material in the spaces carefully cared for by the inhabitants, trying to highlight the primary qualities of domesticity and "care" (Drazin, 2001). He focused on the floor, often made of wood in living rooms, bedrooms and hallways. The wooden floor covers the concrete widely used in building blocks of flats. The style of wood flooring had changed in time, from beech boards in the 1960s laid in a straight edge pattern to zigzag designs appeared later on. During the 80s, a time of severe rationing and shortages, the new residents were offered opulent oak boards, but they often discovered they had a type of linoleum imitating wood in their apartments (Drazin, 2001, p. 178).

In Romania, despite a certain nostalgia towards wood in the house, wood inside the block of flats triggers different kinds of images: because of the dissociation between wood in the house and gas in the apartment, wood had little to do with modernity in some participant's views. In a block of flats which allowed wood heating (had an airway especially made in case someone wanted to build a *sobă*), only one neighbour, on the 2nd floor actually built one. The neighbours on the 4th floor were annoyed by the wood smell that would go up the building when he would use the *sobă*, and would make jokes about his practice of stocking up wood in the hallway of the building. After the trees behind the building would be trimmed, he would quickly go and pick of the remaining bits of wood. Often, they would be wet, and he would have to dry them. For this purpose, he would keep the front and back doors of the building

open, and upset his neighbours, who would then complain about the cold air draft ('current', discussed in more detail in *The Window* chapter).

At the same time, I also knew a young family, Smaranda and Călin Băluț, who lived in a wooden house on the hills of Piatra-Neamț, and used wood as the main fuel. When Smaranda would interrupt a conversation to add wood to the heating system, her friends would admire her, despite the difficulties of such an endeavour - you could never estimate how warm it will become, and you had to constantly feed wood into the burner, otherwise the house would get cold, which they carefully avoided, as they had a new born baby. For this purpose, Smaranda would often touch the heater while talking to me, using her body as a metre for the heat levels in the house — similarly to Mr. Bud checking his heaters, she would constantly assess whether the heating system required further attention.

In the case of the Dodeni neighbourhood of Bicaz, however, heating up with wood had even more distant resonances. Bicaz is a small industrial town (with a population of 8,643 in 2002, but surely now much smaller but to huge emigration in Romanian small towns), half an hour driving from Piatra-Neamț, which developed around the wood and cement industry, now closed (ask parents about state of Bicaz). Having high degrees of poverty and unemployment, inhabitants could not afford to pay for gas. With the forest behind their block of flats, they were tempted into building log burners inside their apartments. In contrast to the A blocks which had an airway included in the architectural project, the blocks in Bicaz were only meant to be using gas. This considered, inhabitants created their own airways, through an improvised tube, as visible in the photograph on the right.



The poor state of the buildings was striking to me, and the potential health risks and fire hazards seemed worrisome. When discussing this with an inhabitant and her daughter, she was saying that they got used to the thought of a potential danger, but that this was their only solution. On the ground floor, most of these blocks of flats had a shed for the wood. I didn't spend enough time there to see how acquiring and burning wood for heating was seen by the local population, but when I showed these photographs to my middle-class research participants from Piatra-Neamț, they were shocked and disappointed with how the state could allow this to happen: "Look at these poor people, the





things they come up with just to keep warm". This final case study goes to show that the transition discussed in the first chapter, from the house to the block, from wood to cement, happened in a complex and convoluted manner, and was facilitated by the DH heating system that became pervasive in Romanian neighbourhoods. Their closing, together with the steep increase in prices and decrease in incomes, has help a gap in people's possibilities. This gap has been filled either by an industrious building administrator, such as Mr. Bud, or has been left empty, vulnerable to improvisations that can be harmful and inefficient.

In this chapter I aimed at describing the various kinds of actors involved in domestic energy consumption, and the choices they get to make, according to their knowledge and economic power — from the inhabitant deciding to buy an apartment heating system, to the City Hall retreating their semi-centralised heating systems off the grid. Infrastructural forms are thus "good to think with", especially given the ways in which they mediate certain 'recurrent binaries' in critical thought: macro and micro, object and agent, human and non-human. This mediating quality has to do, perhaps, with the 'peculiar ontology' of infrastructure as both 'things and relations between things' (Larkin 2013, 329). Comparing socialist and post-socialist heating infrastructure reveals extraordinary insights into the political economy of the time. The indiscriminate sharing of the same heating resource, as offered by DH during socialism, stands in stark contrast to the present-day individual heating systems warming up each apartment, where financial resources allow for it. Heat is thus (1) political, but also (2) embodied — as shown in my description of Ms. Tomin's overheated apartment; (3) aesthetic — as seen in her wall carpets, pillows and decorations; (4) material — dependent on the material qualities of the heating infrastructure which engender unequal heating in the building.

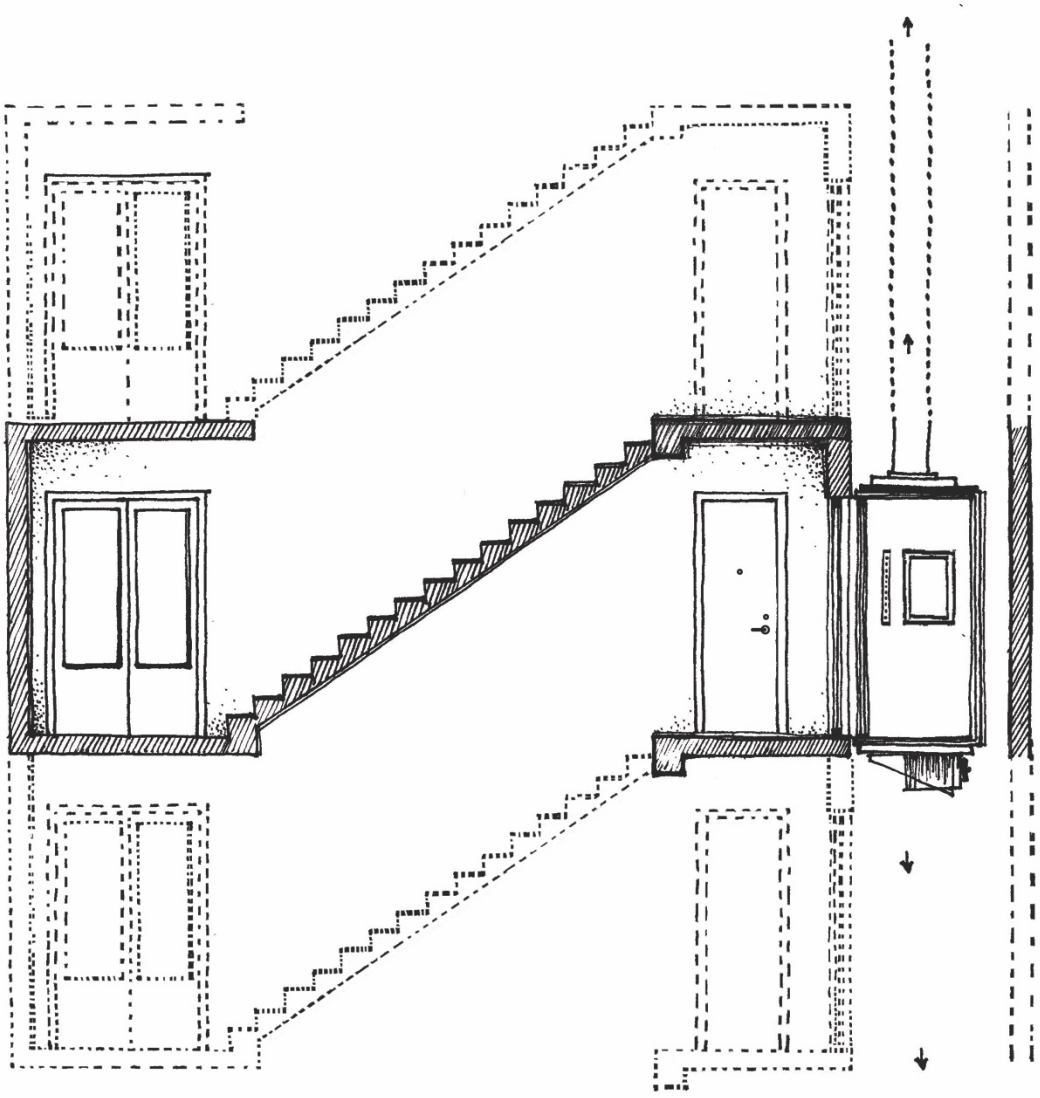
In his article, *Designing urban knowledge: competing perspectives on energy and buildings* (2006), engineer and social scientist Simon Guy critiques the techno-economic paradigm, in which energy efficiency in buildings is technical problem amenable to scientific methods and solutions (Guy, 2006). From a techno-economic point of view, buildings are materially similar, physical structures; from a sociotechnical perspective, they are the material product of competing social practices. In the same way, energy saving action, rather than being an individual, rational action, is a socially structured, collective choice, and the role of social science research becomes the identification of context-specific opportunities for technological innovation: "Although two buildings, standing side by side, may well appear physically and materially similar, investigation into their respective modes of production and consumption may reveal profoundly different design rationales, which in turn might help explain variations in energy performance" (Guy, 2006, p. 653). Tellingly, all the H blocks on the boulevard apart from Mr. Bud's had individual, apartment heating systems; some of Mr. Bud's neighbours were indeed quite proud to have access to the common heating, telling stories about how cold it was in the neighbouring blocks. Instrumental to my research, Guy asks the following question: "Why do particular technical solutions emerge at a certain time and in a particular place?"(Guy, 2006). In this case, why H2B's block heating system? Why Ms. Ionescu's apartment heating boiler? Why Dodeni's wood heating in blocks that don't provide such technology in the first place? These solutions are a reaction to the specific perils faced by a shrinking post-socialist city — a city that does not have the means to deal with political and economic transitions particular to this time.

Hence, descriptions of household heat management speak volumes about post-socialist transitions beyond the household itself, bridging the gap between the state and the private. On the one hand,

this chapter explores the manner in which the technical problems of heating an apartment building are connected to the conditions of a shrinking, ageing city (fewer inhabitants, dilapidated equipment). On the other hand, it analyses how inhabitants take decisions in conditions of limited resources and changing infrastructures. As such, it speaks about the larger "coping strategies" that Romanians, in their attempt to maintain a decent level of heating in their homes, come up with in the context of limited resources. Additionally, heating privatisation encouraged a great deal of the inhabitants to withdraw from the core system, in order to buy individual boilers and improve functionality, while saving money for themselves. This has steadily undermined the building's heating system, depriving it of financial resources and making it less efficient. Consequently, the block can no longer be treated as a whole in the interest of the most efficient levels of control. Additionally, some apartments are left unoccupied altogether, and thus unheated, meaning that neighbouring flats benefit less from each other's heat. The following chapter will address this lack of equilibrium, both in terms of thermal balance and overall maintenance of the common spaces.



The non-functioning heating centre of Dărmănești neighbourhood, Piatra-Neamț



The Staircase

> Buffer spaces [in the building] are very important, especially the entrance and the exit into the staircases of blocks of flats with multiple floors. The staircase can be compared to a ventilation tube through which cold air drafts circulate. By placing buffer spaces at the entrance of the apartment from the side of the staircase, we can reduce their negative effect. (Caffé, 1987, p. 53)

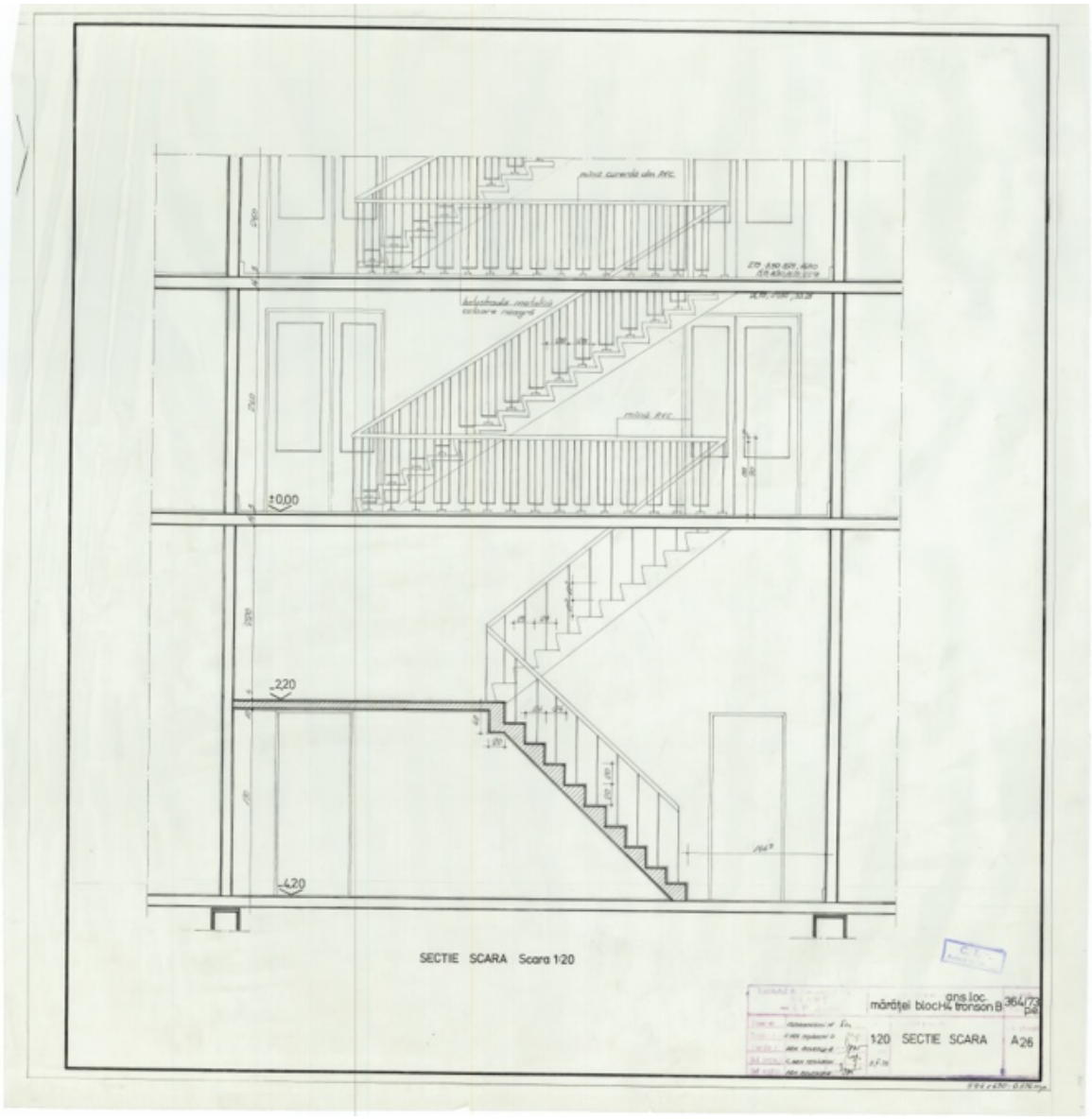
During a cold November evening, I joined the Inhabitants Association's meeting, in which the most recent utility and maintenance costs were being discussed. After going through the latest increases in prices for water, electricity and heat, inhabitants started sharing their efforts to maintain a balanced temperature in their home, overcoming excessively low or high temperatures, as discussed in the previous chapter. Especially for the ones who had their own heating system, the absence of neighbours posed great difficulties during winter time — if underneath or above their apartment, the neighbour was absent from their apartment while abroad, what do to? How to make sure that the ceiling and/or floor stays warm? This was one of the most pressing difficulties of living in a shrinking city, and it was by all means not unique to H2B.

If one takes the building as a whole, it becomes a body that warms up all at once. In that case, all spaces devoid of heat, such as empty apartments, will "drain the heat" from the neighbours. Mr. Rugină, a retired financial controller living in the Mărăței neighbourhood, once told me in an annoyed tone that it was because his neighbour moved to Italy, that his ceiling was cold and now he had to insulate the apartment with polystyrene to keep any heat he produces in the home as much as possible. In a similar vein, in A3, Ms. Ionescu was sad and frustrated at the news of her neighbour moving out. Because she lived on the 4th floor, she had a cold ceiling — as her neighbour would move, she would have a cold floor and she was preparing for higher bills the winter to follow.

Considering the above, the H2B inhabitants had an advantage in contrast to other blocks of flats: they had a warm staircase. As mentioned in the Heating chapter, most blocks of flats had given up their heaters as soon as energy prices rose, because they didn't want to spend extra money for heating that was not directly connected to their homes. Additionally, once each apartment became responsible for the levels and costs of heat, people would often not turn on their own system, only because they would hope to get enough heat through the ceilings, the floors, and the heating pipes that would go through their apartments. For this reason, during cold winters, some staircases became so cold, that the contrast between the staircase temperature and the apartment temperature brought about humidity, then mould on the contact wall of the apartment. During my research, several inhabitants from various neighbourhoods shared their frustration with this cold wall — whereas the outside walls were ticker, and could face the temperature contrast, the wall towards the staircase had never been designed as a tick, outside wall. For this reason, I have come across apartments which insulated that very wall with polystyrene before any other.

In H2B, this was not necessary — Mr. Bud prided himself in warming up the building as a whole. On multiple occasions, he shared his thermodynamics knowledge with me, stressing the importance of having a stable thermal environment, in which all the spaces of the building are maintained a constant

temperature. Frustrated with the absence of many of the inhabitants (and with the subsequent cold temperatures in each apartment), he even contacted some of them, asking if he could turn on their heaters to 10%, to make sure that they don't come back to a mouldy apartment, but also to save on the overall expenses by having a more uniformly warm building. Interestingly, although he openly (and proudly) shared this with me, he was more reluctant to do so with his neighbours.



Why would he be discrete about such a noble endeavour? The reason became apparent during the Association's meeting, when he mentioned the importance of the heaters in the common spaces. Especially now that the heater on the 3rd floor had been stolen and the one at the entrance had been broken during a similar theft attempt, they had to maintain a constant temperature in the building[46]. As soon as he started talking about this, people made reluctant comments about paying more for heating the common spaces. He replied by giving the example of a child going to school in the morning, and adjusting his body temperature gradually as he exits the building but, ultimately, he didn't insist on the expenses. Instead, he shared a similar interaction with a neighbour who wasn't at the meeting, but who was puzzled by the presence of the warm heaters, and who didn't agree with paying for them. "But do you pay for them, madam? Where do you see them on the expense list?", he asked her. Indeed, Mr. Bud "hid" those costs into the elevator electricity section — because the elevator was the main common expense, inhabitants would not necessarily be aware of a slightly higher amount, but they would reap the benefits of a lower individual heating bill.

This disconnect between people's lack of willingness to pay for the common spaces and their expectation of wellbeing puzzled me, and I started paying close attention to the spaces in-between — both inside the block of flats (the stairs themselves, the elevator, the laundry room, the top of the building, the garbage disposal system, etc.) and outside (the benches, the playground, the carpet beater, etc.). Additionally, by looking at the spaces between the apartments, I learned about the effects of a shrinking population. The absence of people to warm up the apartments led me to something else: not only were not many people to produce heat, but there also not many people to pay for the maintenance of the common spaces, or to construct a sense of community such as the one present when the buildings were initially erected (as I described in the *The House and the Block* chapter).

The block of flats as a manner of dwelling was defined through its communal nature — "communism" expressed through the materiality of the built environment. During socialism, the private-public distinction was very clear, and cut at the entrance of apartment — it was only once one closed their apartment door, that their domestic space would come to life. In contrast, since the change of regime, the public-private gradient has gained more nuances, and the apartment has "spilled outwards" in creative ways — the balconies were filled with plants, Christmas decorations, sparrow nests; the patch of land next to the building, with flowers, vegetables and dwarves. At the same time, City Hall itself also put pressure on this space, replacing the green areas with parking spaces, and thus removing the buffer zone that blocks of flats used to benefit from (in terms of both noise and dust). In this chapter, I explore these in-between spaces, or buffer spaces, and address what their negotiation can reveal about post-socialist changes. As a telling illustration, many inhabitants living on the ground floor had found a way to bypass the common spaces, and to create a separate exit for their own apartment:

[46] Apart from the ones on each floor, there were five more heaters on the 12th floor.



Entrance created by the inhabitant directly into the balcony, without entering the block's common spaces

Apart from the expansion of the apartments onto the public areas around the blocks, new small businesses were also demanding terrain: one of the inhabitants of the C4 block, a few streets away from H2B, had started her own business, selling honey and fizzy water (as mentioned in the Water chapter). Interestingly, her small construction (a room made out of tin) allowed her to spend a lot of time watching who goes in and out of her building, and hearing the latest stories. One day, while chatting to her for about an hour, I counted at least ten people who respectfully said hello and started a conversation. Her initiative was admired by other members of the community with whom I spoke, and who benefited from her high-quality honey and refreshing sparkling drinks. At the same time, she would speak of her neighbours with more reluctance than enthusiasm, pointing out that she would specifically avoid gossiping, especially with the elderly ladies who sit on the bench close to her stand all the time.





I have even encountered ground-level apartments in which the inhabitants made room for a chicken cottage under the balcony, sealing the one-meter space between the balcony floor and the ground. In this case, a vegetable garden created a buffer zone between the balcony and the parking lot next to it, somewhat concealing the chickens. When City Hall officials would come check the gardens, the inhabitants would be forced to give up their investment, which would then be confiscated in exchange for decorative flowers that would match the rest of the city. This chapter will be sprinkled with photographs of spaces between the apartments and between the blocks of flats which are appropriated by their inhabitants.

Maintenance of common spaces inside the building

As one enters the A3 block of flats, across H2B, two things stand out: the scented smell and the luminosity of the walls. Firstly, it smells intensely like *tămâie*, an Orthodox church incense. Mr. Borș, a retired policeman who had been living in the block of flats since its construction in 1980, was also a very religious man, who went to church every Sunday. In time, he became a sort of handyman at church, fixing what needed to be fixed — among his responsibilities, he took it upon himself to make this incense in his basement, which triggered the suspicion of his neighbours, who now realised that Mr. Borș was using communal resources, such as water or electricity, for his own purposes. His neighbour from the third floor, Ms. Mihalache, made a complaint against him at City Hall, but each time they came to verify his basement, he pretended that he didn't have the key until, ultimately, he took away the pipe for the inspection, only to reinstall it after.

Nevertheless, Mr. Borș was also appreciated by his neighbours for his painting work in 2004. At the time, he was the block administrator and he took the initiative of painting the entire staircase by himself, starting with the ground floor, all the way to the 5th floor, where the attics were. Seeing that there were no funds from the City Hall for such maintenance work, he raised money from the rest of the inhabitants, and started the work himself. Interestingly, this still left room for suspicion, as neighbours pointed out that he afterwards painted his own apartment, assumingly with the remaining paint that everyone had contributed to.

While giving this example to Mr. Albu, the administrator of a block close-by, he confirmed that among the various kinds of maintenance work, cleaning is done from the Association's money: "The moment you walk into the common space of a block, you realise what kinds of relationships they have". Indeed, the staircases I have visited throughout my research varied extensively, and they became a visual representation of how *gospodar* the block administrator was. This way, they provided the inhabitant with a point of comparison for assessing the work that was being done in their vicinity. One evening in her apartment in H2B, Ms. Tomin told me about the block of flats in which her sister lived, and the administrator, a previous colleague of Mr. Bud from the Săvinești Industrial Complex:

> You know how fair he is? The luxury that is in there! What a fair man… What improvements they made… Here, we gave a lot of money — but we never saw it! … But I must shut up, I mustn't get into conflicts. But we always must give money. Money, money, all the time, money! Now, with the stairs, I didn't even think that those stairs wouldn't be well made from the beginning. Another patchwork, for all this money? In one or two years, it will break again.

She was referring to Mr. Bud's repair work for the stairs at the entrance of the building, for which she refused to pay. When I asked her why, she elusively told me that she wondered what had happened to the 200 lei that were paid a few years back.

> I agree with paying more money, as long as we do something well, not patchwork every year… Something well done. Not everyone gives money, but there are probable people who know of certain expenses, who are good with finances, and that's why they don't give any money. And I don't want to fight. Someone else could take over if they wanted. But there's no-one

who does, or who could, due to the heating system. He is the only one who turns it on, he checks it from time to time; it's an activity that keeps him going.

The entrance stairs

What was so controversial about the stairs at the entrance of the building? At the beginning of 2015, Mr. Bud decided to fix them, as they had been broken for a long time, and thus a danger to the elderly inhabitants during winter time. He would often notice that each time people renovated their homes, they dropped everything on the stairs, and broke them, and for hence left messages on the door, asking them to take care of the stairs, but to no avail. Moreover, the railing of the stairs had been stolen (by the "gypsies", he assumed). The neighbours doubted his choice to fix the stairs in February, when it was so cold, but he knew very well that he can work on this as long as there are more than 5 °C. A few days before, the concrete had been set up, covering the holes of the stairs — now, the wooden frame needed to be removed, and the stairs needed polishing.





We agreed that I would film the process for the documentary, and decided to meet in his office, to wait for the constructor and his team. The constructor was almost an hour late, and Mr. Bud was starting to lose his patience and his calm… It was the same person who had insulated the building (as described in *The Wall Insulation* chapter), and Mr. Bud had often landed him money in times of need. He had indeed done much for him, finding new insulating jobs for other blocks he was in touch with, going to a TV show to advertise for his company (they paid a lot of money to the TV station for that), etc. Even this stairs work, it was partly aimed at helping him gain an income. "How is it possible to have millions in summer, and no money for bread in winter?" He had even helped him get out of legal trouble, when he was caught driving without a licence (it had been confiscated), and risked jail time. All this considered, he felt disrespected when the constructor was late, and he kept calling him, with no success. He was restless also because he had slept poorly — at most, 2 hours — his state of health was not at its peak. By the time the constructor finally called, Mr. Bud was very upset, and unwilling to pick up — instead, he was sharing stories with me about the water quality in the block. After a few minutes, as he looked out the window, he saw that the constructor had arrived, and that he was starting to work on the stairs. He briefly came in to say hello and ask if he could plug something into the energy socket. We took a small break from our discussion, so that I film the renovation process.

Working on these stairs meant a lot of physical, but also financial effort, because people would have a hard time paying him back. In fact, the neighbour who would typically the most to these costs was Ms. Iosub, who lived in England, and came back every couple of months. Her son was a doctor there, and they have two children - she stayed to help them. Mr. Bud discusses all expenses by phone with her and she sends the money. When they last spoke, he told her about the incident that happened during Christmas (she was flooded when a pipe broke down), and she agreed to pay for the repair cost. "Our neighbour who lives in England understands, but these people who live here and witness everything, they don't."

For instance, Ms. Tomin went past the workers while they were mending the stairs and she stopped to analyse the work that was being done, reluctant to the fact that they were not replacing them altogether. Mr. Bud would not even consider such major work: "Can you imagine how much *that* would cost?", he said in despair. A few days later, when Ms. Tomin came by to pay her utility bills and her contribution to the heating system's maintenance, Mr. Bud asked her for 20 lei (about £4) for the stairs. In a strict voice, she told him that she would pay for what needs to be done, but not for the stairs. She had many more expenses, such as taxes and medicine, and wanted others to pay: "the ones who never do". As mentioned in *The Administration Room*, only a few neighbours had the willingness and/or financial capacity to contribute to the maintenance costs of the building.

The elevator

As mentioned in *The House and the Block*, the new inhabitants of the blocks of flats in the 1970s were charmed by the far-reaching views from their new windows, looking onto the hills surrounding the city. This was only possible by means of the elevator, who brought both enthusiasm and reluctance. During the OA meeting, Mr. Bud complained: "I can't record how many people go up and down the elevator — the ones who do not live here. How can you make those pay? You don't know who they are. And there are times in which — it happened to me as well, I had to wait for 15 minutes before I could go down." His listeners agreed, especially Mr. Vasiliu, a retired physics teacher living on the 9th floor. He very much cared for the elevator: without it, he was vulnerable. Similarly, Mr. Poenaru specifically chose the third floor during the block's construction — he could choose any floor, but he chose one that was not too high, not too low: Not only did he dislike heights, but he thought forward towards his old age — what if the elevator doesn't always work?

The elevator is a strong social glue for the entire block, bringing people together as they waited for it to arrive on their floor — but for the elderly living on the top floors, it was a truly vital element of everyday life. Indeed, the elevator would often get stuck — there was a little wheel that would always jump. In theory, it was easy to put it back into place; but out the of 9 children in the block, always rushing up and down, "and slamming the elevator door", none could reach the wheel. In the past, he had asked Ion, the elevator repair man, to replace it. Ion did indeed replace it, but with an equally old one, that would still jump.



Mr. Bud, patiently waiting for the elevator

Still, Mr. Bud prided himself that 15 years ago he managed to replace the entire system of transmission, which at the time was worth €10,000 (about £920):

> I don't want to brag, but I had my possibilities and my informational system, and I managed to retrieve one that was not being used — an old one. This summer, the block next doors had to walk up and down for two months. And each owner had to pay an advance of 1500 lei (about £300), and they replaced what we replaced, plus the electronic side — they made the commands a bit nicer; at the end of the day, I think it works less well.

I described this exchange in more detail in *The Administration Room* chapter, but for now I want to highlight that Mr. Bud had managed to utilise his social network in order to both assert himself as a worthy leader, and to carry out a vital maintenance work which would have otherwise cost the inhabitants a lot of money, as was the case in many other blocks of flats. This replacement was also a testimony of a long relationship with Mr. Ion, who had been fixing the elevators of the blocks on the street ever since they had been built (and who shared stories of the times in which there were only houses in the neighbourhood, instead of tower blocks). During my fieldwork, Mr. Ion retired, and Mr. Bud went through a number of attempts to find a person — the first one who was sent by the elevator maintenance company was unreliable, as he drank during office hours. Mr. Bud had set up a room on the 12th floor, for keeping all the necessary repair tools, and this new employee would drink and smoke in that room, throwing the cigarette butts out the window in such a way that, without his knowledge, these landed in the balconies of some of the inhabitants. It was due to their complaints, that Mr. Bud discovered the bad habits of the new employee. This posed great dangers if someone were stuck, and they couldn't be helped by someone under the influence of alcohol, so Mr. Bud swiftly contacted his boss, and he was soon replaced.



Mr. Bud heading towards the door as he sees that inhabitants are coming in, then helping them operate the elevator

Despite the inherent frustration with its technical problems, the elevator created a specific dynamic of interaction in the building: because people waited for the elevator on the ground floor, next to the administration room, they would often stop and chat. At the same time, they were an easier "pray" for Mr. Bud, who could see that they were entering the building through the window of his office, and would approach them as they waited for the elevator. In contrast, across the street, the A3 block had four floors and no elevator, thus the interaction between the neighbours happened in spaces that were spread over all the floors.

Apart from the words that were exchanged, non-verbal messages were communicated through displays on each floor. For instance, Mr. Borș would place linden branches above the doors of the neighbours he looked up to: the ones who joined him in church on a Sunday, and the ones from the same floor as himself: thus, on the second floor, each door had a branch, and on the 3rd, only two of them did. The same arrangement repeated during every holiday: for Christmas, the same doors would be decorated with pine tree. Aside from Mr. Borș' branches, in A3 one could find framed photos, religious icons, portraits of historical figures, or small piece of wooden furniture, with decorative plants, masking the water bottles for cleaning and sitting alongside the electricity and has meters. In contrast, in the H2B block, the individual floors were not particularly decorated — if anything, Mr. Bud would have a hard time asking his neighbours to come together on each floor and take care of it (such as the poor state of the 6th floor, discussed earlier in *The Administration Room*).



The use of the elevator to arrive straight to one's door made it so that inhabitants from different floors would never see each other's levels, especially given that home visits were very rare, and usually took place only in case of an infrastructural breakdown (such as the one described earlier in *The Water Tap*).


PERICOL DE
ELECTROCUTARE

With this in mind, I have experienced the extensive use of the elevator, and was not surprised to see how expensive the electricity bill was.

> If someone stays here with me for two hours, you will see how people slam the door of the elevator — tzustz, boom, poof! — all these doors; how can these last for ever; Ion, sure, he's a fine mechanic. But in order to fix that system, you need material, you need craft. But the cause remains — no matter if he replaces them or not.

The neighbours reacted without delay:

> Mr. Vasiliu: Do not take offense, but I do not share your opinion. You open the elevator door, let go of it, and see that it is poorly adjusted.
>
> Ms. Anăstăsoaie: It slams itself.
>
> Mr. Vasiliu: And there were times in which the door would not close — you would have to hold it with your hand - and people did so. So, there are more problems. We ask you, because you know them better, to talk to the new company - because before it worked better, they would also bring better equipped people.

This discussion about use and maintenance was complicated by the fact that, on the second floor, an apartment was occupied not by a family, but by an accounting firm, which had many clients. After a similar meeting in the building, they had decided to ask the firm to, as much as possible, invite its clients to walk up, in order for the elevator to consume reasoning. The same reasoning was applied to the teacher on the 8th floor, who was giving private lessons to students after class. The teacher took the neighbours' suggestion very seriously, and asked the students to walk all the way up to the 8th floor, which they did. Unsurprisingly, the neighbours then complained about the noise that the students were making, and asked the teacher to instruct them to take the elevator instead.

When Mr. Anton showed suspicion towards the common costs, in contrast to the block of flats he had lived in before, Mr. Bud replied firmly:

> If you have a four-person family, you pay 50 or 60 lei for the energy of the elevators (6 kilowatts) — that's a lot. We are 85 people here, but there are 200 circulating each day. How do you know who lives here and who doesn't? But you have to pay for everyone. So, you can't compare.

Ms. Jora, the old lady on the first floor had asked Mr. Bud to leave tension for the elevator to go to the first floor, without paying. He accepted out of thoughtfulness, but also with a strategic approach in mind: if he did ask her to pay, everyone would need to pay, and then Mr. Toma, a priest's son-in-law, would rebel, because he always goes up the stairs, because he is young and he likes to exercise. Similarly, the Ionescu family from across the street in A3, chose the fourth floor specifically because they wanted to make sure that they exercise each time they went up to their floor. With old age, they doubted their initial reasoning, and preferred a lower floor — but in its turn, a lower floor came with the higher danger of theft.

The front door

Many of the blocks of flats I entered throughout my fieldwork had messages about safety in their billboards: "In order to avoid theft, please never open the door to strangers." "After 9.00 p.m., please lock the front door of the block of flats with the key, for reasons of safety." "Please avoid going outside after dark." "Lately the numbers of crimes have increased, for example: (1) Robberies and personal attacks (2) People pretending they are raising money for the Inhabitants Associations (3) People who sell all sorts of products […] If you notice suspicious people, please call 112 immediately. Every action put together by the Inhabitant's Association will be brought to your attention by means of billboard posters or discussion during our meetings."



Shadow cover added by inhabitants at the entrance of a block of flats

For this reason, most blocks of flats had installed an interphone system, though which access would only be gained by calling the apartment directly. Whereas in the past the door of the block of flats had always been opened, after 1989, most of them were sealed shut. One of the companies that proliferated the use of such interphones was Electra, with its headquarters in Iasi, two hours away from Piatra. In an article from 2007, its CEO remembered the beginnings of the company in 1991: it was only after two years of activity that they received their first order for a block of flats in Iasi. "At the time, people didn't know what it was and they didn't see its use", but once the orders started flowing, the company saw the value of people's need for security in their buildings. In time, as the company grew, they started automatizing the production and developing the technology required to improve the security of these systems. This way, by 2007, they had 70 distributors and 120 installers, and their business numbers reached 2.5 million Euros.

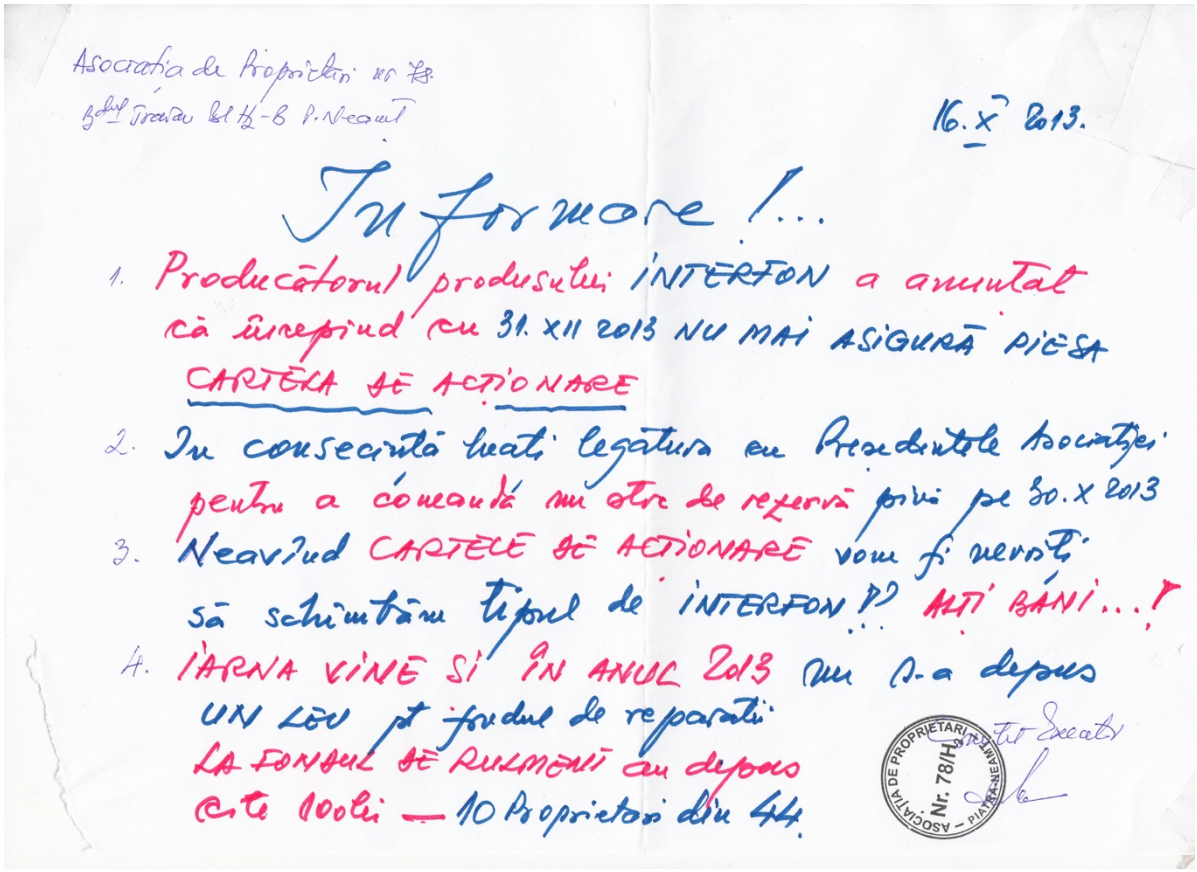


Google Image search for "Electra Interphone", showcasing various models

Despite their popularity, the interphone systems were often believed to defeat their purpose: inhabitants would often open the door without actually having a dialogue with the person downstairs. During my research, I witnessed a few tensions in families due to the man's lack of care towards who gets to walk into the building. Several articles in the local press also highlighted the responsibility that inhabitants had towards their own safety, entitled "The Interphone — Universal Key", "Block inhabitants open the door to anyone", "Recommendations to prevent theft", etc. A raid organized by the local police was filmed by a local TV station: to the surprise of the policemen, people would not only let strangers in, but they would also open their own door, while carrying on with their household chores. The footage shows the policemen scolding the trusting inhabitants, who in their turn don't seem to mind. Having said this, I often heard stories of thefts in apartments at a lower floor and of storage spaces (basements or attics), even as inhabitants were home. Once people had such an experience (or knew someone who did), the trustful attitude would disappear, in favour of Internet articles advising one how to stay safe:

- *Never open the door without using the peeping hole, add a chain lock to your door*
- *Lock the door even if you are home*
- *Never allows sales persons in your home*
- *Never keep large sums of money in your house*
- *Use the interphone efficiently*
- *Use two door locking systems*

In H2B, like in all other blocks of flats, an interphone system had been installed very early on, to keep away unwanted visitors, including homeless people who might seek refuge during the cold winter nights. Interestingly, the technology had become obsolete, like in the case of the heating system for which replacement pieces were not being produced. A billboard poster written by Mr. Bud, read:


Asociația de Proprietari nr 78
B-dul Traian bl 42-B P.Neamț

16.X 2013.

Înformare!...

1. Producătorul produsului INTERFON a anunțat că începînd cu 31.XII 2013 NU MAI ASIGURĂ PIESA CARTELA DE ACTIONARE
2. În consecință luați legătura cu Președintele Asociației pentru a comanda un altă de rezervă până pe 30.X 2013
3. Neavînd CARTELE DE ACTIONARE vom fi nevoiți să schimbăm tipul de INTERFON?! ALȚI BANI...!
4. IARNA VINE ȘI ÎN ANUL 2013 nu s-a depus UN LEU pt fondul de reparații LA FONDUL DE RULMENT au depus cîte 100lei — 10 Proprietari din 44

ASOCIAȚIA DE PROPRIETARI Nr. 78/H PIATRA-NEAMȚ

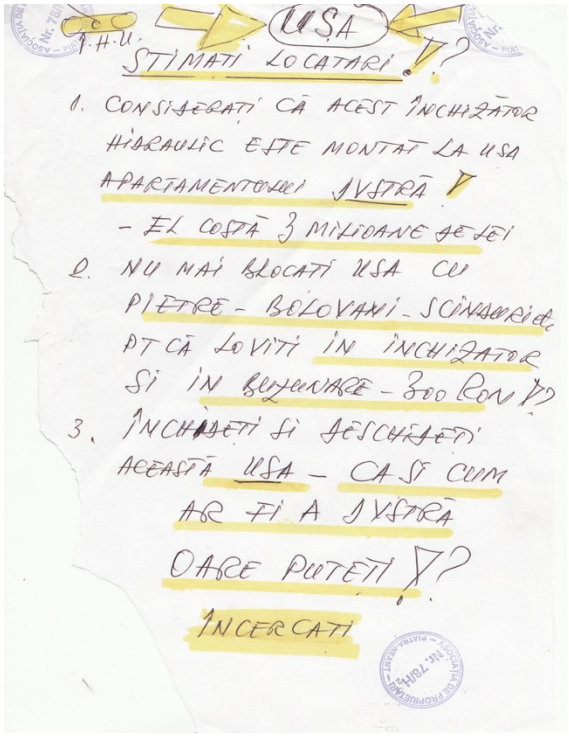
Președinte Secretar

Announcement!...

1. *The producer of the product INTERPHONE has announced that, starting from 31.12.2013, they won't produce THE ACTIVATION CARD*
2. *Consequently, please contact the President of the Association, so that we order a spare one, before 30.10.2013.*
3. *If we don't have ACTIVATION CARDS, we will have to change the kind of interphone we are using?! Yet another expense…!*

[…]

The inhabitants resisted the tendency of the market to encourage consumption through updates in technology — whereas they benefited from the instalment of the new device that entered the market after 1989, they would not, and did not, catch up with the latest developments. Indeed, during my time there, most inhabitants had a spare card, and took good care of it. Also, most of them where aware that, in order for the interphone system to function correctly, they had to make sure that the door was locked well. Because the door had a hydraulic closing system, which forced the door to lock shut, any period of prolonged use could put too much pressure on the door, and break it:



→ *DOOR* ←

DEAR INHABITANTS!?

1.IMAGINE THAT THIS HYDRAULIC LOCK IS INSTALLED ON YOUR FRONT DOOR!
IT COSTS 300 LEI (£60)
2.STOP BLOCKING THE DOOR WITH ROCKS — BOULDERS — PLANKS, BECAUSE YOU ARE HARMING THE LOCKING SYSTEM AND YOUR OWN WALLETS — 300 LEI (£60)?!
3.CLOSE AND OPEN THIS DOOR AS IF IT IS YOUR OWN

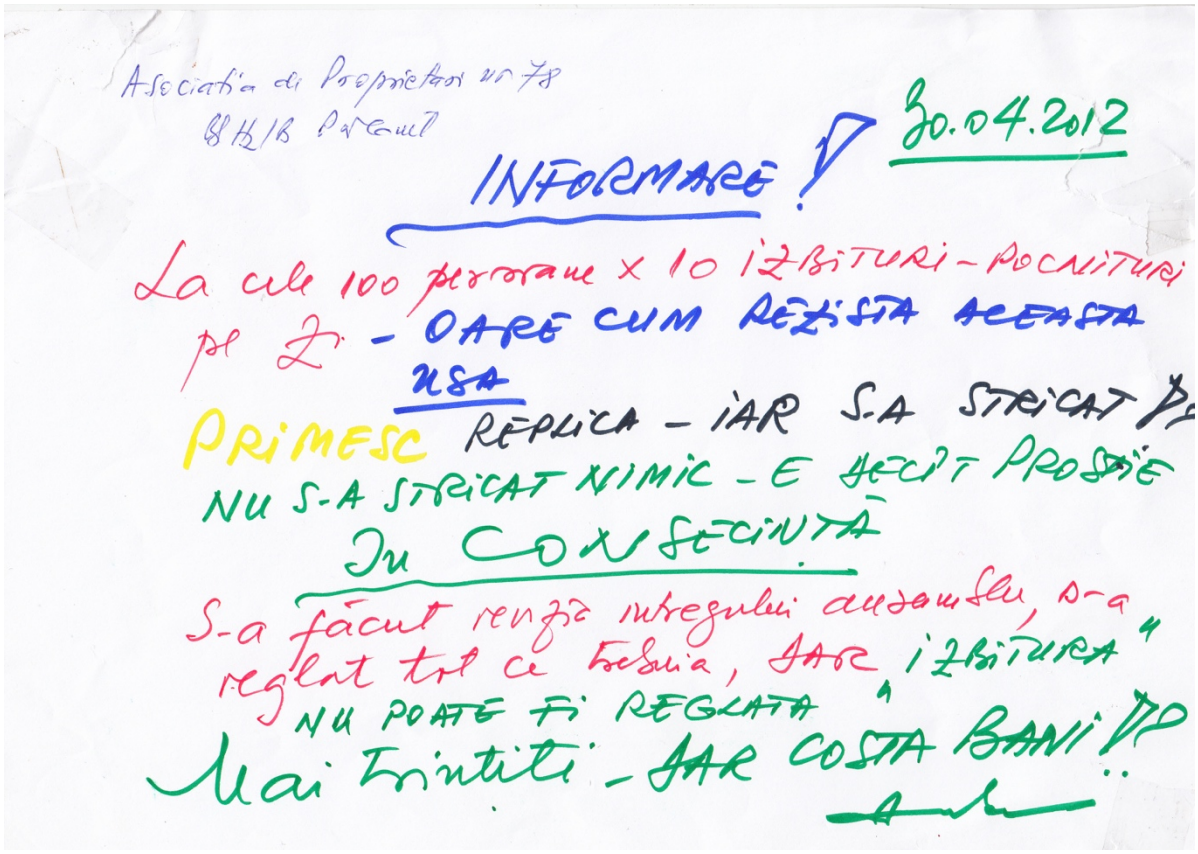
CAN YOU!?
PLEASE TRY

The comparison with individual doors has resonances beyond the level of communal care. In a discussion with Mr. Anton, the retired history teacher from the third floor, he pointed out the differences in society as seen through the lens of individual doors:

> We are the middle class — maybe 15% of the population. And you can see that the block is taken care of. But my apartment is the only one with proper doors. The other three have Ceausescu's doors, the flimsy, wooden ones — that is not middle class…

He remembered an episode during a Thursday morning — the time of the week in which all the neighbours go to pay their bills (an accountant from Locativ Serv comes into Mr. Bud's office). A neighbour, who had previously told him that Mr. Bud was a thief, complained when the accountant asked him to give him 100 lei (about £20) for common expenses. He raised his voice and said: "Bud should pay, he has money!" — "I was laughing, Bud was swearing, it was a mad scene!" This middle class that Mr. Anton was referring to, the 15%, was defined by him as "the group who tries — we have a bit more money, not a lot more, but we know how to manage it". In contrast, Ms. Pamfil, a retired French teacher living in a different neighbourhood, who could not afford to change her doors, would speak to me of the value of having old, flimsy, wooden doors. In contrast to the new metal ones, which didn't let any air or sound in, the old ones allow you to know when someone goes up or down the stairs. She used to tell me she could recognise my walk when I would visit her. For her, there was value in being connected to the rest of the building, in contrast to many of her neighbours, who were phonically, and, in her view, socially insulated.

For the inhabitants living on the ground floor, however, hearing one's neighbours walk in and out of the block could be distressing. In a block of flats nearby the H2B, a billboard message indicated the old age of the inhabitants and their need for rest: "Please respect the intervals of resting time: 14:00–16:00 and 20:00–8:00." In H2B, a message from 2012 read:



ANNOUNCEMENT!
Given the 100 people x 10 blows/day — who does this door hold up?
I am told: "It broke again?!"
It is due to lack of care.
Everything was fixed properly, but the "blow" can't be fixed.
Go ahead and continue this way — BUT IT COSTS MONEY!?

These are but a few of the messages about care towards the door throughout the years in the stack of announcements. The door was indeed used extensively, and its design, meant to close it automatically, often did not leave room for the necessities of life in a block of flats. For instance, when a family moved into the block during my fieldwork, Mr. Bud was very annoyed with the fact that they had blocked the door, to bring their belongings into the building. On their side, the newcomers understood, but had no choice, telling me that they saw no other possibility to bring their furniture in. Something as simple as moving in put a lot of pressure on the common spaces — locking open the front door (hence weakening it), using the elevator often (hence using more electricity) or renovating (hence making a lot of noise, that would permeate the staircase and neighbouring apartments). One neighbour even called the State Inspectorate in Constructions, to make an official complaint: she suspected that the new neighbours were destroying the structural walls, thus jeopardising the entire building. She did not end up filing a complaint, as they asked for her name, whereas she wanted to remain anonymous. For the purposes of this chapter, what is relevant here is that the suspicion towards the neighbours is created according to their behaviour and their traces in the shared spaces of the building.

For the visitors into a block of flats, the front door provided the first impression needed to assess how "gospodari" the inhabitants were. How recent was the paint? How clean were the curtains? In the case of the entrance of a block of flats nearby H2B, one neighbour in particular had asserted herself as a "gospodină" by washing, stiffening and ironing the curtains of the entrance door:



Past the front door, the next "proof" of clean, hardworking inhabitants were the mailboxes. In many blocks of flats that I visited, they were nicely painted and organised. Surprisingly, in H2B, they were in a poor state, as pointed out in the dialogue between Mr. Anton and Mr. Bud:

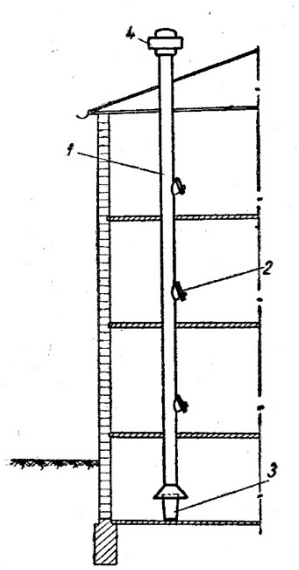
> Mr. Anton: Look here, you can tell what a good householder someone is by their mailboxes.
> Mr. Bud: Mine is in the middle, because I live in the middle of the block, on the 5th floor — look at it, look at how well taken care of it is. And I told them so many times — I can't fix them myself.
> Mr. Anton: It's embarrassing, really.
> Mr. Bud: They expect me to do it, but that costs money.
> Mr. Anton: That's not life, that's negligence. It's embarrassing.
> Mr. Bud: I heard them say: Bud should make them. Sure.

The mailboxes were also used to communicate not only about the state of care in the building, but also about the kinds of people who lived there. In a different block of flats, an Orthodox Christian icon was placed on top — icons in common spaces were a common site throughout my stay in Piatra-Neamț, a sign of devotion made public, and an aid in protecting the building of harm.



To my surprise, the mailboxes were also used to communicate between the neighbours. I once asked Mr. Sum from the 4001 block a few questions about the construction of the block, and he suggested he would ask Ms. Suditu, the constructor. He then typed a letter on his computer, printed it out, left it in the mailbox of his neighbour, and received a reply a week later, which then made its way to me. Similarly, in conflictual situations, neighbours would sometimes leave each other notes, rather than resolve the conflict face-to-face.

The garbage disposal



People did not only communicate through written message, but also through substances that circulated through the building, such as garbage. In a tall building such as H2B, an inbuilt garbage collection system used to be common — at each floor, a door would lead to a connection to the collection tube seen in the drawing on the left — this was part and parcel of the block's structure. In the beginning, most were happy with the cleanliness of the block. The garbage car would come and take the trash from the ground floor — a door in the back of the block would allow access to the garbage collection company. In time, most blocks got rid of the inbuilt garbage systems, because of the smells they created in the building, especially during the summer. In the case of the H2B block, when they decided to give up this system, and use external containers behind the building, Mr. Bud saw an opportunity.

He decided to seal each floor, and to create an extra storage space. After a meeting with the rest of the inhabitants, he found a way to close off the area and add shelves for the food which would normally be stored in the basement, but was used more often in household, thus had to be within reach of the apartment. By reconfiguring this space, he put less pressure on finding storage spaces within the home. In the past 10 years, like many of his neighbours, he had renovated his apartment, and destroyed the storage room next to his kitchen, in order to create more space. This will be discussed in detail in the following chapter, but it is important to note here that, by giving up storage space inside the apartment for reason of space and comfort, inhabitants had to find storing solutions outside their home, but still inside their building.

Whereas this change provided them with storage opportunities, it also meant that they had to carry the garbage downstairs, utilising their bodies as an extension of the garbage disposal infrastructure. Unfortunately, it was often the case that, under these circumstances, garbage disposal created tensions. For instance, some neighbours specifically took the garbage bag out of their apartments, but left it next to the front door, in order to dispose of it when they next left the house. By displacing the area of contamination, from the private to the communal, they revealed themselves as self-centred in the eyes of the neighbours — "Why would I have to bear with their stench?" I will return to smell as a means of communication later in the chapter, but for now it is essential to keep in mind that garbage provided a point of tension unlike any others. Among the many messages that Mr. Bud had left at the entrance billboard (and which were approved of by the Inhabitants Association during meetings), one reads:

Warning?!

1. The entrance hallway is a common good and not a garbage storage… Shame on you!

2. Is it really the first time this happens!?

3. We ask you that within the following 24 hours, you take away your trash, including the one next to the walnut tree, otherwise on Wednesday, 13.07.2013, we will apply the law!

Most of the buildings I entered displayed these kinds of messages, especially during the summer, when the high temperature would speed up the process of degradation, and the garbage smell would pervade the living spaces. One of the most telling examples of a note left at the entrance billboard was the following:

Encouragements towards improvement

1. *DON'T — throw out the following behind the block of flats [directly from the apartment window], including on the heating system: old textiles (with moths), rotten trash bags, boxes, plastic bottles, old clothes, etc.*
2. *DO — take the garbage to the collecting points WITHOUT LEAVING BEHIND TRACES OF ROTTING SUBSTANCES in the hallway and in the elevator*
3. *DON'T — throw all kinds of smelly substances or cigarettes out the window — not even food for pigeons*
4. *DON'T — store in the basement hallways or behind the stairs: "expired" carpets, small rotten pieces of furniture, the "results" of cleaning the basements, etc.*
5. *ETC.*
6. *WHY? RATS WILL APPEAR — A HEALTH HAZARD…*



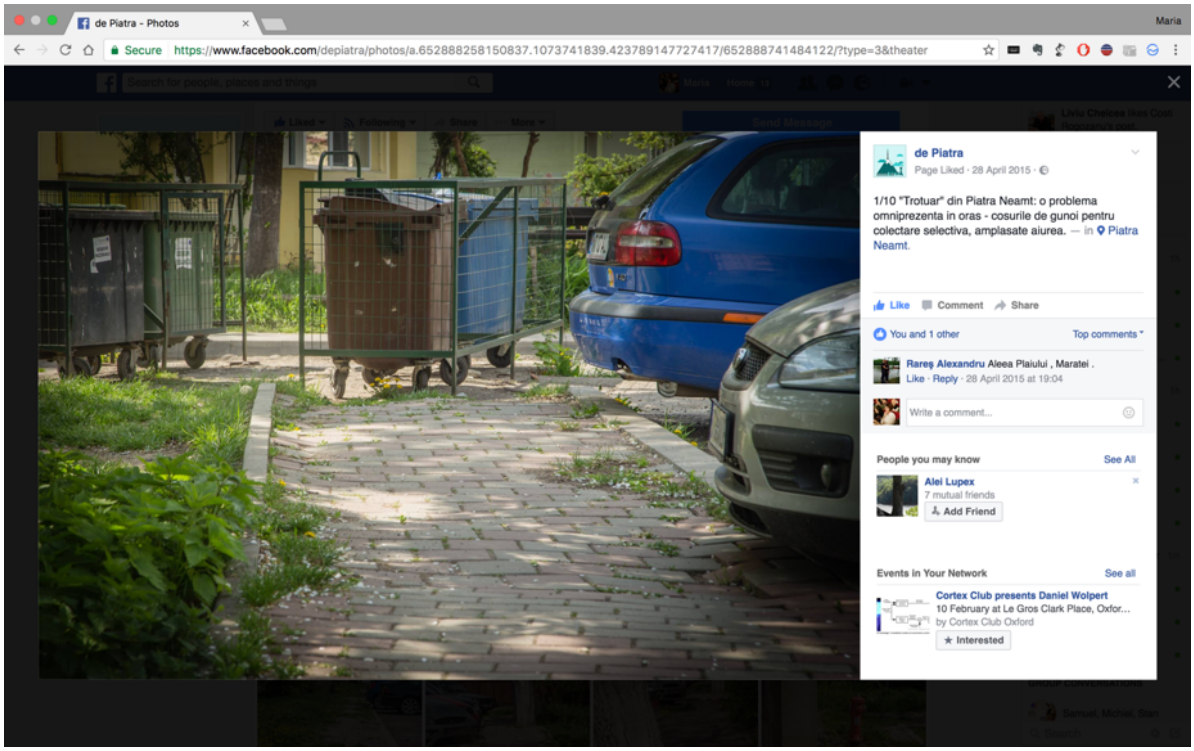
Garbage disposal unit, 2006

These kinds of messages often reappear in the billboard of the building — a sign that the behaviour that the Inhabitants Association (and Mr. Bud in particular) was trying to correct was continuing. The Association had contracted a company called *Furnicuța* ("The Little Ant"), which sent in a cleaner every week to wash the floor of the hallway. For this purpose, one inhabitant on each floor took turns in leaving water in front of the door, for the woman coming in (it was always a woman). Nevertheless, weekly cleaning did not seem to be enough: during a meeting, Mr. Bud told the story, quite charmingly, of the morning in which he came out of his apartment and his shoes stuck to the dirty floor. In the same line of thought, a billboard message read: "The transport of garbage from the basement towards the collection points outside are not the obligation of the cleaning person." The message continued to point out that the neighbours who make a mess are known, and that a camera will be installed, following the proposal of neighbours who "mean well". This way, there would be proof for those who "throw garbage from the kitchen window directly, including fish soup". This message was dated 19.02.2009, and during my fieldwork in 2014–2015, no such camera had been installed, but this speaks to the need for surveillance and control that brought about devices such as the interphone, in relation to trash disposal.

Inside the apartments, inhabitants would sometimes have a hard time storing their trash in the small spaces provided and they often complained that the trash bags that were on the market were of very low quality, and that they would often break on the way to the outside container — hence the mess. Outside the building, the inhabitants complained that all the stores around the block would throw out their trash in the block's garbage bin. When the bins were full, they would throw their trash next to them, so the area around the block became dirty. Additionally, they noticed that their neighbours from other blocks would leave their trash in their bins, because they were closer to the main boulevard, thus overcharging the bins. At the same time, the garbage collecting company came under heavy criticism by the mayor himself for not collecting the garbage in good time.

Throwing out the trash became even more complicated in 2011, when the City Hall started an ecological programme of trash sorting with EU funds, replacing one bin with four separate ones: for glass, paper, organics and mixed trash. Given the limited storage space in kitchens, they initially complained, but many understood the value of sorting their trash. In time, they stopped doing so when they saw that their neighbours would not respect them. "The measure is not bad, it is European — it is a necessary step. But the implementation was disastrous. The balance between people's everyday gestures and the overall policy was not respected", said Mr. Bunghez from the 4001 block, disappointed to see that not even the garbage collecting company would select the trash — this was, indeed a common reason for disappointment.

Similarly, in a block meeting in H2B, Mr. Vasiliu complained about the garbage labels: all of them were labelled 'organic', and there were no more 'residuals' — whereas he wanted to sort his trash, he was shocked at how untrained the garbage men are. On their end, the garbage collectors said that they noticed that most people didn't use the bins correctly, so they introduced an additional step in their practice: sorting out the trash once it's been collected from all the bins. This justified a considerable increase in price, which made people even more unhappy — "Then why would we sort it in the first place?", said Ms. Bunghez, justifying her decision to go back having only one bin in the kitchen. Additionally, these bins would occupy the already meagre space between the blocks of flats, often



transforming the sidewalks into zigzags for passers-by, as seen in this Facebook photo, captioned: "Sidewalk in Piatra-Neamț: an omnipresent problem in the city — the recycling bins, placed randomly".

The garbage bins were a particular point of tension, because homeless people would often come sort the trash. With Romania reaching new poverty highs after the 2008 economic crisis, the sight of homeless people and beggars became more and more common, while inhabitants were often very suspicious of them. For instance, because they lived in the centre of the centre of the city, the Bunghez family saw many beggars around their block. One day, when Mr. Bunghez was coming home, he saw a fancy car stopping and picking them up, which to them indicated that they were organised (as seen in the very popular fiction film, *Filantropica* about organised beggars). "There was an old lady we've known for years, who was begging here, who was picked up by an Audi. Other beggars come and look for things in the garbage, and they make a mess. They also come with dogs, you would almost be expected to say hello to them". He then related this to the nature of the block of flats "if one has a house, they have a garden, with a garbage bin in it. Here, you feel unsafe at night."

Importantly, an incredibly large amount of recycling is done informally: according to Constantin Damon, the founder of the recycling company Green Group, 70–80% of the recycled materials are recuperated by poor people from garbage bins and from the streets (Lungu, 2016). Therefore, most of the country's recycling counts on the people who basically do this for a living. Ironically, he emphasized, Romania imports trash from other countries, such as Germany or Estonia, which is then processed and turned into prime matter for PET bottles, textiles or cables. This said, the processed garbage will never have the same quality as the one that has been sourced in the home — and thus home sorting remains the main stake for a country such as Romania, which has achieved only 5% recycling levels, leaving a staggering 95% unsorted trash (while the EU average is 28%, and Bulgaria's





average is 25%). Romania, as well as the other European countries, need to reach 50% recycling level by the year 2020, otherwise it will suffer grave sanctions.

Whereas home sorting was not a huge concern in the minds of Piatra-Neamț inhabitants, the unsorted garbage that would gather in the local waters was. The fears of the invisible water contamination described in the water chapter were rooted in the visible traces of PET bottles collected in the Bicaz dam, and often removed by either local authorities, or NGOs, only to reappear soon. Most of the families which had a car would make day trips during spring and summer to visit some of the impressive nature sites nearby. During such trips, two stops would be most common: stopping to a local spring to pick up water for home consumption, and taking a break at the Bicaz dam, otherwise an incredible infrastructural achievement, as illustrated in *The Water Tap* chapter. Near the water, many small local restaurants would serve different varieties of fish, which would provide the travellers with a well-deserved lunch. Unfortunately, the layer of PET bottles would stand in stark contrast with the beautiful nature sights to be enjoyed (as seen in the two previous photographs).

The playgrounds

A different kind of pollution that drew the attention of inhabitants in their living was brought about by the increasingly high number of cars, which would park closer and closer to their buildings, as parking lots would replace greens spaces and playing grounds. EU funding had recently facilitated a great deal of cosmetic work in Piatra-Neamț, including the re-pavement of streets and sidewalks or the renovation of historical buildings, but it also allowed for many structural changes, whereby the buffer zones around the blocks of flats, made up primarily of green spaces, disappeared in favour of more and more parking spaces. In this context, inhabitants complained about the higher level of dust in their apartments, because the trees used to protect them from the dust that would rise off the street.



For the children, it meant that they would spend less time around their building, and more time either at home, or in the main square of the city, which had also been recently renovated (the green spaces being replaced by concrete, which allowed the children to come with their bikes and roller skates). If anything, this was made possible by the increasingly watchful eyes of the parents, which joined them in town, and surveyed their play time. News on TV about kidnappings or robberies brought worries to parents, while the schools advised them to pick up their children straight from the class room. Ms. Anăstăsoaie, living on the 4th floor of the H2B block, was an arts teacher, and she had been briefed by the school to make sure that the children are being picked up. This followed a kidnapping that was not made public, and it brought home the fact that her 14-year-old daughter was not safe in the playground. I often met her while she was outside with her daughter, reading from a distance. Her own experiences as a child, described in *The Heater*, of playing until the dawn of day, were not an option for today's children, she shared with me. Her greatest challenge as a mum was restricting screen time for the daughter.

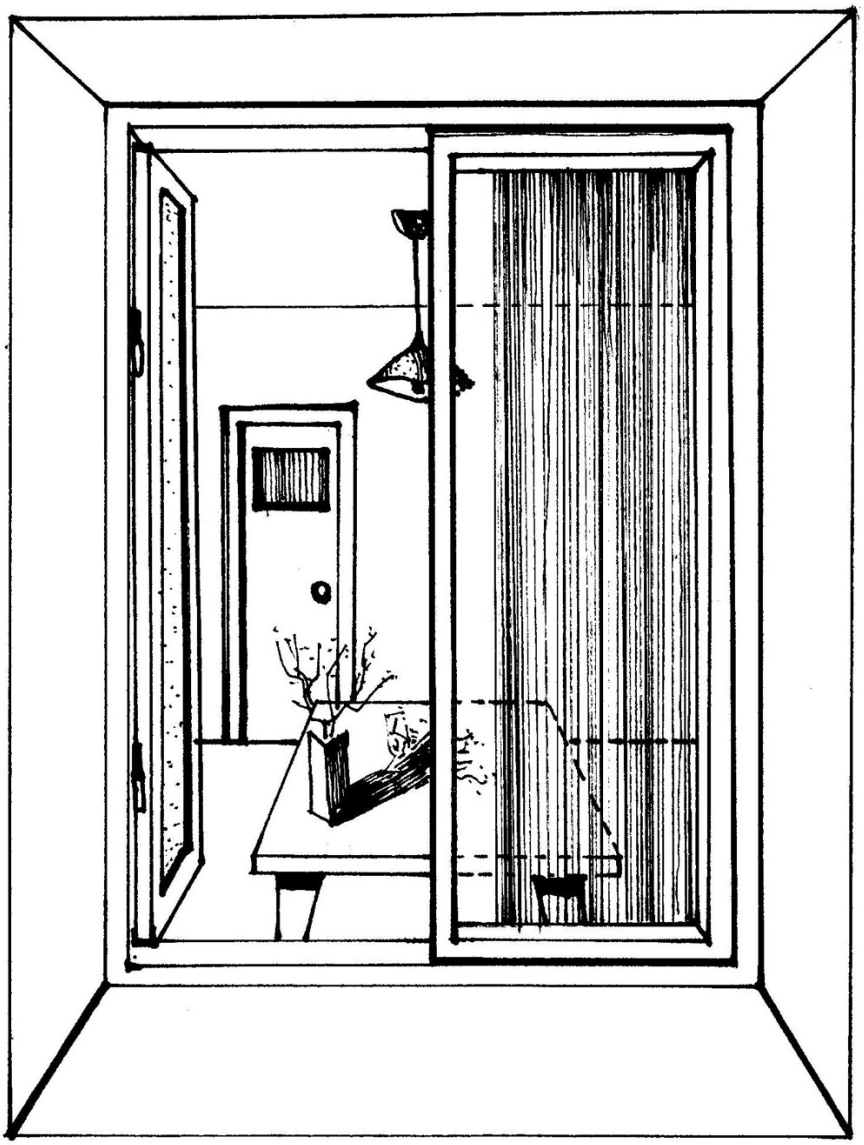
Outside the remit of a worried mother, I did notice throughout my fieldwork that the playground, when there, were hardly ever used. I myself had memories of being called in by my parents after hours and hours of play time outside the block of flats in which I grew up. I don't intend to make an argument for the alienated urban child, either in Romania or abroad, as I aim at showing the structural changes taking place around the block of flats. For instance, one of the rarer finds the neighbourhood was the carpet beater: a metal structure allowing a carpet or blanked to be de-dusted or cleaned, as can be seen in the image below. For my generation, the carpet beater was as close as children could get to Olympic performances such as Nadia Comăneci's celebrated 10/10. Orderly lines would be formed, of eager future gymnasts waiting to show their skills. These intense "practices" which left many with bruised hands would only be interrupted by the elderly actually cleaning their carpets. The carpet beater was as much a signifier of child play as it was of in-depth cleaning.

During a block meeting at the H2B Owners' Association, the 'carpet beater' was brought up. Mr. Tănase, in his big woollen sweater, was disappointed that they no longer had one — what had happened? It was rumoured to be stolen by the gypsies, he said, but was that true? Or was it really the case that the Local Council was starting to take them away? Mr. Bud clarified the situation: it was the Local Council who decided on their disappearance for reasons of air pollution — but then "the gipsies" found out and started cutting them. Mr. Tănase took the word again:

> Mr. Tănase: Now I need to go all the way to the other blocks. There is space behind the block. Around those trees…
> Ms. Anăstăsoaie: They don't allow it, it's not ecological.
> Mr. Tănase: It's not allowed anymore? Does that mean that the ones that are still there will disappear?
> Mr. Bud: Let's hope.
> Mr. Tănase: So they are allowed.
> Mr. Poenaru: And it's also not fair to go to other blocks.
> Mr. Tănase: What did I say. We have so much space.
> Ms. Jora: I also think we should have one.
> Mr. Tănase: It's nice to air our carpets a little bit, but if it can't be done...



In this chapter, I have analysed the spaces in between the individual apartments and the roles they play in maintaining not only heat, but also social cohesion. Thermal balance, required for the good circulation of heat throughout the building, is paralleled by "social balance": the coming together of resources and initiatives that lead to the maintenance of the building and a sense of community. As experienced in my fieldwork, there are varying ideas about what it means to live together, especially as the private-public dichotomy becomes messier and messier. I have shown how inhabitants use common resources for individual purposes (for instance, in the production of *tămâie*, wine or pickles in the block's basement), while at the same time demanding that they be saved from common costs (such as the elevator's electricity). The inhabitants communicate with one another through multiple channels: visual (through written billboards, decorations), olfactory (through cooking or garbage smells), auditory (hearing one another through the flimsy walls). Not in the least, their sense of warm and cold (thermoception) leads to tensions, as some neighbours are disappointed with how cold their ceiling/floor is due to a neighbour's absence. In a time in which winter efforts are centred around maintaining as much heat inside as possible, the following chapter will address one of the key sites in Romanian blocks of flats which is subject to recent change: the window.



The Window

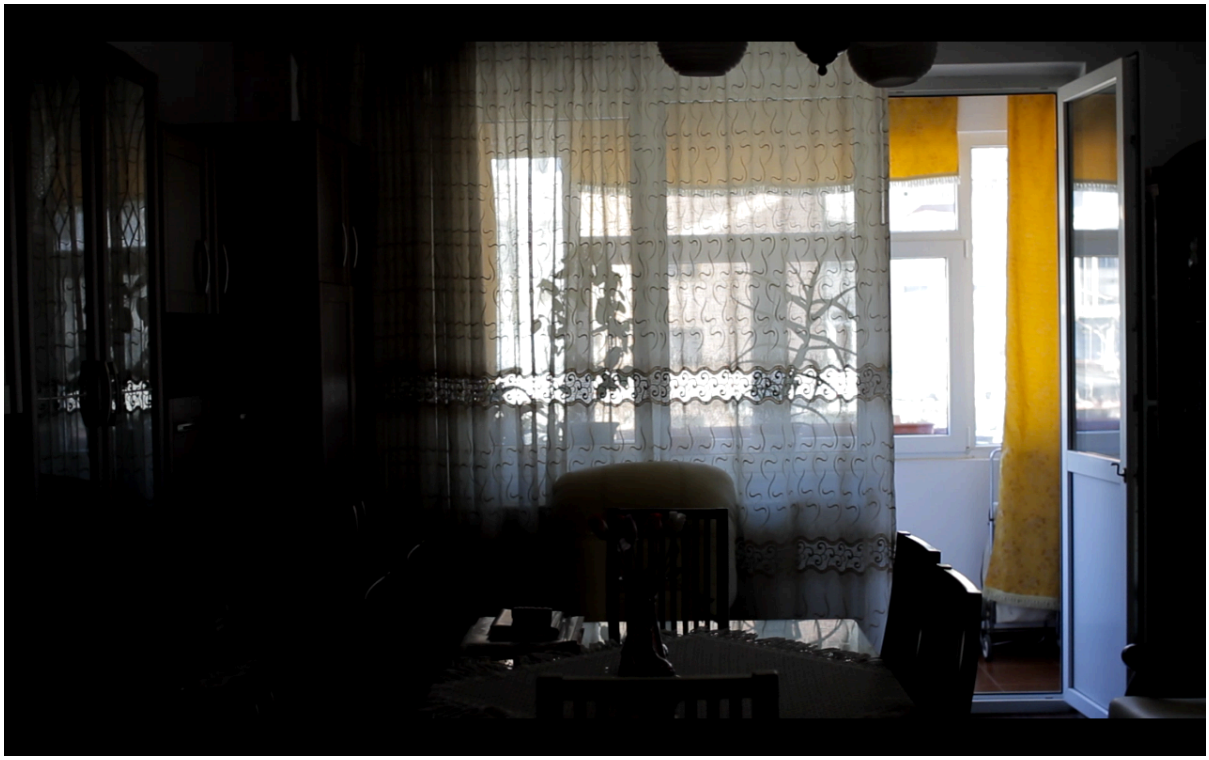
Mr. Bud rang Mr. Anton's door, who welcomed us, being pleasantly surprised with Mr. Bud's timely arrival. "It's a beautiful apartment", Mr. Bud told him. Mr. Anton did not wait for a second, and he introduced us to his home. On the right, as one came in, the 'small bathroom'. Peach tiles in the lower part, white tiles in the upper part, divided by a strip with leaf patterns. A perfectly clean blue towel hung on the right of the small toilet, and a small sink. Next to the small bathroom, the 'small bedroom', with a bookshelf on the left, full of toys, a computer on the right side, and a small bed. "At least at the end of one's life, you have to enjoy your home, especially in such a beautiful mountain town. Even if the block administrator is a tyrant…. not everything in this life is easy", he said jokingly, and Mr. Bud chuckled uncomfortably.

Mr. Anton moved into his H2B apartment in 2011, and found everything renovated: the previous owners took good care of the apartment, and spent three years changing its appearance. The new, clean floors and the white walls were an important point of departure from the other apartments he had visited, but what convinced him irrevocably was the presence of new windows, followed by the balcony, which was closed with the same kind of insulating materials. As he was proudly showing me around, the door between the living room and the balcony was widely open and he was wearing a T-shirt in mid-February.

An embroidered curtain enveloped the living room in a soothing dim light. A porcelain stalk behind a porcelain angel, four times smaller. A porcelain flower arrangement, next to a goose, all the size of the angel. Three statues of Virgin Mary. In the guest room his book shelf contains tens of CDs, covered by small porcelain decorations, tiny flower pots, a small squirrel figurine next to a statue of virgin Mary. In his bookshelf, the crystal glasses; behind a porcelain princess shoe. On the large glass table in the middle of the living room, a red crystal vase with plastic roses. "Look at this, Maria" — he showed me an old wooden icon in the guest room, and we stepped into his living room, which had beige leather armchairs and a couch. He was proud of this room, in which he often received guests, usually former students from his time as a history teacher. We went into their kitchen — "look, this is how a modern kitchen looks like. If you show this to the English, they will say we live well. This is what you need to show", Mr. Bud said proudly. Mr. Anton was proud of his wife's good taste — after all, she was the one to measure everything patiently, and made sure that all the furniture fits, and that the colours match. Additionally, she had worked in Italy as a care-taker for many years, and thus made much more money than he ever could as a teacher in Romania. She was thus the one to finance most of the decoration.

His apartment didn't have a storage unit, but a larger kitchen that was created by destroying the unit with the purpose of larger spaces (a common practice of renovation I will return to in this chapter). He showed me the bathroom and told Mr. Bud he was very happy with his washing machine, which used little energy. As we went into his bedroom, he explained to Mr. Bud that each room had both a television, and a DVD player. He was equally proud of his vinyl player, which allowed his to listen to all his records. The TV was hanging off the wall, a flat screen dominating the room. Underneath it, a small

table, with an embroidered cloth, and a small desk. Everything in cream and beige. “What I like in this room is that I see the mountain when I wake up”, Mr. Anton told me with joy.





"This apartment is more than modern, it surpasses the level of the capitalists — I mean, developed capitalists", Mr. Bud said proudly. He was standing before a make-up stand with mirror, above which sat a Catholic icon. On the stand, another icon. "Did you look over everything, with patience? Did you capture everything?" — Mr. Anton encourages me to not be shy and photograph his home in great detail. On his desk, many photos of his daughters: the one who lived in Dej, Romania; and the ones who live in Italy and the UK. Because the first one was planning to move to Cluj, he was considering selling the apartment and also moving there, to have everyone closer together. "Given the value of the apartment, it might be a pity to leave", Mr. Bud says. "If someone gives me €65,000, good. If not, I'll wait. After all, that's what I paid altogether." €65,000 is what this value, with everything in it. Mr. Anton would add his savings, and hope he could find a good apartment in Cluj for €90,000. "It's the only place in the country where apartments are more expensive — in the rest of the country, the prices have gone down. It's more respected and more pleasant than even Bucharest."

While I was concentrated on filming small details of his home, he told Mr. Bud: "I wanted to keep the space simple, not charged with all sorts of things. But I have some valuable things, such as the icon, or that 100-year-old clock. If she writes about these things, foreigners will also see that we care about these valuable objects." Mr. Bud replies proudly: "Yes, I told her she should include everything she wants." I left Mr. Anton's apartment with his feeling of pride towards his home, couple with his awareness of its real estate value. Whereas in the presence of Mr. Bud he emphasized objects as items of distinction, in our separate discussions he often referred to the energetic dimension of his home. He had bought the apartment four years before, being extremely impressed after the first visit, especially because it was equipped with *termopan* windows — double glassed insulating windows, which had become extremely popular in recent years. The slick, modern lines of the new windows were the starting point for the rest of the home decorations. Old, dark and heavy furniture would not fit with these luminous frames, he told me.

Whereas my description of Mr. Anton's apartment focuses on the objects he decorated his home with, the purpose of my chapter spreads beyond the aesthetic. In fact, Mr. Anton argued that the main reason he moved to H2B specifically was because of the good thermal insulation work and the central heating administered by Mr. Bud (as described in *The Heater*). Post-socialist studies of homes have all too often focused on kitsch as a particular aesthetic (Hoorn, 2004). Instead, I argue that the aesthetic very often merges with the pragmatic, and that the windows seen on the facades of Romanian blocks of flats speak to the inhabitants' needs to close off their apartments in face of the harsh climatic conditions of the cold seasons. Related to this, the addition of windows on the outer rim of the open balconies contributed to this cocooning of the home, for fear of cold air currents, known in Romanian as "curent" (draft). This chapter thus unpacks the relationship between the embodied experience of being in Romanian apartment blocks with the aesthetic and the functional dimensions of apartment transformations. By analysing how inhabitants alter their windows, close down their balconies, I hope to reveal how they expanded their private space while maintaining heat inside, and thus complement the previous chapters that looked at wall insulation more broadly and at the heating system transformations in Romania.

During the socialist period, the Local Council very strictly regulated the outer appearance of the blocks of flats, forbidding the closing of the balconies. For a long time, the balconies looked like the ones in the postcard below: uniform, indistinctive, tidy. Moreover, the Council even advised against drying the washing on the balcony, on the grounds that the various fabrics of the clothes would interfere with the tidy aspect of the facades. This attitude changed during the 1980s, when heating would be scarce (as discussed in *The Heater*). In this context of scarcity, authorities closed an eye to inhabitants' attempts to maintain as much heat inside by adding another layer to the outer shell of the apartments. This was the first step in the appropriation of the apartments buildings as discussed in the *Introduction*. Given that it wasn't officially allowed, inhabitants used their social networks to access materials and craftsmen for the closing of the balconies. Very often, this resulted in improvised end-products, such as the balcony on the top floor of the building discussed in the *Introduction*, closed off with bus windows gathered through one's informal networks:



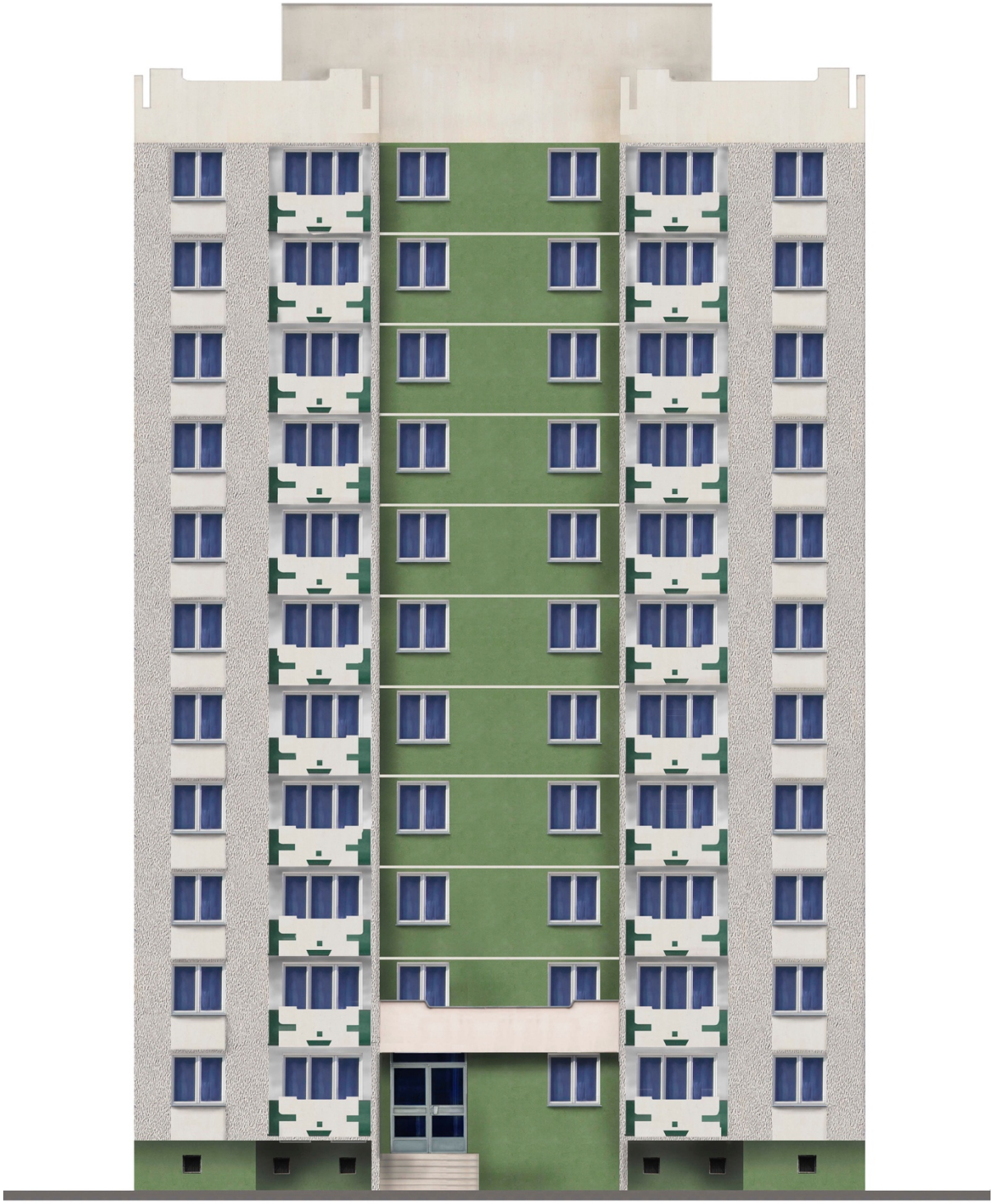
As much as this is a good illustration of the socialist secondary economy that has been extensively discussed in the literature, such an example, showcasing the distance between the initial purpose and the final use, is extreme. Typically, the frames were made of out of iron, and the glass was single-glazed — this way, insulating, but leaving room for fine currents of air.

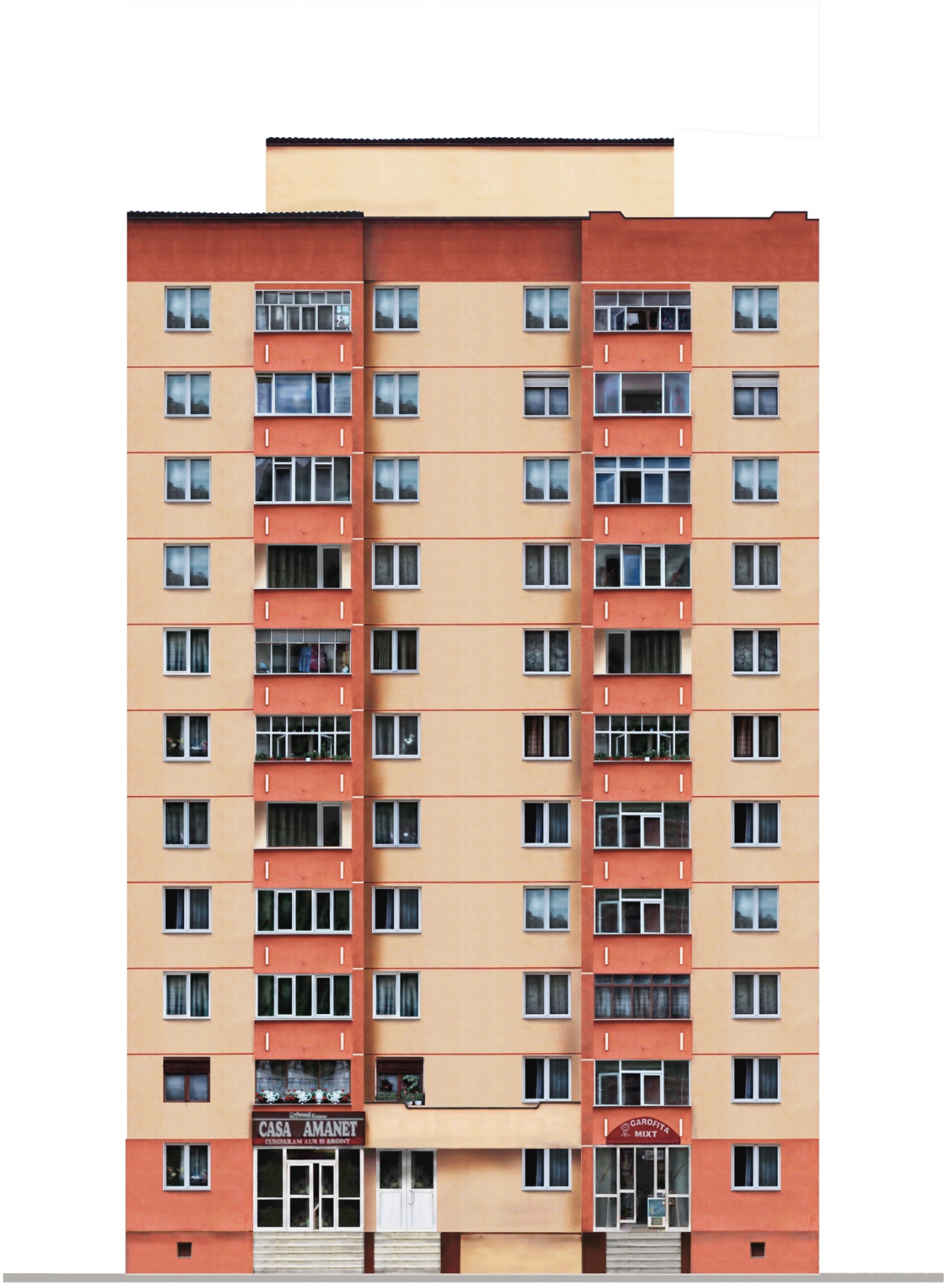
After 1989, as the market of double glazed windows (known as *termopan*) developed, these single glazed iron constructions were replaced by airtight PVC frames, which closed off the apartments completely. With the rise in energy prices, this was welcomed by inhabitants, and promoted by the market with a drive that was unprecedented. In the image façade fragment below, the *termopan* windows are the ones surrounded by the thick white frames: for instance, on the left side, one distinguishes two balconies, on the second and third floor that have been closed with termopan in similar fashion, next to polystyrene insulation that is painted in the same shade of yellow. While neighbours from the second floor decided to insulate and to close the balcony, they tried to convince the others to do the same, knowing that a more uniform insulation would be more effective; also, with the scaffolding set up, why not take advantage and lower the costs? Very often, the social lives of facades follow the relationships between neighbours very closely. Moreover, they follow the relationships that the neighbours have with social actors outside the building, required to make the necessary transformations: for instance, on the right side, the improvised attic that is shared by the two neighbours depended on the social relations they had with constructors, who, in their turn, could afford to do informally commissioned work that would not ask for permission from the State Inspectorate in Construction.



Although such a permission was obligatory, the Inspectorate closed an eye to such work, unless it would damage a structural wall, such as the newly founded shops on the ground floors of blocks of flats, which would require large spaces. In those cases, the neighbours on top would usually file an official complaint. While talking to the Chief Inspector, it became clear that most of their work relied on these complaints, and so was bottom-up: they simply were too overwhelmed to conduct individual raids and to ask for building authorisation from each inhabitant. This particular Inspectorate being known as unreliable, some inhabitants saw the general aspect of their city as a direct consequence of lack of good governance. The variety of balcony finishings shown above was described as backwards attitudes held by the City Hall: How can they let each person do what they want? Is this the freedom we wanted during the revolution? Is this how people show their wealth nowadays?

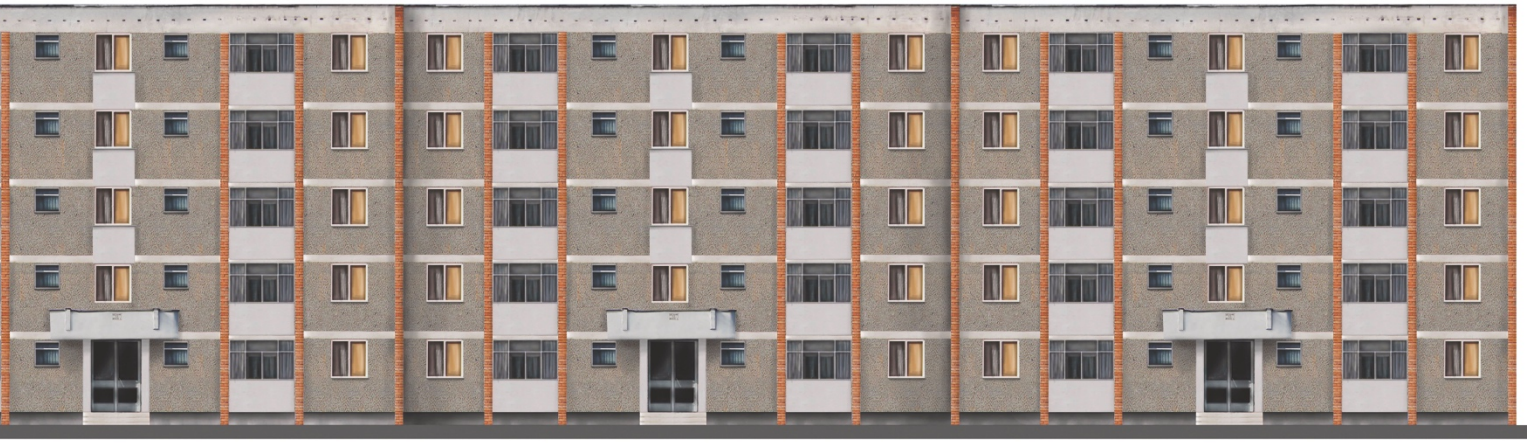
Below, I will explore how windows mediate home transformations between the private and the public (the inside and the outside of the apartment). The following facades of five blocks of flats, constructed by architect Adela Iacoban on the basis of our discussions, reveal the changes that took place in the neighbourhood of Mărăței, in the close proximity of the H2B block (including H2B). I will describe some of the architectural traits of the buildings in the neighbourhood, to show a variety of issues that do not necessarily manifest at the level of the H2B block. Additionally, by focusing on the interaction between materials and the natural environment (by considering rain or sunlight for instance), I hope that my findings will be relevant to a range researchers interested in the built environment not only anthropologists.




CASA AMANET
CUMPĂRĂM AUR ȘI ARGINT
GAROFIȚA
MIXT











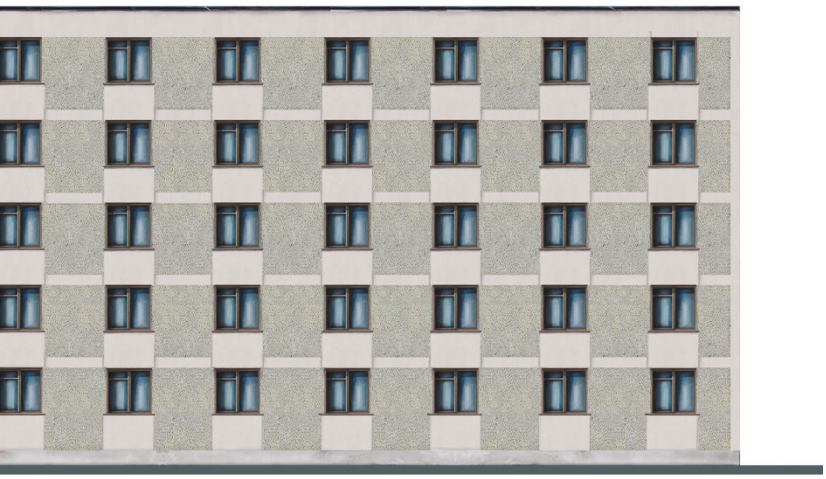

Elegant Sol
Expo Carm




Expo Carm
SECOND HAND

















These detailed plans reveal much of the variety of windows, balconies and the H blocks on the Traian Boulevard (p. 229-230), are made out of concrete: a very compact composite material, with a low thermal inertia, which does not allow for the circulation of steam from the inside towards the outside. By thermally insulating it with polystyrene, the problem of the heat loss is solved, but the building becomes air tight (as discussed in *The Wall Insulation*). When the windows are *termopan*, the air exchange becomes the responsibility of the inhabitant — how often one opens the window becomes the primary mean of airing an apartment. For some floors, we see a different kind of window framing, of wood or steel: this allows for air circulation, but is not thermally efficient. If the block is made out of aired brick, for instance, things get worse, because the steam goes past the permeable walls and stop when it meets the polystyrene — this way, mould is easily formed and, importantly, it is invisible to the inhabitant, who can experience health problems without realising what the source is.

This could be the case with the A block (p. 233–234), across from H2B, which was made soon after the 1977 earthquake, with thick brick walls and slightly larger apartments. However, inhabitants rarely insulate these buildings entirely. On the one hand, that is thanks to the thicker walls, which keep more heat inside, but it is also due to the complicated volumetry, which would be very hard to insulate: the windows and balconies have pre-fabricated round framings, finished with white mosaic. Additionally, the façade on pages 233–234 is facing South, and it is guarded from the harsh Northern winds, against which most people insulate (as discussed in *The House and the Block*). On the first floor, there are four balconies which were closed with steel painted in white, and three balconies closed with PVC joinery and double-glazed windows. Closing the balconies on the first floor also has the role of a blind or a roof, made of various materials — polycarbonate plaques (straight or undulated), galvanised steel sheets, corrugated sheets, polyurethane foam panels on the inside, and aluminium on the outside. In contrast, the rounded balconies are difficult to close: the joinery and the window are plane, but they need to be mounted on a curved trajectory. The finishing is degraded and dirty around the attics because of details which were projected or executed in an incorrect manner (the lack of droppers, for instance).

These are but two examples and a similar analysis can be conducted for the other buildings, but for now, I would like to emphasize one central point: the urban fabric of a city like Piatra-Neamț, in between the pragmatic and the symbolic, is a complicated *palimpsest*, in its broad meaning of "something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form". *Palimpsest*, at its origin, means "a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing" (The Oxford English Dictionary), but writing, as a metaphor, suggests a semiotic load that has been inscribed in a conscious manner. In this case, pragmatic solutions aimed at increasing energy efficiency or at merely preventing further degradation have aesthetic consequences that we not consciously thought through. In order to get to the core of inhabitants' reasoning for these transformations, I will discuss one case study in detail as follows and demonstrate the manner in which these outward changes are coming from the inside of the apartments. As energy prices are rising in a time of financial scarcity, the bulk of renovations have an energy saving purpose. Always looking ahead in a time of uncertainty, inhabitants look for ways of saving money, but they continue to develop their homes by buying decorations or kitchen utensils. Most often, homes then become stuffed with objects, which are kept aside, in case of future scarcities.

Windows and renovation

Ms. Chiforeanu and Ms. Țolea were having coffee and catching up among friends, when I rang the door, as I had promised I would visit her, to exchange photographs and learn about the recent changes she had made to her apartment. They were life-long friends, having worked together in their 20s as financial controllers, and were now retired. To my joy, Ms. Țolea stayed with us, and facilitated the discussion, making comparisons with her own apartment in the A3 block. What followed was an afternoon of humorous conversations about how troublesome the simplest of ideas had been. For instance, Ms. Chiforeanu wanted to change the couch and the table in 1998. She carefully analysed the main furniture store in the city, and chose a beige couch and armchair set. When the employees of the store arrived, they realised in shock that the couch wouldn't fit through the door. They had to take down the door, get them through, and put the door back, all in a process that left her house look like a scene from Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. Looking back on it, she didn't find them too comfortable, but she surely could not get them out of the living room, because unmounting the doors would be a considerable effort. She got used to them, even if they remained a bit hard and uncomfortable.

Ms. Țolea had a very thick, soft carpet in the hallway, and she regretted following the recent fashion of taking it out, only to replace it with fake wood flooring. Nonetheless, the carpet also had big disadvantages when they had a water leakage — drying it was impossible. In fact, changing the carpet came with changing the doors, which was necessary when they changed the fridge. The new fridge was bigger than the door, so they had to take the door out, which broke in the process. Because the door broke, they had to change it; because they changed one, they had to change all of them; because they changed the doors, they changed the flooring. Once they changed the flooring, they had to change the curtain (make parallel with the Christmas tree sketch, making fun of small apartments in the blocks). The pretext that she invoked was the dust that was created when the doors were taken out, that permeated all the possible corners of the house — once such a mess was made, why not arrange everything at once?

This resonated with Toma Caragiu's comic piece about a Christmas tree. A famous comic actor who had died in the 1977 earthquake in Bucharest, Caragiu was best known for this piece, which would often be re-run around Christmas. "At home, the Christmas tree is placed on a small table. If it is too long on its upper part, we arrange something with the neighbour, so that they receive it through the roof. If it is too long on the lower part, we arrange something with the table and cut its legs. We then take the table and bring it to the bed room, from where we take out the closet, and bring it to the living room. But where should we put the table? In the bathroom. But the bathroom is… a bathroom. Where do we place the bathroom? In the hallway, instead of the fridge, which we then place in the closet. In this simple way, the Christmas tree will fit next to the window." Screened in 1973 on national television, this piece was a surprisingly open satire addressing the lack of spaces in apartments, and the difficulties in decorating them.

These endless transformations to the apartments resonate with the Diderot effect, as described by McCracken in 1988: the introduction of a new possession that is deviant from the consumer's current complementary goods can result in a process of spiralling consumption (McCracken, 1988). He bases his theory of consumption of Diderot's essay, *Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown*, in which he describes how the purchase of a new robe plunged him into debt, after he completely redecorated



his home to match the new robe (Diderot, 1875). In McCracken's usage, the Diderot Effect is the result of the interaction between objects within "product complements", or "Diderot unities", and consumers. A Diderot unity is a group of objects that are considered to be culturally complementary, in relation to one another (McCracken, 1988).

In this chapter, I argue that most changes in Romanian apartments actually follow a similar chain of actions. If not as radical, these changes definitely had an unexpected result. For instance, when Ms. Chiforeanu wanted to install an apartment heating system, she found that there was no room in the kitchen, and so decided to place it in the balcony. Because it was not a good idea to have a boiler unprotected in the open balcony, they decided to close it with *termopan* windows. In the picture above, taken from the living room towards the closed balcony, we can see the layers of curtains and the kind of luminosity they engender — a gently filtered light, which, as much as it is soothing to the eye, limited the inhabitants' capacity to read in the living room without artificial light. In terms of Diderot unities, these new additions to the apartment follow an aesthetic coherence with the objects inside the home, but they rarely, if ever, consider the other apartments on the same façade.

Ms. Chiforeanu told me about the first days in the apartment, when they didn't even have curtains — instead, they had white sheets of paper in the windows. Dan, their son, was 6, and she remembers it as a beautiful period in her life, when she would slowly arrange her home, and spend time with the little one. There were not many options for decorations at the time, but the quality of the furniture was impressive. While in general dominated by large pieces such as the Miruna bookshelf, one of the most practical and beloved items was the foldable table, which I've seen again and again in my participants' homes. During the day, the table would be stacked away in a corner, while during dinner parties, it would become the centre piece of the room, hidden under an embroidered table cloth.



The folding table in the living room, 2001

These dinner parties were becoming rarer nowadays due to economical limitations, but Ms. Chiforeanu's larger pension allowed her to continue to host these parties, which were also a pretext for her to share her most recent creations, such as the *goblen* below:



Ms. Chiforeanu showing her newly-framed goblen to a friend in 2012

The *goblen*, an embroidery based on a previously-defined model, became more and more fashionable after 1989, with catalogues circulating between housewives, and a great deal of effort being put into making such an embroidery, which could take three months of daily work at a time. Apart from showing skill, the *goblen* were a bridge between the older tapestries discussed in the Heating chapter and the more aristocratic paintings pervading houses or apartments showcased in the decoration magazines widely read by housewives, such as Casa Lux. A wall full of *goblen* gave one a feeling of "warmth and intimacy", Ms. Ţolea explained, this association was limited to her generation, while her younger friends would never consider having a *goblen* on their wall. Apart from their value as a home-made item that embellished the home, they also had a financial value, being sold by housewives in decoration magazines of the late 1990s with prices as high as $2,000 per piece.





unor mari personalități, a făcut - mărturisește cu umor - troc cu prieteni sau cu alți pasionați, a vândut din cărți, a oferit și a luat lucrări și piese decorative pe care și le dorea cu ardoare și pentru care a făcut sacrificii importante. Pentru că s-a format în preajma unor mari oameni - Șerban Cioculescu, Zoe Dumitrescu-Bușulenga, Agatha Grigorescu-Bacovia, Profira Sadoveanu, i s-a „inoculat" plăcerea frumosului care a făcut-o să uite de multele necazuri cu care viața a împovărat-o. Iar prieteni de nădejde, Vasile Parizescu, Petre Oprea,

Colecția doamnei Bălășescu este de o diversitate și o originalitate remarcabilă. Ea a fost adunată în zeci de ani, după o serioasă muncă de documentare și de cultivare a simțului artistic; donată prin testament Muzeului de istorie și artă al Municipiului București, colecția va deveni un micro-muzeu de artă decorativă.



soțiile pictorilor Gh. Vânătoru și R. Iosif, frații Petrescu, familia Marigela și Dimitrie Cosmescu, Simona Nistor - au ajutat-o să-și îndeplinească visurile. Și așa s-a adunat în casa doamnei Bălășescu o comoară de obiecte de artă de diverse genuri, selectate după criterii riguroase și purtând semnături ale unor maeștri ai plasticii românești.

După ce izbutești să te desprinzi de vraja interiorului încesat de valori - și e greu să o faci, ai senzația că lucrurile sunt dependente unul de altul, că ele pun stăpânire asupra ta - ochiul se oprește asupra unor piese: două gravuri de Aman, din 1875 și un desen în creion cu linia inconfundabilă a lui Grigorescu; o splendidă „Horă" a lui Pan Ioanid, Vânătoru, o gravură de Pătrașcu, Steriade și

Interesante lucrări de Corneliu Petrescu: diversitate tematică, culoare, tehnică originală, colaje.



Example of a beautifully decorated home from Casa Lux, 1999



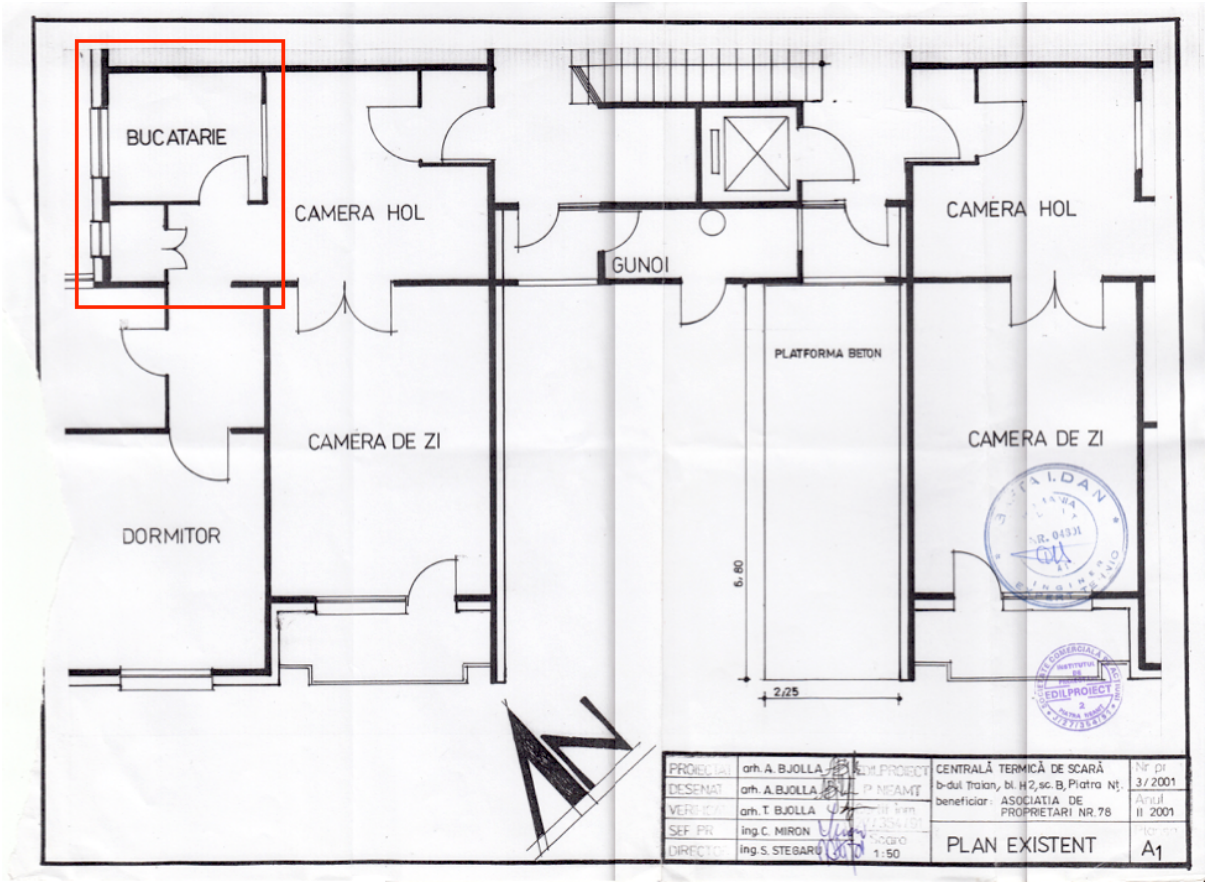
Whereas in my first weeks of fieldwork, I was surprised by how crammed the visited apartments were, I slowly began to understand the coordinates of a generation that made their home during the socialist period in which decorations were scarce, and in which the market didn't show as much variety as nowadays. As a reminder, the overwhelming majority of my research participants varied between 50 and 70 years old, a representative sample of an aging population in Piatra-Neamț. In this context, what I considered a blockage inside the home of objects which cluttered the visual field, was for research participants a collection of what they considered beautiful and worthy of sharing. This complicated my understanding of the displays of objects inside the home, and the need to show that one has access to current objects of consumption, including the above-mentioned *termopan* windows. This is not aimed at showing one's affluence, but at constructing a home that is well-equiped for the future, both functionally and aesthetically. "You never know when you might need something" is informed by both socialism's economy of shortage (Chelcea, 2002) and post-socialism financial instability.

Consequently, a big theme in my research became the way in which objects get stuck in the house due to people's fear of financial incapacity. Ms. Ionescu, after tidying up her bedroom, told me once: "See how nice it is now? It's crazy that I haven't had the power to throw things away before. But with money troubles lately, you never have the power to throw something out — you never know when you might need it". Cleaning the house then became an exhausting work, taken up each week with the same determination, from one corner to another. "Something has changed in the environment", she told me. Her neighbours, who lived in the countryside, but had left the apartment empty for when they visit the city, were shocked at how much dust one gathers despite the lack of activity. However, it was mostly the accumulation of things that is most tiring about de-dusting — her house was filled with things that gather dust and must be cleaned.



The storage room of Ms. Tomin, with curtains aimed at keeping the dust away

Back in H2B, Ms. Tomin had changed old windows with *termopan* windows, paid by her daughter. It was only after this happened, that she started complaining to Mr. Bud about the extreme heat in her apartment, as described in *The Heater*. Knowing from other participants that window replacement was followed by other changes in the home, I asked her if she ever considered other structural transformations, such as merging the kitchen with the storage room, as seen in her apartment plan below ("Bucătărie" is the kitchen in the left upper corner, and the small square next to it represents an inbuilt storage space). Shocked at my question, she made it clear she would never think of doing such a thing. If anything, she judged the people who took out their storage room and enlarged their kitchen and recalled a moment from the late 1980s: "My daughter told me — if you break the kitchen, I quit university. If you have guests, will you force them to go through the kitchen on the way to the balcony?" In fact, she had made an additional storage space out of the second bathroom at the entrance of the apartment: "I took out the sink, because smell would come up through there, and I covered all the holes." Many apartments I visited during my research had precisely the same feature: a secondary bathroom turned into the much-needed storage space.



The balcony

Curious about the architectural dimension of these adaptations, I went to speak to the Iacob family, who had worked as architects during the 1980s. They confirmed that drastic changes (such as tearing down walls or closing balconies) were not allowed during the socialist period, and neither were smaller ones, such as changing the paint colour of the balcony's contact wall. "How was it regulated?", I asked them. "It was not regulated in any way", they told me, "everyone did what they wanted, and then local authorities would come in and make you demolish. Especially the balconies — they would be closed in order to deposit food - it was only late that they started to make blocks with storage space on level -1." Here, the most important distinction was between the blocks that were projected as private blocks (such as H or 4001), and the one projected as renting ones (such as the D ones). The rental ones had extraordinarily small spaces, with very strict indices of size that the architect was not allowed to go over.

They themselves had rented their current apartment until 1989. Having arrived in Piatra-Neamț from Bucharest after their graduation in the 1970s, they were entitled to a place to live (this was one of the most common reason many have told me for missing the old regime). They were supposed to have a small storage space in the kitchen (cămara), which was not built anymore — hence the importance of the balcony as a storage space. Due to resource scarcity, they would also restrict the space of the balconies, and build smaller ones — too small to fit a table and a chair (to use for recreation) — hence the secondary reason for using the balcony as storage more than recreation.

> Many are surprised that we, as architects, still live in this block. In school, we learned the balcony is the connection between the inside and outside, an apartment's garden — that's how we were educated. And [in this apartment] I myself find that I have no place to put my cabbage or bag of carrots, because we had no storage space. Well, we made one because we live on the 4th floor and we had the airing system [...] but if I have a balcony of 6 metres/1 metre, narrow and long, I don't get to use it for anything. Not for I what I was told a balcony could be — a place for a chair and a little table; a place to drink my coffee in the morning.

Whereas Ms. Iacob went out of her way to create a storage space in her kitchen, thereby lessening the living space, the general tendency has been the opposite: to expand as much as possible, even going outside the remit of the apartment space. In the case of the photo below, the inhabitants created a wall on the outer limit of the balcony, thereby extending their living space. With this, came the need to bring in heaters on the balcony (this way, often eluding the controllers who counted the number of heating elements, and so, paying for less). In discussions with architects, it became clear that the floor space of the balcony was never designed to hold as much weight. They were never made to hold heaters and other heavy furniture, and so the risks on the long-term were considerable. As an anecdotal story, a friend who is both Danish and Polish used to visit his Polish family during the summer, and he was never allowed to go on the balcony, for fear that the balcony might collapse (as it had happened in the past).

These recent developments have also been analysed by Romanian scholars. In Bogdan Iancu's *The Social Life of Postcommunist Windows* (2011), his central argument is that the window, which has been an important but common accessory of local households for decades, turned into an article of consumption overnight (Iancu, 2011, p. 21). He states that the domestic sphere of material culture integrated the domestic artefact of the *termopan* window with much rapidity. Further, once the '*classic*' window disappeared, a series of other artefacts left the domestic scenography: window curtains, replaced with vertical blinds ("just like at the office"); or the old and massive chandeliers, frequently replaced with spot-lights that turn homes into a sort of exhibition halls with picture rails (Iancu, 2011, p. 29). Whereas Iancu did his fieldwork in Bucharest, the capital of the country and the largest city, I did mine in a medium sized town in which people's economic resources.

Overall, the emergence of double-glazed windows in Romania "had the coordinates of a troubling event not only for the local window market but also for the domestic environment, turning from a mundane accessory into an item of consumption whose nature tends to be fetishized" (Iancu, 2011, p. 19). Iancu illustrates the configuration of the *termopan* window as a contradictive cultural object, as it embodies a desirable modernity in terms of comfort, but also a *contaminated* object, polluting entire contexts through its simple presence (Iancu, 2011, p. 21). This contamination is something I came across during my fieldwork as well: in Târgu-Neamț, 44 km away from Piatra-Neamț, a monastery has recently been renovated, after many years of being closed due to structural issues. To the shock and awe of the first visitors, the windows of the medieval construction had been replaced with *termopan* windows with PVC frames, such as the ones discussed above.

Most importantly, Iancu questions whether the increased popularity of *termopan* windows results in the accumulation of humidity and the subsequent physical decay of the building, despite positive popular discourse. An example of such a discourse comes from a company dealing with *termopan*,

which points out the increasingly important role that windows play in the building industry: "Windows are not regarded as products that simply cover a hole in the wall, but as elements influencing both the aspect of the entire building and its energetic efficiency" (www.aplast.ro). During his research, Iancu saw several places affected by what he terms post-*termopan* "diseases". During my own research, some research participants mentioned going on holiday, only to find a thick layer of mould on the wall surrounding the *termopan* window. According to specialised magazines, most of these problems are due to the fact that windows are inadequately placed in the specific ecologic context.

Iancu also touches upon closing the balcony, based on an analysis carried out by an engineer in a specialised magazine. He suggests that problems such as condensation, leakages and aesthetical issues that occur after installation are due to the wood/glasswork as a product, to the clumsiness of those doing it, and, most importantly, to the fact that balconies were not conceived to be included in the thermal insulation of the building. Expanding one's home into the balcony minimalizes their initial role, that of open rooms exposed to the exterior. Currently, Iancu (2011) remarks that even if closing the balcony is not recommended, as it has not been included in the building enveloping, only few apartment owners think about it, and those selling this type of interventions are even fewer. Similarly, Florin Poenaru (2008) has discussed the process of renovation following buying a flat in Romania: closing the balcony in order to turn it into a thermal shield against the elements, was a common practice under socialism and has been maintained to this day. In his paper analysing these practices, Florin Poenaru showcased a few apartment owners' reasoning, among which the presence of snow in the balconies during winter, the necessity for the whole family to sleep in the same room due to the lack of heating, etc.

Moreover, as a historical payback for the fantasy years of closing the balconies during socialism, few balconies stay open due to the national and local thermal rehabilitation programmes, such as the polystyrene insulation discussed previously. In his ethnography of homes in Suceava, Drazin argues that, in this new world, the classic wooden-framed windows that Romanians adjusted with duct tape or sealed with paper balls and cloths "do not find their place anymore" (Drazin, 2009), because *termopan* windows are the new instruments of "adding meaning to the world" (Drazin 2009). Essential for my argument is Drazin's conclusion that insulation is about more than energy efficiency. Double-glazed windows, like any new technology, are costly and not everybody can afford it. Thus, the *termopan* becomes an element implicitly associated with social distinction.

Specifically, I noticed during my fieldwork that Romanians working abroad, who have left their apartments behind, will often invest in new double-glazed windows and will close their balconies. In the month of August, when most workers abroad have a holiday and return to Piatra-Neamț, construction business thrives on these new renovations, aimed principally at demonstrating their hard work in a manner that is concrete and widely visible. In my discussions with inhabitants, it's become clear that the new windows fulfil the dual purpose of (1) maintaining the good state of the apartment (by allowing for a more constant temperature and less dust intrusion) and (2) communicating their wealth and wellbeing to neighbours who might otherwise be suspicious of their activities abroad (given how both foreign and Romanian media often portrays Romanian immigrants).

The size of the apartment and the balcony

For the inhabitants who do remain in the country, renovation has an additional role of maintaining a constant level of heat for the balconies otherwise stacked with jars of food for the cold seasons. It was often the case that the apartments were designed with the smallest possible size in mind by architects, only to be made even smaller during the construction part, as described in *The House and the Block*. The scheme below illustrates the "normative distances and sizes" (white circle) in contrast to the "resulting minimal distances" (black circle) for a bathroom ("a"), a kitchen ("b"), a one-person room ("c"). During my research, I have come across multiple studies released by the Institute of Urbanism and Systematisation, assessing the most rational use of small spaces.

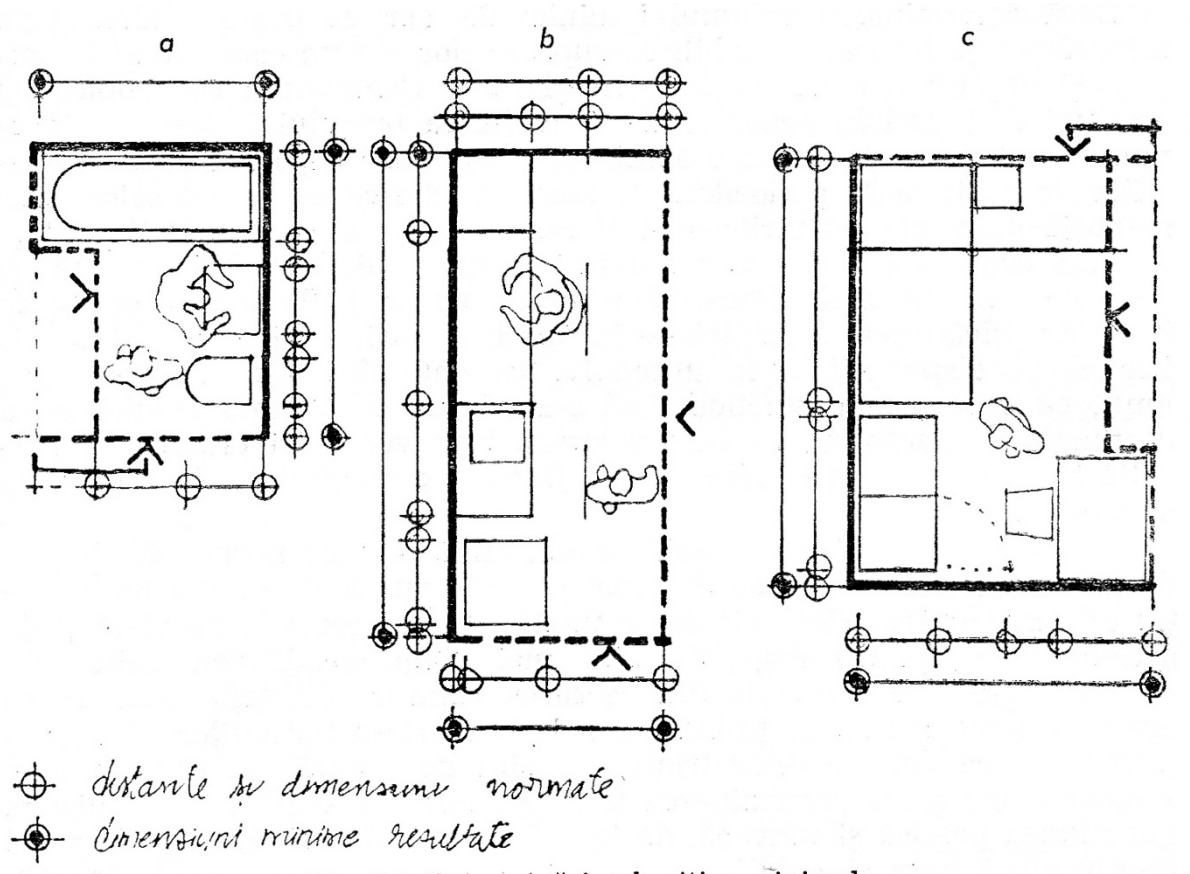


Fig. 5.1. Determinări gabaritice minimale:
a — baie; *b* — bucătărie; *c* — cameră 1 persoană.

If one adds the need to store foods during socialism, we see how the balcony turned into a storage space for all the pickles and conserves made during the autumn. As mentioned in *The House and the Block*, the architects were often frustrated with the contrast between their projects and the finished product, especially when it came to the balconies and the storage spaces. If the balconies were too small for leisure activities and the kitchen storage spaces were taken out, part of the logic of closing down the balconies was to create a constant temperature for the food items that would be stored there. During the cold winters, in which temperatures could reach -20 °C, the food would freeze in balconies that wouldn't be closed.

On the one hand, the ideals of the Romanian architects belonged to the world of idealists such as Corbusier, such as the drawing below. The caption reads: "The balcony as a space of exterior leisure necessitates a certain functional dimension (a). It is exposed to both passer-by sights and to wind from all three directions" (source). This anticipation regarding issues of both privacy and the wind are very telling for this chapter's discussion of windows and balconies, in that inhabitants actually were confronted with such issues in their everyday life, some relating these limitations to the attempt of the socialist regime to control the individual.

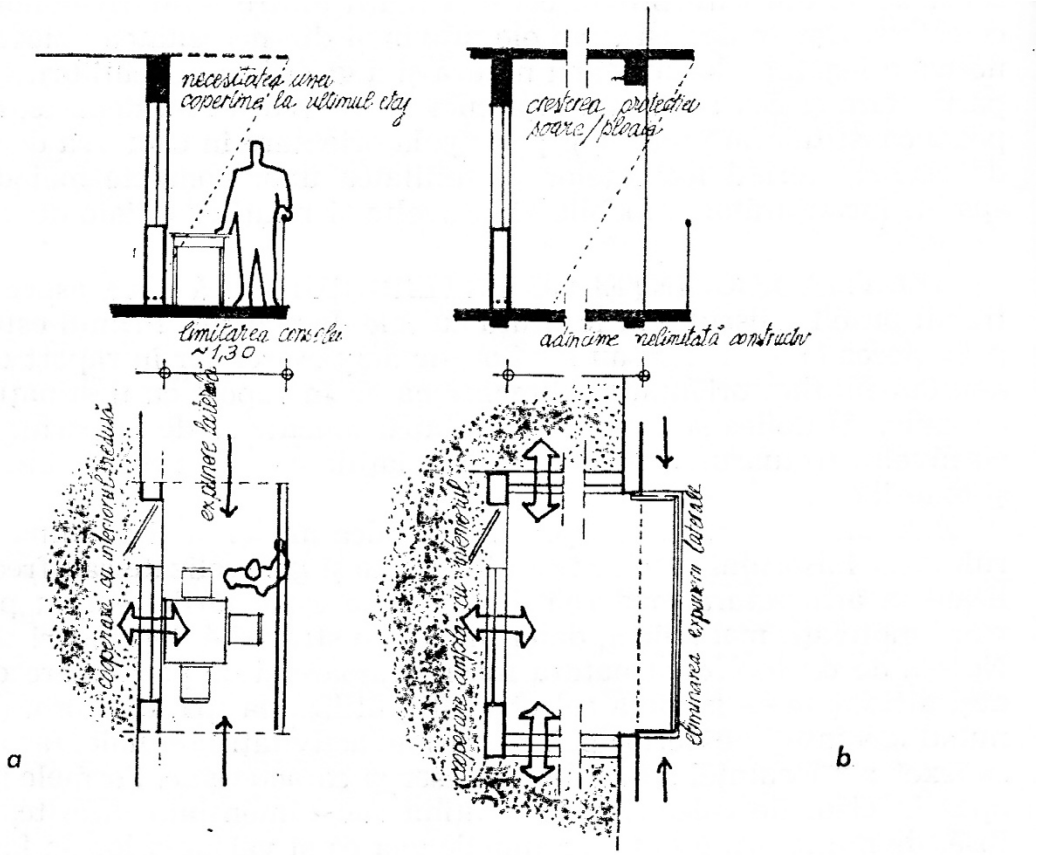
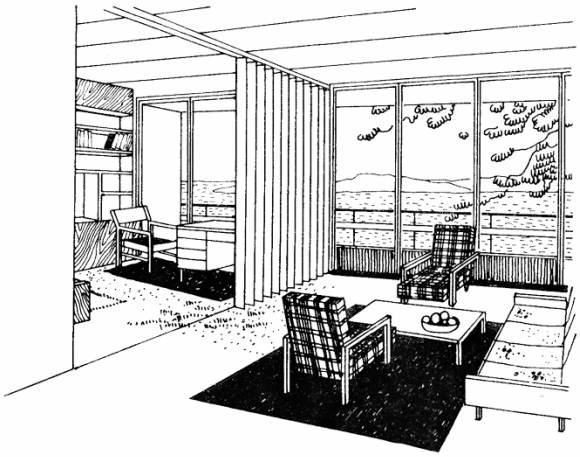


Fig. 5.12. Balcoane şi logii:
a — balconul ca spaţiu de recreare exterior necesită o anumită dimensionare funcţională; este expus privirilor şi vîntului din trei direcţii (*b*).

An edition of the magazine "Almanah" from 1982 read: "Practical Ideas for your Home. A room that is too big and that is shared between adolescent brothers can be separated in an interesting manner, creating a place of rest and study for each one through the use of a separating bookshelf. In the hallway, a couch with armchairs creates a pleasant place for receiving guests, discreetly lit and decorated." As was pointed out to me by a participant, under no circumstance would any apartment have the space to implement the changes suggested by the magazine. What the magazine does provide, is an idealized notion of homemaking, to which people adhered as much in the past as they do now. Alternatively, other decorations magazines at the time would address the space limitations of these new apartments. One such magazine from 1983 reads: "A narrow hallway can seem larger through the use of a mirror." Another, titled "Conquer the space… of the apartment" reads:

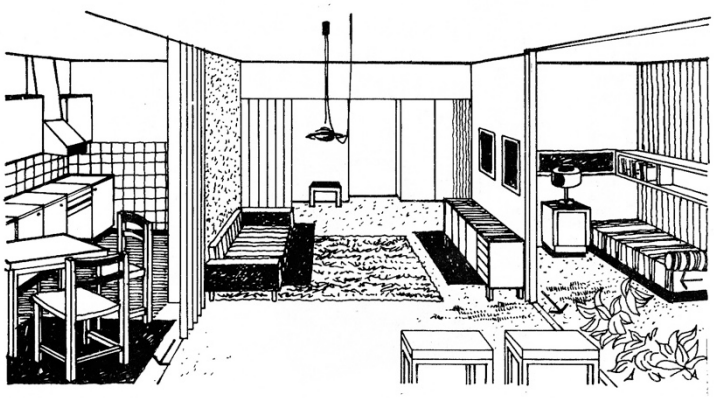
> If people understood that the home is made first of all for us, and not for the furniture, the first step in conquering the space of the apartment would be achieved. By charging the rooms with heavy furniture, we become strangers in our own homes. […] We can't artificially create a good spatial sensation. We must know where, how and what kind of furniture we use. In fact, an empty room, without furniture, can even seem smaller than a room with the right furniture.

Indeed, while looking for decoration magazines from the socialist period, I came across a multitude of designs that looked like they were straight out of an IKEA catalogue. Clean designs, large windows, flat surfaces with few decorations dominated hundreds of pages which created an ideal for home design. A living room and a bed room, separated by a folding wall are shown in an apartment with large windows and nature surrounding it:



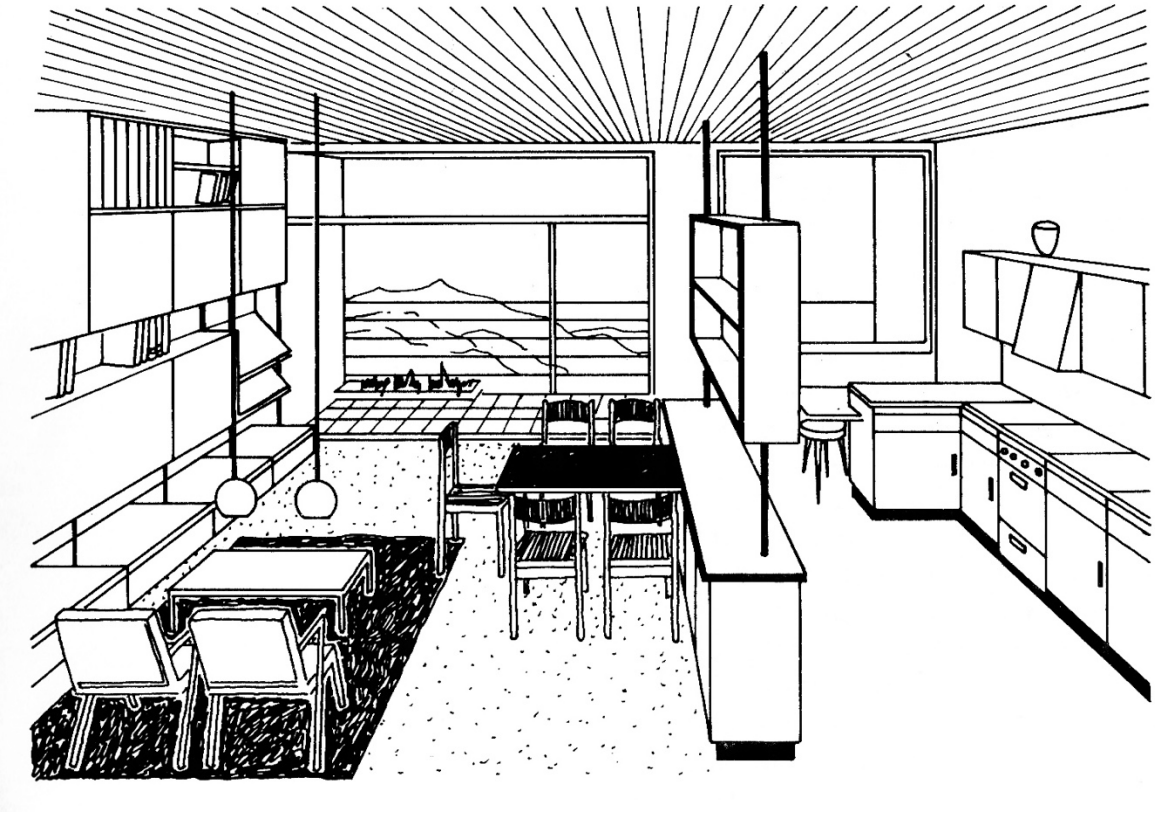
Cameră de zi şi dormitor cu loc de studiu despărţite cu perete pliant.

Similarly, a section of an apartment shows a minimalist living room, with a bedroom on the right side, and the kitchen on the left.

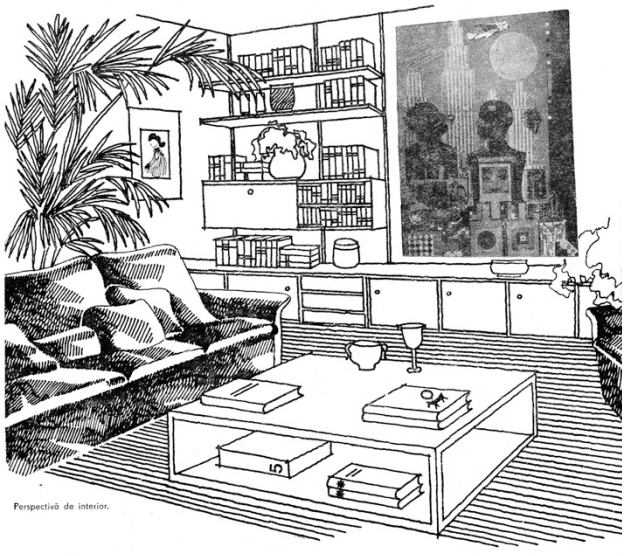


Legarea camerei de zi cu dormitorul şi bucătăria prin sisteme amovibile.

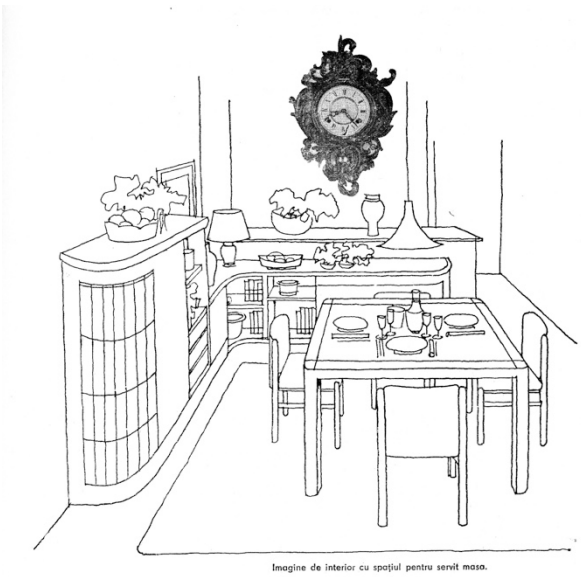
In another drawing, the living room and the kitchen are separated by a small bookshelf:



Interestingly, from a visual anthropology perspective, one particular magazine created collages, using more common objects to bridge between the more abstract drawings and the messiness of objects with complex shapes and textures:



Perspectivă de interior.



Imagine de interior cu spațiul pentru servit masa.

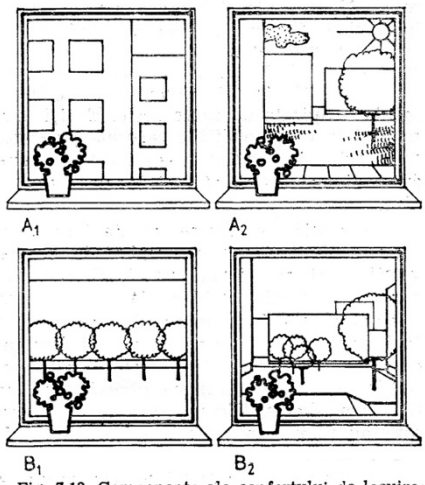
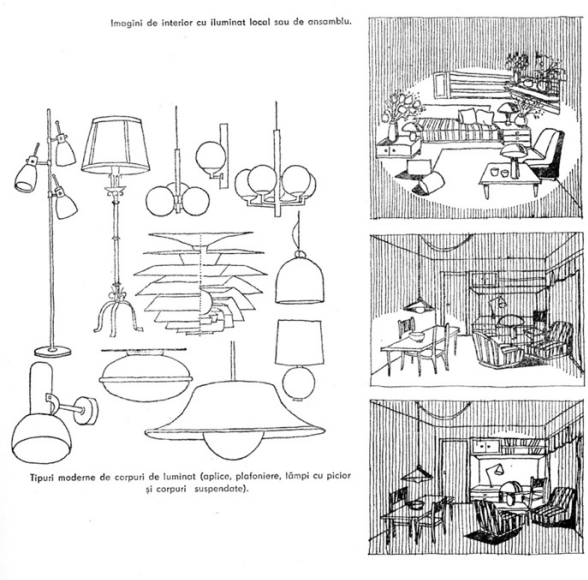


Fig. 7.13. Componente ale confortului de locuire: distanţa ambientală (A_1—A_2) şi criteriul de spaţialitate (B_1—B_2).

The value of these images lies in the ideal they showcase, despite the everyday lived reality of inhabitants in the late socialist period. Rather than speaking to class and definitions of luxury, they were published in a regime in which very few lived in large houses, where these illustrations could be put to practice. Instead, workers and intellectuals, bureaucrats and engineers, all lived in blocks of flats. Surely, as mentioned in *The House and the Block,* there were a few differences between these blocks of flats which did speak to privilege — such as the 4001 block in the city centre that hosted mostly heads of institutions (but they were not drastic). Most blocks of flats had small apartments with limited spaces, even if they differed through a slightly larger balcony or a different base material for the building (brick instead of poured concrete).

Additionally, the view from their windows was typically not a large one, of nature overflowing, but the neighbouring block of flats. In a planning study from 1987, the varying levels of comfort according to the view seen from one's window were assessed — the caption reads: "Components of comfort in dwelling: ambient distance (A1–A2) and criteria of placement in space (B1–B2)". As shown in the *House and the Block* chapter, despite these ideals being known by socialist planners, the reality of the field was that many new inhabitants had to be hosted in clustered blocks of flats in small spaces.

Interestingly, the closeness between the blocks of flats meant two things: (1) that privacy was intruded upon, up to the point where the neighbours could see both the décor and the activities in an apartment and (2) that less light would go through in certain parts of the apartment (which are legislated clearly, but rarely taken into account). This considered, the closing of the balconies and the curtains in apartments became a way to regain privacy, while at the same time losing light. Most apartments I visited were quite dark, decorated in various shades of brown and beige, and lit locally, with small sources of light that focused on one area of the room (as seen in a 1980s decoration guide):



Despite the reality of the low level of light in the apartments, a well lit space remained an ideal. While in Ms. Tomin's apartment, she described the changes she had made that were aimed at increasing the brightness of the apartment, from lighter curtains, to replacing the wooden doors with doors that had a matte glass finishing. Despite most apartments I visited being painted white/beige, among the home books of my research participants, there were many notes related to the use of colour, such as:

> Our home, lit by the sun. How could one define colour, this source of joyfulness so intimately connected to our existence? From the first ray of the morning, we are surrounded by a composition of colour. The walls, the ceilings, the drapes, the curtains, the carpets — they are the colourful marks of our home. If we imagined a world without the harmony of colours, or if we covered it in white, grey or black, we would live in a sad, monotonous world (Almanah, 1989: 172).

In *The Book of Young Housewives*, one reads: "The young housewives need to know the laws the govern the balance of colours and […] the influence of colour on the psyche and on health in general" (Sburlan & Manta, 1988). The text continues to describe the relationship between colour and light, and "the importance of choosing the colour accordingly, depending on the function of the room" (Sburlan & Manta, 1988).





"A well lit setup with charming details"

Vertical communication

Some inhabitants were worried about lit cigarette butts being thrown from above their apartments. To their worry, they would sometimes be blown into their apartments by the strong winds that dominated the Romanian clime. During an Inhabitant's Association meeting, Mr. Ionescu lost his temper: "a DAY does not pass without me finding cigarettes in MY balcony!" Having a small carpet, he was worried about a possible fire. "And I know exactly who smokes… To my shame, I am 75 and I've never tried smoking". Mr. Bud solemnly takes a note of this in his notebook containing all meeting summaries.

The Bunghez family from the 4001 block repeatedly told me the story of their neighbour on the 8th floor, who fed the pigeons on their side of her balcony. The neighbour would throw food for them and the pigeons create dirt and ruin the flowers. How could she do such a thing? After all, everyone knew they are terrible — the pigeon poop, gathered and hardened, destroys the tar of the block covers.

> In civilised cities, there are spikes. And she cannot understand — I asked her nicely to stop feeding them, to go to a park to do so. But it is her pleasure. By mistake, the food she throws ends up in our flower pots, and we end up with visitors. *Mămăligă* (polenta) in my planter?! This is communal living... We even wrote a note downstairs, and we compared it to what happens in civilized cities abroad.

Pigeons were a common problem among inhabitants from different buildings, especially for the ones who were trying to grow plants in their open balconies and found themselves spending large amounts of time cleaning the bird poop. In fact, they were often invoked as one of the main reasons for closing the balconies. Interestingly for my thesis, they would often make nests between the building's cement wall and the layer of polystyrene insulation, thus decreasing the capacity for thermal insulation, and allowing for rain water to permeate between the two layers.

By all means, pigeons were not the only birds to inhabit the buildings. Ms. Ionescu from the 4th floor of the A3 block, living on the top floor of the building, had four sparrow nests in her balcony. Luckily, she had the advantage of a balcony cover that extended half a metre towards the streets, and so, did not have to worry about the bird poop that would fall on her plants — on the contrary, the baby sparrows would poop on the passer-by's heads instead. In contrast to pigeons, sparrows would only seasonally share their livelihoods with those of the inhabitants, arriving in spring and leaving in autumn. A profound fascination revolved around their capacity to return to the exact same apartment, and thus to remain loyal to the Ionescu family.

As anticipated in the previous chapter, in recent years the inside had spilled outwards, with ground-floor balconies seeing doors and stairs added to them, to ease the independence of the inhabitants, but also to make use of the surrounding spaces. With this, came a need for privacy, in some cases (as seen in the photograph on the right) or, on the contrary, an extension of the intimacy towards the public space, decorated in a specific way (which would not be replicated indoors very often). Specifically, with garden decorations proliferating in homeware stores, inhabitants looked for more and more ways to make their balconies or gardens look more attractive.





Most often, the balcony would become the garden, if left open. In fact, the summer use of the balcony as a garden would be the main reason why the balcony would stay open. Taking care of plants in the balcony — a particular order of watering the plants, according to their needs — some need more water, some need less; some need a bit of fertilizers, some don't; some need insecticide; some need spraying on the leaves, especially in the evening. In general, plants were watered either in the evening, or in the morning. Leaving the apartment for more than a few days, when going on holiday, meant passing on the responsibilities to a neighbour, who then had to be instructed exactly. Often, the neighbour would water them too much or too little. An additional issue was the trust involved in letting a neighbour water the plants. Ms. Ionescu, for instance, found herself leaving the key with a neighbour who was clearly going to look through all the drawers, but who was very conscientious in her watering.

In an open balcony, the plants would have to be protected during the winter, and brought in the common spaces of the block: on the staircase, and on the last floor, before the entrance to the attic. This completely changed the aspect of the staircase, which became a kind of botanical garden, showcasing some of the botanical treasures of the apartment. Sometime in April, one could buy additional flowers that were already bloomed, to complement the already existing ones — whereas some plans, such as violets, were long-term presences, others, such as geraniums, would usually be bought each year. During the summer of my fieldwork, most of the conversations with research participants revolved around the care towards the plants. The neighbours would compare each other's treasures and would define their good housekeeping according to how well kept their balconies would be. For instance, when talking to Mr. Toma from the second floor of H2B, who had beautiful hanging flowers in his balcony, he asked me who the inhabitant on the last floor of A3 was, seeing that their flower arrangement surpassed theirs.

One might be tempted to read an argument for a semiotic dimension of the balcony arrangement — a non-verbal communication between neighbours based strictly on the visual marks decided upon on a conscious manner. Whereas it was certainly the case that neighbours did admire or judge one another on the basis of how well they took care of their balconies, the choice of plants also had to do with how inhabitants conceptualised (and longed for) nature. When the size of the balcony allowed, the smallest table and chairs would be set up, transforming the winter-time storage space into a small garden. This very much depended on the building — whereas H2B had relatively narrow balconies, A3 had spacious ones, that allowed for reading or sunbathing. Most importantly, it allowed for "clean air" and relaxation — even if the boulevard right in front had been assessed by City Hall as one of the noisiest.



A retired couple from the fourth floor of the A3 block would always have their morning coffee in the balcony among their flowers, briefly assessing the state of the apartments across the street — they knew, for example, that the dog from the 9th floor would be in the balcony around 10.00 a.m., that the old man with binoculars would show up from time to time, that the old lady on the 6th floor would de-dust her carpets above the flowers from the 5th floor. Especially after retirement, many inhabitants had found similar routines which involved the balcony — for people who sometimes didn't get out of the house for days on end, being on the balcony allowed for some sort of socialization, be it at a distance. Mr. Vatra, who had previously had an intensely busy schedule while working as a controller, would spend his summer days as a widower on the balcony, "observing the world and sometimes waving at the children who played in outside" and who looked up to him like a grandpa. His own children had moved abroad, and he would rarely see his grandchildren — once or twice a year, for Christmas or Easter. Luckily, his wife had objected to his desire to close the balcony, and now he could enjoy the benefits of fresh air without leaving his home. All in all, the use of the balcony oscillated between the need for bodily comfort, where possible (enjoying clean air and plants) and social comfort (interaction at a distance).

So far, the above discussion of the use of balconies mainly referred to the open balconies, which were in fact rarer than the closed ones. Plants were both a reason to keep the balcony open, in order to transform it into an open "garden" during the summer, and to close the balcony with glass windows, so that the temperature remains stable and the plants can remain there during winter time. That was especially the case for the smaller balconies — the ones which served mostly a storage function, as described above. Lastly, closing the balconies made it easier to direct the currents of air, known as drafts, and discussed in the last section of this chapter.



In closed or open balconies, plants became an essential element of the household, which had to be taken care of accordingly. In *Casa Lux*, a very influential decoration magazine, a reader sent a letter in an edition from 1999: "I have a three-room apartment that I modified entirely according to the suggestions of Casa Lux. I love this magazine for the beauty that it encapsulates, for the opportunity to "visit" other homes and, of course, for the pages dedicated to plants. […] In time, my home was transformed into a greenhouse. I have more than 100 species of plants which I love, with which I share discussions and music, and I am happy that I can read articles in your magazine about the care they require. The plants are like my children and I can't imagine how my life would look like without them." Whereas this particular letter is written in very strong terms, I have often seen my female participants show affection towards their plants, asking them how their day was going, and giving them various names to greet them by.

The Window and the Draft

As I showed earlier, the closing of the balconies and the changing of the window frames was meant to encapsulate the home in an air-tight seal which would maintain all the heat inside. In this context, how did my research participants air their apartments? Also, how did they conceive of the air that was either stagnating, or moving through their apartment? This question became essential to my research very early on, when realising that inhabitants were very weary of (1) the possible health hazards that are involved in a simple a gesture as opening the window and (2) the implication for heating costs. For instance, Ms. Ionescu from the A3 block would open the window in the morning, before turning the heating on — especially since she had insulated the apartment, she had become weary of the damaging effects of humidity and mould. During the night, the heating would usually be turned off and she slept next to her husband under a thick blanket — this was both because she considered a low temperature during the night healthier and because this way, she would save some money. For the inhabitants who had an individual heating system, this mattered profoundly, especially as energy prices rose. Ms. Ionescu's morning practice was not very common, in fact — I would often notice that among the windows I could see from my own apartment, there were some that never opened, despite the apartments being inhabited.

As described in *The Wall Insulation*, constructors showed real concern for polystyrene insulation, specifically because they knew that inhabitants would rarely air their homes thoroughly, on the one hand because of the need to save energy, on the other hand for fear of the draft. In summer, my research participants would keep the windows closed, both at work and at home, no matter how warm it would become. I would often see people travel in overheated cars, or in steaming trams, only



because opening the window could be "bad for you". The high temperatures were nothing next to the possible hazards that the draft could bring, from tooth ache to terrible migraines or even partial paralysis. What is the draft, and how can we pin down its elusiveness? At its core, the draft is the movement of air due to a difference in temperature — it can be cause by two open windows in a room, by air conditioning directed towards someone's desk, by an open window in a car.

I myself often myself explained the phenomenon of the draft to foreigners who saw it as a mystery or an eccentricity. Among the questions that I received from Dutch and English friends who visited during my research, the following stood out: "So it is moving air? Like… the wind?" "So, if you believe in it, it affects you; if you don't believe in it, it doesn't?" "Do doctors really advise against opening two windows at the same time?" Realising that I myself was a "believer" in the potent capacities of the draft, I looked up what fellow Romanians had written on this. In an article from 2009, Sorana Stănescu interviewed Romanian health specialists about the draft. She found, to her surprise, that doctors and nurses would advise their patients against, for instance, using a ventilator in the bedroom during the hot summer nights, because the draft could cause neuralgia or meningitis (Stănescu, 2009). In fact, doctors argued that it was not the movement of air that was a problem, as it was the difference in temperature, which can emphasize symptoms we already have.

Stănescu put forward a proposition for the Romanian obsession with the draft: the lack of centralised heating from the 1980s during long periods of socialist energy austerity made people aware of the necessary efforts to maintain all the possible heat inside the poorly insulated socialist buildings. In order to raise the temperature by a few degrees, she argues, Romanians have improvised space heaters on the basis of diesel, sawdust or word:



Illustration of the original DOR article, Irina Georgescu

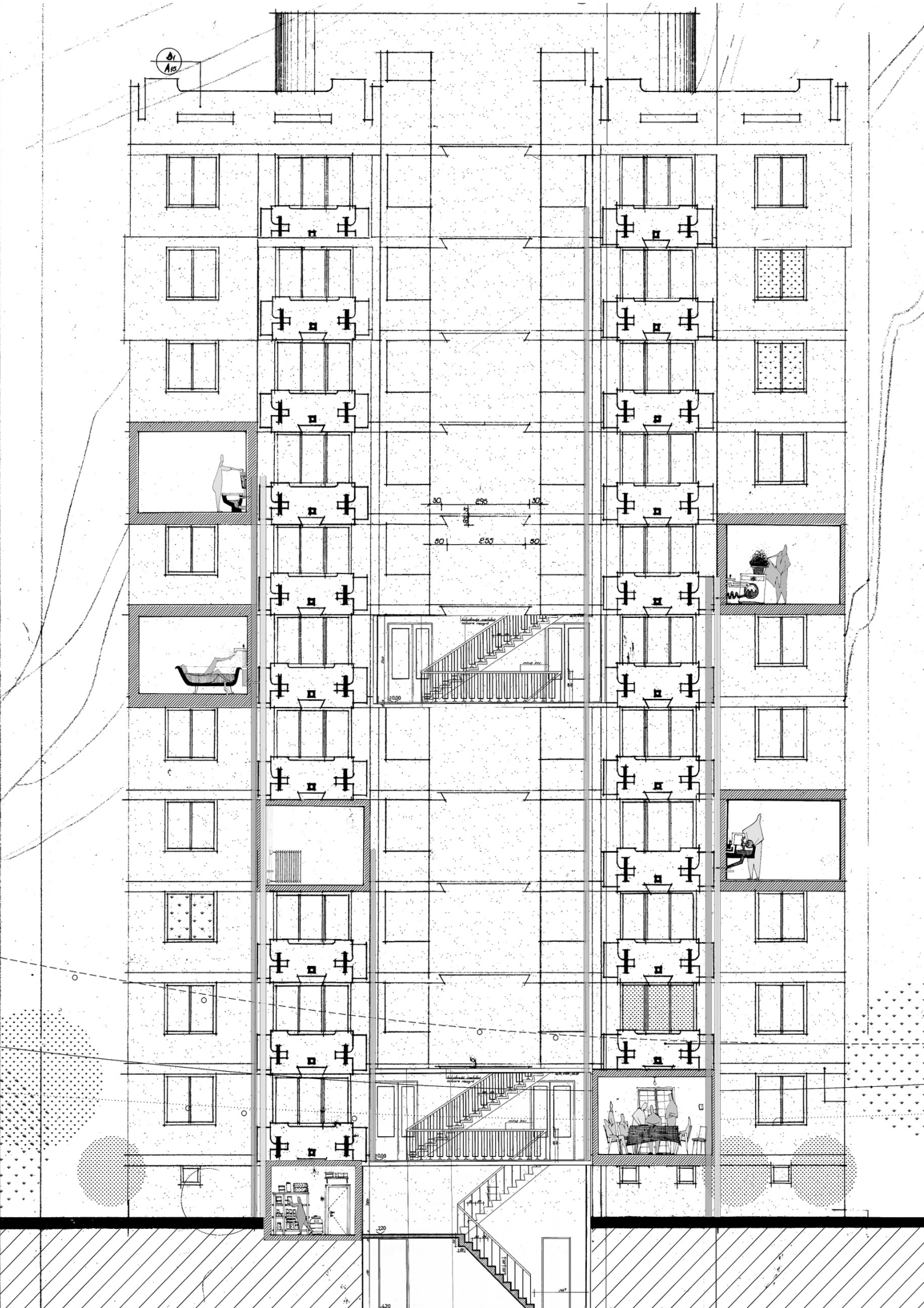
"Perhaps under these conditions they developed a "sixth sense" for detecting the feeblest of air drafts that threatened the steal the already meagre heat. What else was the draft if not more cold air? And was not chronic cold, in the context of a population with precarious health, an open door to disease? Of course, it is merely a theory. One that cannot be studied in greater detail, due to the Revolution, *termopan* windows, apartment heating system and thermo-insulation. Perhaps, in time, the "sense of the draft" will soften, and so will other "traumas" from those times" (Stănescu, 2009). On the left, the illustration for her article, showing the shape of a current going back and forth, around a chair that is being "pulled by the draft". "Mă trage curentul", meaning "I am pulled by the draft", was one of the most used phrases during my fieldwork, always in the passive tone. A direct causal relation between the historical conditions of cold in the home and the perceptions of health in the home is hard to pin down, and too convenient and simplistic perhaps. Relevantly for my study, however, many of my research participants explained their fears in those terms.



Mr. Borș's woods drying in the A3 staircase

The concept of the draft can gain great analytical value if we go back to a few of the ethnographic vignettes from the previous chapter: When Ms. Ionescu was upset with Ms. Borș for leaving the doors of the staircase open in order to dry his wood for the fire, the main reason she mentioned was the draft, as a possible danger for all other inhabitants. When Mr. Bud insisted that he keeps the heaters in the common spaces, he invoked a gradual change in temperature for the children who go to school, for reasons of health and comfort. It also helps us understand emic justifications behind the decision to close off the apartment as much as possible by changing the windows, closing the balconies and ultimately insulating the facades with polystyrene.

In this chapter, I have expanded on the idea of closing in the building as much as possible, as put forward in *The Wall Insulation*. I have shown how the layer of polystyrene now covering the majority of Romanian blocks of flats are but a step in the ongoing transformations of the buildings aimed at energy efficiency. When research participants referred to the insulation of the building as a coat or to the windows as eyes, the mix of aesthetic and functional came across as incredibly powerful. I find it essential to problematize the relationship between these two categories, seeing that the choice of windows in Romania is (1) aesthetic and symbolic — a marker of status and modernity through the white PVC frames — and (2) a functional solution in the face of the harsh climatic conditions of the cold season. It might seem reasonable to argue for a conscious decision in the hands of inhabitants to appropriate their apartments, especially as a counter reaction to socialism's strict guidelines concerning balcony decorations. Nonetheless, as we have seen, inhabitants seem to have less control over the renovation process than they might have hoped for, finding themselves at the mercy of the so-called Diderot effect, by which they look for aesthetic and functional coherence inside their apartments. Because their focus is centred around their own apartments — rather than the rest of the building — and because there is no state institution urging them to resonate with the rest of the block's inhabitants, the facades start to look like the complex puzzle of colour and texture that the thesis began with.


30
295
30
60
255
60
±0,00
±0,00
-220
420

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the recent changes made to the H2B block of flats in the name of energy efficiency and the changing relationships between its inhabitants and the post-socialist state. The Romanian blocks of flats, the bulk of which were built in quick succession during the industrialisation and urbanisation process in the 1970s, had many infrastructural issues from the onset, as described in the first chapter, *The House and the Block*. Inhabitants' testimonies, local newspaper articles and documentation from the State Archives all attest to the fluctuating heating, flimsy finishings and mould issues that upset inhabitants from the very beginning. The "engineered infrastructure" might have had a "spectacular" effect (Larkin, 2013), but the "unengineered" effects (Penny Harvey, Jensen, & Morita, 2016) of the rushed building process produced suspicion towards the socialist state. Both the inhabitants and the architects were unhappy to see their building plans transform; indeed, due to the lack of resources, they had to sacrifice both the quality and the size of the new buildings. Further, constructors grew frustrated and the future inhabitants who would ask them to change certain things (such as tiles). Future inhabitants were often involved in the construction of their home, either during the process or immediately after.

Despite the imposing systematisation plans and the heart-breaking demolitions that ensued from it, the emergence of the blocks of flats was not a thoroughly planned process. Certain houses did continue to exist (as seen with the Petruca family), but now with new neighbours in sight. Even if the old houses disappeared, storage spaces or water sources often remained, thus creating continuity between the two forms of dwelling. Perhaps most importantly, what remained deeply engrained in the inhabitants was a certain *practice* of adapting the apartment to the environment, as I have illustrated by focusing on the changing windows, balconies, attics or wool/wood insulation. This stands in stark contrast with the official discourse of efficiency and rational living, linked with the industrial developments in the country.

My research has shown that this tension between socialist ideals of modernity and the reality of everyday life in the new construction is best understood by putting aside purely visual elements of dwelling, and also focusing on multi-sensuous embodied experiences (Howes, 2005; Ingold, 2000). For instance, smell is revealed as an important means to communicate between the apartments, such as when Ms. Tomin complains of an all-pervasive garlic smell that comes from an unknown neighbour. If we take the "official" high expectations of modern life in the building as a starting point, no wonder such an "intrusion" is disappointing to her. Equally, the sense of touch becomes a way to check for the humidity of the walls — especially when one's neighbour is absent during winter, leaving a cold apartment behind. Finally, sound reminds everyone that "hell is other people" (Sartre, 1989). This was most poignantly exemplified when the new polystyrene wall insulation was installed interiorly to thermally insulate apartments from the outside: it failed to phonetically insulate the apartments from each other.

Moving from the façades into the interior of the apartments, my ethnography has unpacked how inhabitants deal with inside spaces that don't fall under their direct responsibility, such as gardens or

staircases (with their elevators, doors, and garbage disposal units). Apart from being striking examples of the blurring distinction between private and public spaces — does the rooftop belong to the top floor inhabitant or to the building as a whole? —, they also revealed the complex manners in which inhabitants communicate with each other. Through all of these channels, inhabitants are deeply connected and know each other's stories; but, to my surprise, are rarely close in their relationships. If anything, lack of trust and an omnipresent suspicion arises (as described in *The Administration Room*, *The Water Tap* and *The Heater*). Here is where I contribute to literature on trust and collectivity, in line with Coleman's emphasis on "the moral effort to make the material conditions of life-in-common matter, to seize on infrastructures of connection as part of a collective project — indeed as the very stuff of collectivity" (Coleman, 2014, p. 469). Trust is a highly salient topic in Europe today, both Eastern and Western, in which precariousness of life under neoliberalism is attributed to the poor and racialized other (Ortner, 2016, p. 57) — hence the importance of this discussion of trust in the global context of suspicion towards global immigrants.

Among these, Romanians are at the forefront of recent discussions around Brexit in the UK, for example. Research Councils in the UK have funded myriad research projects assessing the effects of Romanian *immigration* (for instance, in Oxford's Centre on Migration, Policy and Society). However, the consequences of Romanian *emigration* for Romanian cities has been understudied. Migration leaves apartments empty, causing infrastructural problems and tensions in the block (as described in *The Heater* and *The Wall Insulation*). One of the most striking themes in my current research has been *absence* — the *absence* of inhabitants who have long departed to work abroad, the *absence* of resources to take care of the building, the *absence* of heat or water circulation. During great waves of migration, this emptiness left behind in the home countries of migrants is greatly understudied in comparison to the receiving countries, with any focus usually on big cities. In contrast, in shrinking, ageing cities, fewer resources can be put aside (by both inhabitants and City Hall) in order to increase the quality of life of those inhabitants who are stay behind. In this context, the ageing infrastructure of the buildings starts to play an important role in the lives of the inhabitants, in moments of sudden breakdown but also during slow decay. I think that these connections between infrastructural problems in source communities and larger migration processes would benefit from further study in the future.

Since, as argued, unreliability is somewhat embedded in the fragility of infrastructure, I have explored a wide range of infrastructural issues surrounding Romanian blocks of flats, from construction to the present day. These were experienced as important by my research participants, who put great effort into making their living environments as pleasant as possible, with fewer and fewer resources. Throughout the thesis, I have shown the tension between the block administrator's efforts to draw his neighbours' financial resources towards the common good of the building, and the individual neighbours' efforts to both contribute to these endeavours, and make their own apartments more suitable through renovation/redecoration. These individual changes in each apartment had an overall effect on the rest of the building, be they pragmatic (changing the overall level of heat) or aesthetic (contributing to the overall façade with a different window/closed balcony/new attic). These adaptations started before the change of the socialist regime, and, of course, before the mass privatisation of the apartments. My research nuances the idea of the socialist inhabitants as renters through the example of H2B, in which inhabitants bought (and adapted) their apartments from the beginning, many of them insulating their inside walls with polystyrene as early as 1974. Whereas many insulation techniques had their origins in the "traditional" Romanian house (such as the wall carpets,

as seen in *The House and The Block*), others were linked to the natural environment at-large and the proximal forests (such as the wood panels of Ms. Tomin's apartment discussed in *The Heater*).

My thesis has analysed how the renovation process, which included changing the windows, closing the balconies, and thermally insulating the walls, have come from the necessity to close in the apartment, so as to conserve as much heat inside as possible. This outwards transformation tells a larger story about the relationship between the aesthetic and the functional. The initial motivation to make changes might have been functional, but the transformations of the buildings have had profound aesthetic consequences, with apartments deteriorating both on the inside and the outside. These changes are seen by the inhabitants and by urban anthropologists alike as markers of contemporary disenchantment with both the Romanian state (and, more recently, with the EU). "Where was City Hall when we were fixing our entrance stairs? We did everything ourselves!" cried Mr. Bud when pressed by a neighbour to justify the repair cost of the stair. In the context of this institutional vacuum, the Romanian adherence to the EU created great hope and the expectation of alignment with Western members of the EU, as manifested in the urban fabric. Romanians were evidently thrilled when the EU funding for building rehabilitation was announced. Soon after, however, many inhabitants, such as Mr. Bud, found that they could not access these funds, and that instead, many neighbours were starting to insulate their own apartments with private funds. My thesis puts this process of home adaptation in a larger temporal and spatial context.

Every year since the energy crisis of 1973, buildings have been made more airtight and better insulated to increase energy efficiency (culminating with the large funds coming from the EU). At the same time, keeping the warm air inside also meant keeping in all the moisture that humans, kitchens and bathrooms constantly produce. Being a gas, water vapour can penetrate everywhere in search for a cool surface on which to condense. When it enters into a wall cavity and condenses there, it soaks insulation, corrodes all metal (nails, screws, bolts, wire lath, masonry ties) and flows down to the floor plate to rot the building's basic structure — all of these chemical processes, hidden from view (Brand, 1994, p. 114). Because of water, houses deteriorate from the bottom up as well as from the top down. Indeed, moisture from the ground rises by capillary action into foundations and seeps into cells, treating a building like a very large lump of sugar (Brand, 1994). Furthermore, although water can only rise a few feet, it can descend and branch out indefinitely. As a continuation of my research, a short preliminary research trip to Chișinău in the Republic of Moldova provided blocks of flats that were further revealing. There, mould has savaged its façade, thus endangering both the health of the inhabitants and the structure of the building in the long-term. As can be seen in the photo on the following page, thermal insulation has been added onto the affected façade like patching quicksand. This is a fascinating comparative case study that would merit further research, because Moldova is not inside the EU and insulation has been pushed forward by commercial businesses alone.

Importantly, my argument here is not against thermal insulation, which, done properly, increases the quality of life of the inhabitants and protects against excessive energy consumption. Heating homes and confronting climate change at once, insulation is here to stay. The contingencies of concern with respect to insulation, however, are relative quality of its material and fitting. For instance, the insulation materials on London's Glenfell tower was a flammable type that is banned in the US and in Germany. Similarly, the polystyrene so commonly used in Romania, is not recommended for buildings taller



Block of flats in Chișinău

than P+2, for which special permission is required for exemption. My data suggest that permission is rarely granted: most buildings do not have approval from the State Inspectorate in Construction (an institution, as described in *The Wall Insulation chapter*, with little interest in the recent building rehabilitation work). Additionally, the Inspectorate often fails to prevent improvised heating units from being installed by their inhabitants (such as the wood-based units in Bicaz, for which inhabitants construct exhaust pipes that press against the flammable polystyrene).

In my work, I am pointing to something graver (and more discrete) than the need to insulate: austerity and the retreat of the state from caring for domestic buildings, concomitant with recent privatisation. My thesis identifies important parallels between the UK and Romania in terms of building maintenance and the involvement of multiple actors: at least eight contractors and sub-contractors were responsible for separate elements of the refurbishment and materials used for the work at the Glenfell tower[47]. Such public-private partnerships raise concerns about the inability of the local authorities to properly supervise the whole process and guarantee the satisfaction of health and safety regulations. Privatization has meant that a range of companies are competing for the business. The race to the bottom on price that occurs in an outsourced paradigm increases the chance of sharp practice, necessarily compromising safety during construction and in occupation. Worsening this situation is the fact that it is often those companies with a reputation for gaining "easy" approvals that increasingly dominate the market, further undercutting the council building control[48]. This was described in *The Wall Insulation* chapter, through my encounters with constructors, inhabitants, City Hall officials, and state inspectors. However, I have shown that the urban transformations — most evident in the case of wall insulation — took off long before the regime change in 1989.

Contribution to anthropological theory

In his article *The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure*, Brian Larkin speaks of the capacity of infrastructure to elicit awe and admiration, emphasizing the public display of the state's capacity to reinforce modern ideals of progress (Larkin, 2013). His contribution counterpoints previous arguments in the anthropology of infrastructure, which had defined *infra*-structures according to their internal, invisible working. As Star and Ruhleder famously drew attention to the silent, unnoticed work done by infrastructures, they were thought to become noticeable only when they give in and stop functioning as they are meant to (Star & Ruhleder, 1996). It has so far been established that, short of breakdowns, infrastructures tend to remain invisible at the level of use and experience. In this context, Bowker came up with a methodological and conceptual tool by which researchers could reveal the hidden relations that allow for the smooth functioning of infrastructure, and termed it "infrastructural inversion"(Bowker, 1995). Whereas Larkin emphasizes infrastructure as spectacular public display, Bowker refers to mundane operational processes. Although these views may appear to be contrasting, Harvey *et al.* have argued in their introduction to *Infrastructure and Social Complexity* (2017) that "these are not immediately comparable forms of visibility, since the regular operations of infrastructure may remain

[47] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/15/experts-warned-government-against-cladding-material-used-on-grenfell

[48] https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2017/jun/17/architects-grenfell-tower-fire-was-an-avoidable-tragedy#img-1

opaque or unknown, even as the infrastructure is publically exhibited" (Penelope Harvey, Jensen, & Morita, 2016, p. 17). This is where my thesis dwells, providing a detailed, nuanced case study of visible *and* invisible infrastructures within mundane processes of care and maintenance, in the face of degradation and breakdown.

As much as "infrastructural inversion" has allowed analysts to bring certain elements of infrastructure to the fore and leave others background, it has also assumed their smooth functioning. In reality, the obvious fragility of infrastructures, shown by regular breakdowns or even collapse, has engendered different patterns of visibility. These breakdowns have been described as fragile in recent ethnographies all over the world, from Schwenkel's ethnography of water infrastructure in Vietnam (Schwenkel, 2015) to Chu's study of maintenance in China (Chu, 2014), or Fennel's analysis of heating in the US (2011). Infrastructural breakdowns are not only ubiquitous, each is patently visible, and they generate new forms of practical engagement on the side of their users, as seen in Anand's ethnography of water pressure in India (Anand, 2012) or von Schnitzler's work on prepaid water meters in South Africa (von Schnitzler, 2008). As much as they have informed my own research, many of these studies fail to engage with the relationship between *visibility* and *invisibility* that is of such great importance to inhabitants (with the notable exception of Schwenkel 2015). In the case of H2B, it would be true to say that, in line with this previous work, the lack of visibility of a leaking pipe brings about a constant worry with regard to the very visible breakdown. However, where my work is truly innovative is in the highlighting of ways in which infrastructures, while fulfilling pragmatic roles of energy efficiency, for instance, equally have an aesthetic purpose or resonance. For example, not only is wall insulation a visible infrastructural addition to the building, but it is aesthetically charged — loaded with meaning according to the social and political realities of post-socialism.

In this context, a useful conceptual distinction is the one through engineered (i.e., planned and purposefully crafted) or non-engineered (i.e., unplanned and emergent) activities, as suggested by Harvey *et al.* (2017). They argue that, if infrastructures fail, this can be either due to internal disruptions or to the breakdown in the relations between infrastructure and the domain of activity it is expected to sustain. From the Săvinești Industrial Centre (that used to host 30,000 workers and that is now maintained by 200 and degrading each day), to the district heating units (that are now relics in open view, as discussed in *The Heater*), the Romanian built environment is a strong illustration of engineered systems that break down, but continue to generate an effect. Harvey *et al.* speak of these effects in terms of health hazards, but I would like to add more subtlety to this discussion by introducing the aesthetics of these infrastructural forms that continue to communicate. Very concretely, these contribute to the collective forms of disenchantment with the present-day regime, in contrast to socialist times.

It is equally important not to take for granted the association between visibility and effectiveness. As Lea and Pholeros have shown in the context of Aboriginal housing in Australia, the public exhibit of material artefacts like pipes does not guarantee a well-functioning infrastructure (Lea & Pholeros, 2010). Similarly, the insulation done by City Hall on the main boulevards does not indicate its effective functioning ("treabă de mântuială"), with inhabitants and constructors alike being profoundly unhappy with how superficial the work was performed — not only did building "rehabilitation" not take place according to the legislative definition (of replacing pipes, adding a new attic, etc.), but the only work

that was conducted was the addition of a layer of thermal insulation, which in the long-term could degrade the installations even further (as argued in *The Wall Insulation* chapter).

A very interesting two-way interaction seems to be taking place: through wall insulation, the invisible consequences of faulty heat and humidity regulation become visible — initially hidden under a positive, aesthetically pleasing form (colourful polystyrene), and later as a flimsy looking, degrading façade. These aesthetic consequences, visible to all members of the community, then have the potential to influence the functional and aesthetic choices of other individuals for their respective home insulation. Depending on the time at which they witnessed the changes, people may choose very different solutions to their own issues of energy poverty and degradation. People are then witnesses of infrastructural change while being the proponents of that same change. Without state regulation, it becomes very difficult to identify the agent responsible amid this chaotic process.

Thus, attention to infrastructure offers a welcome reconfiguration of anthropological approaches to the political. This has been anticipated by Graham and Marvin's (2001) analysis of the "splintering" effects of infrastructural systems in contemporary urban settings. Referring to the capitalist world, they argue that these systems, once held together by elected public authorities deploying funds from taxation, are now distributed across many different owners and property regimes, with very diverse charges to the users. They thus hint towards the retreat of the state from the care of these infrastructure — a core idea in my thesis. Shaped by a politics of decentralization, post-socialist countries have suffered from the neoliberal agenda intent on the outsourcing of service provision (Ortner, 2016), which have, in turn, increased differentiation of access to services.

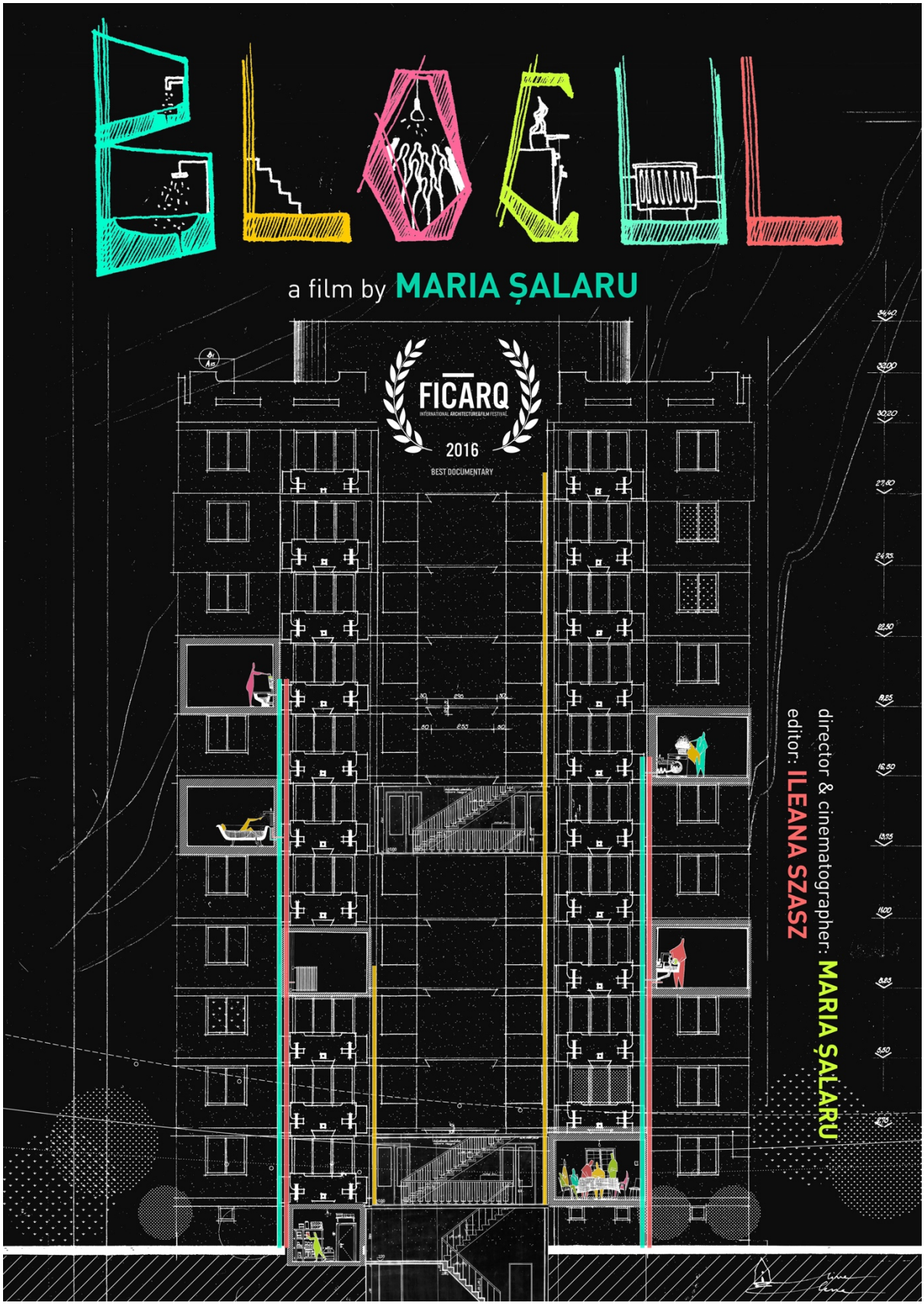
Equally, this "splintering" has generated new social relations, as people come together to fill the gaps between the state and the market, and to become involved in the maintenance of the otherwise degrading urban environment. This is clearly shown in my work: for example, when pipes break down (*The Water Tap*), it fosters sociality around the mending of the font (see also Schwenkel, 2015). At the end of the day, however, not all social actors have the economic means and the technical knowledge to deal with infrastructure in a similar way: technical dimensions of infrastructure become impenetrable to most people (Penelope Harvey et al., 2016). As seen in my work, this complicates the relationships between Mr. Bud and his neighbours, who don't always grasp all the ways in which Mr. Bud maintains and calibrates the heating system, for instance.

Penelope Harvey et al. (2016) have pointed out that inconsistencies and gaps in the infrastructure often allow users to creatively manipulate infrastructures — such as the various water readings that inhabitants hand in (*The Water Tap*) or the financial gymnastics carried out by Mr. Bud when these readings don't add up (*The Administration Room*). Of course, whereas these miscalculations are traced on paper, they also have a concrete equivalent: inhabitants often tamper with the meters themselves, narrow the water tap flow, or take cold water and boil it. Equally, Mr. Bud lowers heating costs by recirculating warm water by means of the difference in pressure instead of pumping it actively. In the space between the infrastructural gesture and its paper trace, there is a gap in which inhabitants place themselves and their relationships with others. This dissertation adds to the innovative anthropological work about infrastructure. However, my ethnography is also grounded in the long anthropological tradition of studying the home and it thus also broadens the horizon of infrastructure studies, by including a nuanced discussion of the relationship between the aesthetic and the functional aspects of

everyday life in Romanian blocks of flats. My work problematizes the disassociation between "form" and "function" (Pfaffenberger, 1992), often taken for granted, and highlights how, within the space of the apartment block, they coalesce.






BLOCUL
a film by MARIA ȘALARU
FICARQ
INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE&FILM FESTIVAL
2016
BEST DOCUMENTARY
director & cinematographer: MARIA ȘALARU
editor: ILEANA SZASZ

Dissemination and impact

The theoretical underpinnings of my study are based on empirical data that I have gathered using a range of visual methods that also enabled me to engage into a fruitful dialogue with the local community about the care and maintenance of the housing stock inherited from the socialist period. Through producing *The Block*, a documentary about the H2B building, I expanded the reach of my research beyond the initial participants to other inhabitants of Piatra-Neamț and other Romanian cities (such as Sibiu and Bucharest), to fellow researchers (in The Netherlands, Germany, the UK), to architects and filmmakers in South Africa or Spain, to community activists in Moldova (see a film review below from the *Cinema and Architecture* magazine). Following each film screening, the ensuing conversations have been inspiring, reiterating the importance of a study of such a home as a negotiated space between the inhabitants and the state. The premiere of the film took place in its place of genesis, with a screening in Piatra-Neamț's main square, attended by the inhabitants and the rest of the local community (see photographs on the following page). Mr. Bud was interviewed by the organisers of the festival *Filmul de Piatra* and shared his concerns and his efforts. More widely in Romania, the film started a much-needed conversation about living spaces, achieving a wide presence in the media, through newspaper and radio interviews. Given that the documentary is edited in the style of observational cinema, without any commentary guiding the viewer, I felt the need to write a complementary piece which would fill some of the gaps uncovered by the film. Hence, I wrote an in-depth narrative journalism piece about Mr. Bud's efforts in the H2B in the non-fiction journal *Decât o Revistă*, which has a wide circulation throughout Romania. Because it is written in Romanian, it offered the research participants themselves an occasion to access my core findings and reflections.





The findings of my study also have a resonance beyond academia because they can inform housing and energy policy in concrete ways. In public policy, it has been commonly assumed that attitudes and behaviours within the home need to be modified in order to secure a sustainable energy future. Alongside instruments such as regulation and economic measures, government campaigns have sought to 'educate' the public. Government campaigns in the energy and environmental fields have often been predicated on a rationalist 'information deficit model' (see Burgess et al. 1998), which assumes that "environmental education, drawing from scientific work, will lead to people making the link between policy and action, and acting in order to meet policy objectives" (Eden, 1996). However, such 'information deficit' models have been criticised on both theoretical and pragmatic grounds: as an example, pro-environmental attitudes (expressed, for instance, in surveys or in focus groups) are not reflected in significant shifts in behaviour (Owens & Driffill, 2008, p. 4424). Rather, in spite of successive campaigns, the take-up of energy efficiency measures has proved disappointing and behaviours have in many instances become more energy-intensive (Owens & Driffill, 2008, p. 4417). All in all, there is a "clear gap between consumer beliefs on individual responsibility to conserve energy and day to day usage behaviour" (Jelly, 2008, p. 66).

Why would that be? Aside from those who deal with the production or transmission of energy, no one really "behaves" in relation to energy. Devices convert energy into services; people consume services, not energy. So, what is needed is a social science of energy service consumption, something much broader than a science of energy behaviour (Wilk, 2009). Graphs of increasing energy consumption are, in fact, graphs of the societal appropriation or increasingly intensive use of technologies such as lighting systems, refrigerator-freezers, air conditioning, and so on (Wilk, 2009). "What the energy world requires, and what social scientists are in a position to provide, is an analysis of how conventions evolve, of how energy intensive ways of life become normal, and how energy demand is embedded in society" (Wilk, 2009).

Economic anthropologists have convincingly argued that the modern capitalist economic system, itself an enormous engine of growth requiring constant expansion in consumption, is a cultural artefact (Hann & Hart, 2009). Humans are operators: participants' behaviour is not simply determined by advertisers, governments, policy makers, etc. It is because anthropology has a systemic view of human society, that it has the potential to assemble a comprehensive approach. In the area of energy consumption, I would like to emphasize the need to take account of the physical, social, cultural and institutional contexts that shape and constrain people's choices. This unexplained gap between intentions and behaviour brings us to the role of socio-technical systems of energy and water provision, which have been explicitly designed to encourage consumers to forget about where their energy and water is coming from… and going towards (Kaika, 2005).

In my thesis, I have attended to the micro, day-to-day transformations of individual apartments, at the same time aesthetic and functional, and the way in which they cumulatively affect "larger" urban changes in Piatra-Neamț, transforming both the urban fabric and the local sense of what defines a good life. I set out to describe the various kinds of actors involved with domestic energy consumption, and the choices they make according to their knowledge and economic power — from the inhabitant deciding to buy an apartment heating system, to the City Hall retreating their semi-centralised heating

systems from the grid. Tellingly, all the H blocks on the boulevard apart from Mr. Bud's had only individual, apartment heating systems; some of Mr. Bud's neighbours were proud to have access to the common heating, telling stories about how cold it was in the neighbouring blocks. Indeed, each building does not only reveal a different design rationale, but also a different social make-up and rapport between its inhabitants. However, what H2B shared with the rest of the Romanian blocks of flats that I encountered during my research, was a stubborn coping mechanism in the face of utilities privatisation, infrastructural ageing and the incapacity of City Hall to deal with both these issues. The proliferation of water meters, apartment boilers or insulation layers, reveal at the same time a pragmatic reaction to the present time and a new conceptualisation of the home — not as the block, but the individual apartment. In my thesis, I have revealed the technical and societal issues stemming from this unitary nuclear view of urban forms of organisation. In doing so, I sincerely hope I can provide a base for the development of new economic and political mechanisms aimed at improving people's transformations of their home.

Epilogue

In May 2017, I went back to Piatra-Neamț, to meet Mr. Bud in his office in H2B. As I knocked on the door, his cell phone rang. It was the director of the local garbage collection company, I was about to find out:

> Is this the director? This is Bud. I just want to say this. This morning, I went outside and saw that our bins were completely full. Unfortunately, the neighbouring blocks come and leave their trash there. But it's not acceptable that you haven't picked up the trash in so long. On our side, you've never have issues with payment. I made one last week — of course, a small one, you know how difficult money issues are. This week I'll make another payment. Each month we pay. Indeed, we have a small debt... But it's important that we have a clean surrounding. Please send someone over, there is a huge mess. Bud Gheorghe. I was the head of the Quality Control Institute for 35 years.

He hung up the phone upset and told me, in desperation: "Maria, even garbage has become political." He had been up since 7 O'Clock, trying to reach the garbage collection company. He went around to check the garbage bins around his block, which were all empty. "Why were they empty", I asked? He told me that the other blocks have their own bins, but they used his — in the past weeks, he had even scolded a few people when he caught them throwing the trash in the H2B bin: "Are you not ashamed, why do you throw out your trash here?" — I asked. They say they like our building. They prefer stinking up our block." For three days, he told me, he had also been throwing out his trash in the bin of the next block, because it was empty but also because he wanted to teach them a lesson.

The delays in garbage collection had added to this tensed situation. The mayor, a liberal, could not come to a resolution with the Local Council, led by the social democrats (PSD). PSD had recently won the local elections, and so started "placing their men in all the key positions", including in Locativ Serv, the company that administers utility provision and utilities for Owners' Associations (see detailed description in the Administration Room chapter). The previous director, with whom Mr. Bud had a warm relationship, was now gone, and the new one was "impossible" — he had fired seven members of staff already, to place "his people" in positions that were advantageous to him.

Worried by these recent developments, Mr. Bud seemed tired: the city had degraded since I left, he told me, and so had his health. He told me about all the doctors he had been seeing while having heart problems, and about how important it was that he manages to keep his calm so that he doesn't aggravate his heart condition. On the bright side, he had cleaned up the whole staircase: "Even in Paris you won't find a building like ours." He had completely replaced the stairs with metal ones and a wheelchair ramp, he had painted the hallway "with the best paint", he had added tiles on the lower side of the polystyrene insulation, so that people couldn't kick it with their feet. How had managed to pay for all this? He found a creative way, he told me. Because other blocks would pay for their bills in the H2B office (as described in *The Administration Room* chapter), he had decided to charge each 1 leu/month (£0.20), and had been saving. He was pleased with this new development, but was upset with his neighbours for already scratching the elevator door. After painting it, he leaned the door open,

leaving a note in which he asked his neighbours to not use the elevator while the paintwork is drying. A few hours later, he had found it scratched. He then wrote a billboard message, in his typical colourful style: "The paint on the elevator door did not even last one day. What a big shame?!"

He was also burdened by the long, cold winter that forced him to use the heating system for six months. He had burned his fingers trying to seal a valve, and was constantly criticised by one of his neighbours on the third floor for not warming up his apartment enough. Because on his section of the building many apartments were empty, water would have to be pumped to reach his floor. However, pumping hot water instead of recirculating it would mean overheating the rest of the apartments (as described in *The Heater* chapter). On top of that, gas prices had risen considerably, so he wanted to save up. The care for the heating system kept his from retreating from his role, despite his health problems. To this, he added the general finances, which continued to remain complicated, as neighbours still gave him "fake" water consumption slips that did not add up at the end of the month (as described in *The Water Tap* chapter).

Most importantly, he did not feel understood by his neighbours. One telling example was an incident from the previous month, in which a warm water pipe broke down in the basement, flooding it. In order to fix it, he had to stop the water circuit in the whole building. It was a long, tenuous process, which required many trials and errors. Towards the evening, he managed to turn on the water circulation again, only to hear a neighbour from his floor say: "You broke the heating system, that's why there was no water." Mr. Bud then lost his temper and told his neighbour that instead of accusing him, he could have helped him fix the problem. In moments like this, he would like to give up, he told me. But he would, of course, continue to live in the building: his replacement would need to be a responsible and resourceful person… Who could have the connections needed to get all the authorisations, for the heating system, for the elevator, etc.? Who could maintain good relations with locksmiths, electric engineers, etc.? In anticipation of his "retreat", he confessed, he had started looking into the costs of electric heating: the gas heating system would most definitely peril if he didn't take care of it. This was all too contradictory for me, given that at the same time he was telling me about fixing the roof of the heating system with iron panels. Not only that, but he was concerned that he had a warranty of ten years for the wall insulation work, out of which five had already passed.

As I left the building and looked up, I saw the same vividly orange wall insulation I had left behind two years earlier. In contrast, the building next to it was covered in a grey-brown paint that was already peeling away.




Aleea Viorelelor
Bloc 16 Sc. A Apt.1 -16
PERICOL DE ELECTROCUTARE


RO
NT•02 F JR



















Bibliography

Abraham, D. (1987). *Perspectiva sociologică de cercetare a problematicii locuirii*. Bucharest: Editura Tehnică.

Alexander, C. (2007). Almaty: Rethinking the Public Sector. In C. Alexander & V. Buchli (Eds.), *Urban Life in Post-Soviet Asia* (pp. 70–110).

Anand, N. (2012). Municipal Disconnect: On Abject Water and its Urban Infrastructures. *Ethnography*, *13*(4), 487–509.

Apăvăloaie, M. (2005). *Piatra-Neamț - studiu monografic*. Piatra-Neaț: Editura Cetatea Doamnei.

Appadurai, A. (1988). *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ardener, S. (1981). *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps*. (Croom Helm, Ed.).

Auslander, L. (2005). Beyond Words. *The American Historical Review*, *110*(4), 1015–1045.

Bank, W. (2003). *When Heat is a Luxury: Helping the Urban Poor of Europe and Central Asia Cope with the Cold*. Washington, DC.

Barnouw, D. (1994). *Double Exposure: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*. London: Routledge.

Barry, A. (2013). *Material Politics: Disputes along the Pipeline*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.

Bennett, J. (2004). The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter. *Political Theory*, *32*(3), 347–372.

Boardman, B. (1991). *Fuel Poverty: From Cold Homes to Affordable Warmth*. London: Belhaven Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bouzarovski, S. (2010). Post-socialist energy reforms in critical perspective: entangles boundaries, scales and trajectories of change. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, *17*, 167–182.

Bowker, G. (1995). Second Nature Once Removed. *Time & Society*, *4*(1), 47–66.

Bradshaw, M., & Stenning, A. (2000). The progress of transition in East Central Europe. In J. Bachtler, R. Downes, & G. Gorzelak (Eds.), *Transition, cohesion and regional policy in Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 11–32). Ashgate.

Brand, S. (1994). *How Buildings Learn*. Viking Press.

Buchli, V. (1999). *An archaeology of socialism*. Oxford: Berg.

Burawoy, M., & Verdery, K. (1999a). *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Burawoy, M., & Verdery, K. (1999b). *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*. (Rowman & Littlefield, Ed.).

Burgess, J., Harrison, C., & Filius, P. (1998). Environmental communication and the cultural politics of environmental citizenship. *Environment and Planning A*, *30*(1), 1445–1460.

Buzar, S. (2007). The "hidden" geographies of energy poverty in post-socialism: Between institutions and households. *Geoforum*, *38*(2), 224–240.

Caffé, M. (1987). *Locuinţa contemporană*. Bucharest: Editura Tehnică.

Cantacuzino, G. M. (1934). *Izvoare si popasuri*. Bucharest: Fundatia pentru literatura si arta "Regale Carol II."

Chelcea, L. (2002). The Culture of Shortage during State-Socialism: Consumption Practices in a Romaian Village in the 1980s. *Cultural Studies*, *16*(1), 16–43.

Christophers, B. (2011). Follow the thing: Money. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *29*(6), 1068–1084.

Chu, J. Y. (2014). When infrastructures attack: The workings of disrepair in China. *American Ethnologist*, *41*(2), 351–367.

Clarke, A. (2001). The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration. In *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*. London: Berg.

Clifford, J., & Marcus, G. (1986). *Writing Culture - The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. *Classical Antiquity* (Vol. 2). University of California Press.

Coleman, L. (2014). Infrastructure and interpretation: Meters, dams, and state imagination in Scotland and India. *American Ethnologist*, *41*(3), 457–472.

Collier, S. (2011). *Post-Soviet Social*. Princeton University Press.

Constantinescu, E. (2011). Lessons from Romania: ticking housing bomb. *The Guardian*.

Constantinescu, I. P. (2012). Shrinking cities in Romania: Former mining cities in Valea Jiului. *Built Environment*, *38*(2), 214–228.

Crowley, D., & Reid, S. (2002). Socialist Spaces - Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc. Berg

Publishers.

Dalakoglou, D., & Harvey, P. (2012). Roads and anthropology: Ethnographic perspectives on space, time and (im)mobility. *Mobilities*, *7*(4), 459–465.

Daniels, I. (2010). *The Japanese House: Material Culture in the Modern Home*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Daniels, I. (2015). Feeling at home in contemporary Japan: Space, atmosphere and intimacy. *Emotion, Space and Society*, *15*, 47–55.

Deletant, D. (1999). *Communist Terror in Romania*. London: Hurst & Company.

DeVault, M. L. (1991). *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. University of Chicago Press.

Diderot, D. (1875). *Oeuvres Complètes*. Paris: Garnier Fréres.

Drazin, A. (2001). A man will get furnished: wood and domesticity in urban Romania. In D. Miller (Ed.), *Home Possessions: Material culture behind closed doors* (pp. 173–200). New York: Berg.

Drazin, A. (2005). Architecture without Architects: Building Home and State in Romania. *Home Cultures*, *2*(2), 195–220.

Drazin, A. (2009). Vânătoarea de molii: curăţenie, intimitate şi progres in România. In V. Mihăilescu (Ed.), *Etnografii Urbane: Cotidianul văzut de aproape* (pp. 65–86). Polirom.

Duneier, M. (2001). *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Eden, S. (1996). Public participation in environmental policy: considering scientific, counter-scientific and non-scientific contribution. *Public Understanding of Science*, *5*, 183–203.

Europe, C. (2009). COGEN Europe. Overview. Retrieved April 9, 2010, from http://www.cogeneurope.eu/2009/02/overview/S

Fehérváry, K. (2002). American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a "Normal" Life in Post-Socialist Hungary. *Ehnos*, *67*(3), 369–400.

Fehérváry, K. (2013). *Politics in Color and Concrete - Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary*. Indiana University Press.

Fennell, C. (2011). "Project heat" and sensory politics in redeveloping Chicago public housing. *Ethnography*, *12*(1), 40–64.

Gochenour, C. (2001). *District Energy Trends, Issues, and Opportunities: The Role of the World Bank*.

Washington, DC.

Government of Romania (2004). *National District Heating Strategy. Approved by Government Decision no. 882/2004, and published in the Official Gazette no. 619bis of 08/07/2004, Part I, Bucharest*.

Graham, S., & Marvin, S. (2001). *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilites and the Urban Condition*. London: Routledge.

Graham, S., & Thrift, N. (2007). Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *24*(3), 1–25.

Guy, S. (2006). Designing urban knowledge : competing perspectives on energy and buildings, *24*(1), 645–660.

Hann, C., & Hart, K. (2009). *Market and society. The great transformation today*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies*, *17*(1), 13–26.

Hart, K. (1986). Heads or Tails ? Two Sides of the Coin Author. *Man*, *21*(4), 637–656.

Harvey, P., Jensen, C. B., & Morita, A. (2016). *Infrastructures and Social Complexity*. London: Routledge.

Harvey, P., Jensen, C. B., & Morita, A. (2016). Introduction: Infrastructural Complications. *Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Companion*, 1–42.

Harvey, P., & Knox, H. (2012). The Enchantments of Infrastructure. *Mobilities*, *7*(4), 521–536.

Hecht, G. (2009). *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Heidegger, M. (1927). *Being and Time*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Hoorn, M. van der. (2004). Consuming the "Platte" in East Berlin. *Home Cultures*, *1*(2), 89–126.

Howes, D. (2005). *Empire of the senses: The sensual culture reader*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

Humphrey, C. (2002). *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Humphrey, C. (2003). Rethinking Infrastructure. In J. Schneider & I. Susser (Eds.), *Wounded Cities: Destruction and Reconstruction in a Globalized World* (pp. 91–107). Oxford: Berg.

Hyatt, S. B. (1997). Poverty in a "Post-welfare"Landscape. In *Anthropology of Policy: Perspectives on*

Governance and Power (pp. 166–198). London: Routledge.

Iacobescu, F., & Badescu, V. (2011). Metamorphoses of cogeneration-based district heating in Romania: A case study. *Energy Policy*, *39*(1), 269–280. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2010.09.039

Iancu, B. (2011). The Golden Age of Termopane - The Social Life of Post-Socialist Windows. *The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review*, *6*, 19–34.

Ingold, T. (2000). *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. Oxford: Routledge.

Ingold, T. (2012). Toward an Ecology of Materials. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *41*(1), 427–442.

Jacobs, J. (1961). *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.

Jacobs, J. M. (2006). A geography of big things. *Cultural Geographies*, *13*(1), 1–27.

Jelly, R. (2008). Phase 2: Qualitative assessment of consumer responses to the national electricity smart meter rollout program. In *NERA Economic Consulting on behalf of the Department of Industry, Science and Tourism, Sydney*.

Jenkins, L. (2002). Geography and Architecture: 11, Rue du Conservatoire and the Permeability of Buildings. *Space and Culture*, *5*(3), 222–236.

Kaika, M. (2005). *City of flows: modernity, nature and the city*. New York: Routledge.

Kennedy, D. (2005). South-East Europe Regional Energy Market : challenges and opportunities for Romania. *Energy Policy*, *33*(2005), 2202–2215.

Larkin, B. (2013). The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *42*(1), 327–343.

Laszczkowski, M. (2015). Scraps, Neighbors, and Committees: Material Things, Place-Making, and the State in an Astana Apartment Block. *City and Society*, *27*(2), 136–159.

Laszczkowski, M. (2016). "Demo version of a city": Buildings, affects, and the state in Astana. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *22*(1), 148–165.

Latour, B. (1993). *We Have Never Been Modern. Noûs* (Vol. 12). https://doi.org/10.1016/0956-5221(96)88504-6

Latour, B. (2000). The Berlin Key or How to Do Words with Thing. In *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture* (pp. 10–21). London: Routledge.

Latour, B. (2002). Morality and Technology: The End of the Means. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *19*(5–6), 247–260.

Law, J. (2004). And if the global were small and noncoherent? Method, complexity, and the baroque. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *22*(1), 13–26.

Law, J., & Mol, A. (1995). Notes on materiality and sociality. *The Sociological Review*, *43*(2), 274–294.

Lea, T., & Pholeros, P. (2010). This Is Not a Pipe : The Treacheries of Indigenous Housing. *Public Culture*, *22*(1), 187–210.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1982). *The Way of the Mask*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Lungu, A. (2016). Curățenie pentru România. *Decât O Revistă*.

Macdougall, D. (2007). Color, *2*(1), 5–26.

Macel, O. (2002). Post-war architecture in the Former Eastern Bloc. In H. J. Henket & H. Heyen (Eds.), *Back from Utopia: the chalenge of the Modern movement*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers.

Machedon, L., & Scoffham, E. (1999). *Romanian Modernism: The Architecture of Bucharest, 1920-1940* (Vol. 59). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Malinowski, B. (1922). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific. An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: Routledge.

Marx, K. (1971). *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. London.

Maurer, B. (2006). The Anthropology of Money. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123127

Mauss, M. (1969). *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. London: Routledge.

McCracken, G. (1988). *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Mihăilescu, V. (2009). *Etnografii Urbane: Cotidianul văzut de aproape*. (V. Mihăilescu, Ed.). Iaşi: Polirom.

Mihăilescu, V., Nicolau, V., Giorghiu, M., & Olaru, C. (2009). Blocul între loc şi locuire. In V. Mihăilescu (Ed.), *Etnografii Urbane: Cotidianul văzut de aproape* (pp. 31–50). Polirom.

Miller, D. (1988). Appropriating the State on the Council Estate. *Man*, *23*(2), 353–372. https://doi.org/10.2307/2802810

Miller, D. (2001). *Home Possessions*. Oxford: Berg.

Nuorkivi, A. (2002). *Institutional Handbook for Combined Heat and Power Production with District Heating*. Stockholm: Baltic Sea Regional Energy Cooperation.

O'Reilly, K. (2012). *Ethnographic methods - The practice of ethnography*. London: Routlege.

Ortner, S. B. (2016). Dark anthropology and its others Theory since the eighties. *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *6*(1), 47–73.

Orwell. (1965). *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Heinemann Educational Publishers.

Owens, S., & Driffill, L. (2008). How to change attitudes and behaviours in the context of energy. *Energy Policy*, *36*(12), 4412–4418.

Pfaffenberger, B. (1992). Social Anthropology of Technology. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *21*(1992), 491–516.

Poenaru, F. (2008). *On the Socialist Balcony: State, Citizens and Ideology in aRomanian Neighborhood*. VDM Publishing.

Rău, R., & Mihuță, D. (1969). *Unități urbanistice complexe*. Bucharest: Editura Tehnică.

Ringel, F. (2014). Post-industrial times and the unexpected: Endurance and sustainability in Germany's fastest-shrinking city. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *20*(S1), 52–70.

Robbins, B. (2007). The Smell of Infrastructure: Notes toward an Archive. *Boundary 2*, *34*(1), 25–33.

Ronald, R., & Elsinga, M. (2012). *Beyond Home Ownership*.

Sahlins, M. (1963). Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *5*(3), 285–303.

Sartre, J. P. (1989). *No Exit, and Three Other Plays*. London: Vintage Books.

Sburlan, S., & Manta, V. (1988). *Cartea tinerelor gospodine*. Bucharest: Ceres.

Schwenkel, C. (2015). Spectacular infrastructure and its breakdown in socialist Vietnam. *American Ethnologist*, *42*(3), 520–534.

Sebestyen, G. (1986). *Conditionări tehnice, economice și sociale rezultând din amploarea problemei locuințelor*. Bucharest: Editura Tehnică.

Simmel, G. (1991). Money in Modern culture. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *8*, 17–31.

Simone, A. (2004). People as Infrastructure : *Public Culture*, *16*(3), 407–429.

Stanculescu, F. (1934). Stilul romanesc si stilul modern. *Arhitectura*, *1*, 13–14.

Stănescu, S. (2009). Simțul curentului. *Decât O Revistă*. Retrieved from http://www.decatorevista.ro/simtul-curentului-dor-1/

Star, S. L., & Leigh, S. (1999). The Ethnography of Infrastructure. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *43*(3), 377–391.

Star, S. L., & Ruhleder, K. (1996). Steps Toward an Ecology of Infrastructure : Design and Access for Large Information Spaces. *Information Systems Research*, *7*(1).

Strathern, A. (1971). *The rope of moka : big-men and ceremonial exchange in Mount Hagen, New Guinea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Strathern, M. (2012). An Awkward Relationship : the Case of Feminism and Anthropology. *Signs*, *12*(2), 276–292.

Velody, M., Cain, M. J. G., & Philips, M. (2003). *A Regional Review of Social Safety Net Approaches in Support of Energy Sector Reform*. Washington, DC: US Agency for International Development.

Verșescu, G. (1971). *Istoria Monografică a orașului Piatra Neamț*. Bucharest: S. L.

von Schnitzler, A. (2008). Citizenship Prepaid: Water, Calculability, and Techno-Politics in South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, *34*(4), 899–917.

Wagner, J. (2015). *Social life of water*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Wilhite, H. L. (2005). Why Energy Needs Anthropology. *Anthropology Today*, *21*(3), 1–2.

Wilk, R. R. (2009). Consuming Ourselves to Death: the Anthropology of Consumer Culture and Climate Change. In *Anthropology and Climate Change* (Vol. 9, pp. 265–277). Walnut Creek: Left Coastal Press.