

## Discreet Commoning in the *Bloc*

Informal practices of 'living together' in the collective housing estates of post-socialist Bucharest.

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#### **Abstract**

In an abrupt urbanisation, the socialist state constructed large collective housing districts, radically transforming the Romanian cities. After 1989, thriving neoliberal policies of radical privatisation, collapsing public infrastructure and rampant individualization, affected urban communities. Despite dominant narratives of socialist planning "failure" (Murawski, 2018), the legacy of the socialist-modernist housing project still endures (Marin & Chelcea, 2018). The remains of a public grid in need still trigger dwellers' practices of informal appropriation and everyday protocols of care and repair (Mihailescu, et al., 1994). Inhabitants adopted and collectively transformed the in-between spaces, articulating a specific practice of living together that resembles a "quiet sustainability" (Smith & Jehlička, 2013). In this context, the research aimed to document the ephemeral and informal practices of the post-socialist Bucharest from the perspective of emerging urban commons (Stavrides, 2019). By noticing manifestations of urban informality (Acuto, et al., 2019) and instances of everyday conviviality (Illich, 2009) the research seeks to reveal them as local forms of "latent" commons (Tsing, 2019; De Angelis, 2017).

The inquiry adopted a qualitative methodology, with a strong participative approach. Methods included storytelling, situated research, containing interviewing, ethnography and drawing, completed by mapping, live projects and archival research. The fieldwork was situated in Drumul Taberei district and anchored around the case study of OPEN Garage project-space. Working as an "extra room" for inhabitants and researchers alike, the space allowed the research to engage and support the informally driven urban commons. Field research identified examples of informal practices of transforming, using and maintaining the in between spaces among the district, such as gardens by the *bloc*, open garages or adopted libraries. Case study analysis illustrated that sometimes also individual pursuits of informal care and ephemeral appropriation may trigger communities into coagulation, generating implicit, discrete forms of commoning. Findings evidenced how an acute sense of creative disobedience compensates for the local urban commoning low level of explicit organisation. By resisting impulses of their excessive formalization, the research points towards articulating and supporting the conditions when latency might blossom into discreet forms of commoning.

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## **Declaration**

I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not been previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

#### **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Instances of informality as commoning in post-socialist Bucharest

#### Prologue

They look straight into the camera. The image is blurry, the film is scratched and the colours have faded. The sound has been lost. Intermediary titles are introducing a series of episodes that illustrates the "civic-pedagogical side of the activity of the dwellers' association committee" of a bloc, which is understood as an apartment 'block'1, from Drumul Taberei district of Bucharest. The film *Blocul F2/The* Bloc *F2* (1987)<sup>2</sup> is an amateur documentary realised by Grigore Velicu, who appears to be also one of the dwellers. The film announces from the beginning that it is "based on real facts". Thus, all the 'documented' actions are actually staged. It's winter. Few men with sheepskin hats and coats are shovelling the snow. A woman with a fur collar sweeps the alley with a broom. They look at the camera from time to time and smile. Many more appear. Children also help. They all pretend to clear the snow, but at the same time they are doing it. The snow flies, the alley is cleaned as they talk to each other and laugh. Forgetting about the camera, they start a snow fight. Spring is coming. Again, women, men and children are out in the green space near the bloc. The shovels and rakes in their hands are barely touching the ground as they pretend to work the garden. Nevertheless, they don't look uneasy doing it. They share complicit glances with the person behind the camera. And again, more are joining the gardening action. They seem to know each other well and enjoy the sunny day. But they are not just simulating. A neighbour passes a bucket of water from her window; others carry some soil with a blanket; while a few men are welding the metal fence. The green space that they pretend to take care of looks, however, cared for. Flowers have been planted, the soil was dug, trees were kept and the green hedge was trimmed. The episodes continue illustrating several situations specific to collective living in the bloc. At a superficial glimpse, the film could be dismissed as another propaganda material, where citizens were rather simulating their participation in the actions of 'compulsory volunteer work' imposed by the socialist state. But the scenes convey actors' familiarity with the performed roles and actions. Thus, even if staged for the camera, the film actually documents how a group of (some) neighbours engages in collectively maintaining their living space. Their gestures, their habits, their tools, the arranged space around them, translates beyond words that they are used to do these things. Furthermore, as some of the scenes go off-script, we see glimpses of conviviality among them, transmitting that they know each other, that they feel good together and that they form a community.

<sup>2</sup> From the personal archive of the author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Translated as 'block', it is defined in legislation as a "building consisting of individual properties defined as apartments and the undivided common property" (Monitorul Oficial, 2009). In everyday language bloc can also represents the whole district made of collective apartment buildings together with other public equipment. It is also used to define a specific way of living 'by the bloc', different than for example than 'by the house' which means dwelling in a district of individual houses. Therefore, bloc is a specific local expression and it will be used as such throughout the text.



**Fig. 1.** Residents planting the green spaces in between the *blocs*, Drumul Taberei district, Bucharest (1973). From the "Mihai Oroveanu" Collection of Images, courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and *Salonul de Proiecte*.

#### 1.1. Introduction to the topic

More than three decades after the end of the Cold War, the echoes of this specific narrative hadn't faded away. The current perspective today over the legacy of the socialist city has remained pretty much frozen in the last frame of that ideological conflict. Thus, a curtain of failure was drawn also over the built form produced by the socialist systems of the Eastern Bloc countries. However, in recent years, an increasing number of researchers are contesting this normalisation of the "failure-centred axiom" (Murawski, 2018, p.909) that was almost traditionally assumed by the scholar literature on the socialist urban planning. The passage of time, together with evidence from the ground, while facing current evolutions in urban planning and dwelling culture led to several voices calling for "different conclusions about the overall success" of massive public housing program during socialism (Zarecor, 2009, p.239) in creating functional living districts for a huge part of the population. Despite the dominant narratives, residents of such districts across former socialist Central and Eastern Countries (CEE) began to find them "interesting, unique, even charming" (Lebow, 2013, p.180). Also in the Romanian context, more recent researches are going beyond the canon of ideological or aesthetic interpretation of 'blocs' districts' and inquire into the nature of public housing mechanisms and its valuable achievements (Voinea et al., 2022), or are evidencing their modernising role for local practices of planning and dwelling (Maxim, 2009, 2017) and are tracing their still functional legacy for their residents (Marin & Chelcea, 2018).

In the post-socialist local representations articulated especially by the liberal and professional elites, the bloc was constantly devalued, embodying in a built form many of the socialist 'failures'. Depending on different discursive needs, the blocs became either the 'matchboxes', alluding to their standardised dimensions and prefabrication, while tinted in a clichéd 'grey' saturating the monotonous and bleak aesthetics of failure, or directly labelled as 'communist' and 'old' to serve developers' narrative which are off course building the 'capitalist' and 'new' housing estates. Expressions like 'behind the bloc' also embodied class differentiation and stigmatization through dwelling typologies. These stereotypical depictions of failure have been silencing for a long time the high social mix maintained by these districts. Moreover, informal manifestations of local pride, attachment and belonging contributed to the articulation of genuine communities by the bloc. However, the post-socialist alternative of for-profit urban developments consolidated as a much denser, tighter and almost lacking any public infrastructure dwelling proposition compared with previous socialist versions. Facing these spaces for storage rather than for living, the strengths of the diminished public planning was soon to be regretted by professionals and administrations alike. At the same time, some dwellers living in several housing situations came to appreciate the quality of life still supported by the socialist districts. This revision process was accompanied also by a renewed presence of local administration. Renovating and maintaining public spaces in these districts was resumed after a period of almost abandonment and state retreat during the 1990s and 2000s. Also a kind of cultural renaissance has gained momentum, resourced by today's adults' generations that have been born and raised in these districts where

they are still living and which they still cherish. Moreover, the attachment towards the neighbourhood and belonging to the local community began to articulate in explicit forms of civic manifestations. However, also private developers are becoming more interested in these districts. Supported and even accompanied by local administrations, they seek to occupy and commodify the generous resources and spaces of the districts. As a direct reaction to these aggressions on the shared resources of the city, in recent years an explicit civic movement of concerned citizens has coagulated. Many of these new civic groups have been crystalized around advocating for defending the public infrastructure of collective housing districts that are currently threatened of privatisation and enclosure (Borcan, 2022). In recent years, a civic-private conflict has become more acute. The antagonist positions are represented on one side by civic organizations and more organized citizens and on the other side by for-profit led developers and real estate companies, often supported by a more or less corrupt administration. The collective access to the city resources has gradually decreased, in a phenomenon described as a "desertification of territories", that it eventually triggered a reaction from activists and more active citizens. Compensating for the disappearance of "proximity services" delivered by the public administration, a "flowering of citizens initiatives" took over to defend the public interest (Coriat, 2024). Thus, the resources disappearance has generated awareness of their usefulness, their importance and their role in everyday life. This awareness has become for those involved a 'cause' for which they 'fight', aiming to 'save' the collective resources from 'destruction' (i.e. privatization). Thus, the conflict has the role of making visible and mobilizing issues and concerns shared by many, complementing and sometimes even replacing the role of the local or national institutions in pursuing the public interest. Such conflicting stance carries also the ability to articulate explicit positions related to urban governance that are becoming implicitly political. Without being an end in itself, participation in such actions generates solidarity and belonging, developing the self-organization capacity of those involved, which can thus be transferred to other spheres and urban spaces. The participation in actions for defending the public resources has evolved, from the support for collective use, to administrative tactics, actions of public protest, up until juridical procedures. However, as shown in the "Report on the State of Democracy in Romania" (Centrul pentru Inovare Publică et al., 2024) in the absence of a real and active support from public administration, the actions of the civic groups shows a 'slowly but surely' setback and a kind of 'fatigue' after relentless fighting against powerful real estate corporations, that use increasingly aggressive means, benefiting from the state's inaction, indifference or even complicity.

In this context, I intend to contribute as well to the on-going contesting of the failure narrative that still dominates the public and professional discourse on socialist housing districts. Aiming to document and inquire the users' perspective over their life among these districts, my research looks at the informal spatial practices inherited from socialism and developed during post-socialism. Born and raised myself in the *bloc* (and still living in it) I also carry a situated perspective over the manifestations, the evolution and the impact of these practices over the lived experience.

The informal practices associated with collective living, or better said, forms of neighbourly relations, exist everywhere. However, their socialist heritage, the physical and institutional space of the bloc and the post-socialist transformations make them unique in the landscape of informal urbanity. By looking at its socialist roots, local informality has a specific evolution. Although some practices, customs and skills were transferred from the pre-existing local dwelling culture, the socialist-modernist collective housing project strongly determined the character of urban informality, which survives to this day. As the film Blocul F2/The Bloc F2 (1987) illustrates them as being supported at some point even by the state, these informal spatial practices were actually reproducing in vernacular forms the still existing values of the socialist society. Dully conforming, reluctantly resisting, creatively diverting or even just pretending to follow the official directions, dwellers were still participating into the collective life. By sharing an infrastructure, practising mutual aid, cultivating solidarity, they were enacting authentic 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 2002) in their proximity. Therefore, local informality could (also) be seen as a product of socialist public housing program. Not just as a scrap product of the system's failure to plan and provide in time, but still following the socialist vision of compensating the collective effort by raising support through empowering citizens to join, to participate and to contribute. Paradoxically at first sight, these sometimes contradictory processes of top-down reinforced communality crossed with creative disobedience as a collective practice and thus have consolidated the bloc as a sort of 'social condenser' as imagined by the early visionary constructivist avant-garde (Fig.1).

In conclusion, this thesis searches for situations and evidences about the value of informal practices which go against the socialist failure narrative. Precisely, I address the local contemporary forms of 'civilization' discourse that portrays spatial informality as invasive and unaesthetic remnants inherited from a failed socialist past. Quite the contrary, I believe that the socialist-determined informality is still able to support more or less explicit forms of commoning among dwellers. In the context of social fragmentation, civic disempowerment or ecological crisis of contemporary Bucharest, these commoning practices are valuable local resources for the inhabitants, professionals and administration alike.

# **ISTORIES**

# **TEXTS**

Intervals where concepts are translated into lived experiences that details, expands and opens up new threads for reflection.

I

# Settling In

DRUMUL TABEREI

"Here, there used to be an empty field", he stares aimlessly at the four storey bloc half hidden behind the tall trees across the alley. A bright sunlight fills every corner of the living room. Noises of bird songs, kids coming out from school and occasional cars passing by are pouring through the large open windows. He recollects their first day here. They moved in before the Christmas of 1972. His brother came with the car, a Moskvich, to help them. After they finished carrying the furniture upstairs it was already late at night, so they just slept over without arranging anything. "When we got up in the morning, how should I say this? From the dump we used to live in, now I was walking around with my wife, and it felt like a palace. Versailles was nothing compared to that! With those metallic windows, they were beautiful! But it was so cold". Cooking flavours are coming through from the staircase. It's about lunchtime. He better warm up the soup on the stove, as his niece will drop by today.

In about a decade, the district expanded in great leaps of one microraion after another into the empty lands beyond the outskirts of the city. Raised partially on military training grounds, the newly built "palaces" were bordering swamps, pools with frogs, flocks of sheep, wild flowers and corn fields. This half natural, half agricultural landscape was steadily urbanized over the years. At the beginnings, the two situations coexisted for a while. Being rushed in, dwellers remember that not all the infrastructure was finished. Schools, stores, parks and even sidewalks sometimes came after the apartments were being assigned to their owners. As one retired resident appreciates leaning down with his palm above the ground, trees "so small, as they didn't cast any shadow yet" were planted by the new inhabitants. Watching today the busy traffic of the main junction by the park is hard to imagine how this was the end of the public transport routes. On a chair in front of the local corner shop, a lady remembers how bus stations were reached only "with boots" through the muddy alleys. Back then, construction sites were so omnipresent that were seen as "naturally" in the memory of early dwellers. But they pulled it off and made the district their home.

Such a beginnings' ethos can be glimpsed in the movies of the time, such as *O lumină la etajul zece/ A light on the tenth floor* (1984) directed by Malvina Urșianu, that shows the journey of Maria, a metallurgical engineer for regaining her job, her social status and her dignity and start her life over after she was unjustly convicted. The film illustrates the theme of women emancipation in the context of a social system that is pictured as based on the factory

and the collective housing. Receiving a repartition in a bloc still under construction in a new working class district, she founds the place still a large and noisy construction site. The roads full of mud and the few trees have just been planted. The urban background is somehow mirroring her life reconstruction. Along her reintegration in the factory, she restores some old friendships. But most of the time she's guite alone. At the beginning she is often alone in her apartment, or on the empty staircase. It seems she is the only dweller in the bloc. But after a while she starts saying hello to the passengers getting off at the same bus station. Some of them even invite her to come to their place to watch TV. She also befriends one of the workers from the construction site working on a scaffolding by her window. She's sharing food with him, chatting and socializing. The social bustle around the district increases, as more dwellers are moving in. She starts to interact with them in the elevator, on the staircase and makes few acquaintances. They start exchanging food and borrowing things. She finally settles in.

Decades later, these early days are still vivid in the memories of the first inhabitants. Their stories have something of settlers' foundational myths, where a group of people, arriving by the outskirts, had to work together and overcome all sort of shortcomings in order to forge a home for themselves. The invoked existing physical 'emptiness' of the land doesn't refer only to the lack of urban infrastructure, like buildings and roads, but also to a non-existent social network that had to be weaved from scratch. The young families which moved in the same time were beginning to get along with each other, learning how to become neighbours. Thus, by living together, they actively contributed to the district settling in and become their neighbourhood. These narratives were sometimes adopted further by the next generations and manifest in the living practices. In the bus, by the alleys, near the blocs' entrances, in local corner stores or from the half-open garage doors small gestures, familiar encounters and exchanges are taking place. As if the togetherness rumour of the beginnings could still be traced in the everyday life of the neighbourhood. The glimpse of a few gardeners leaning over a small piece of land in between the tall buildings looks like a ritual of the foundational transformation of those empty lands. It might be that such vivid memory placed deep down in the collective conscience of the community shapes even today the inhabitants practices of living.

#### 1.2. Context

#### The Socialist City

At the beginning, the socialist city was an aspiration outlined in documents and statements of the time more as a political manifesto than a plan. It sought to spatialize the new social relations, specific to the socialist organisation of life. Unlike the capitalist "city of the past" which was characterised by "qualitative differences between the centre and the periphery", the imagined socialist city for the future was seeking to host and generate the new production relations based on "collaboration and mutual support" (Rău & Mihuță, 1969, p.50). Thus, even before formulating its urban principles and defining its aesthetic features, the socialist city was defined based on the opposition with the capitalist city. By identifying in the "differences between centre and periphery, the most obvious expression of social inequality", in the socialist city "there was no room for social segregation" (Zahariade, 2011, p.50-51). But no matter how much we attribute it to the dramatic propaganda of the time about the difficult legacy of the capitalist city, housing conditions in post-war Bucharest were dire for most of the population which was living especially outside the central core. Numbers from housing surveys from 1954 are illustrative:

"45% of residential buildings had neither running water nor connection to the sewage system, and 25% were without electricity. 74% of the city's territory was covered in substandard construction, either degraded or poorly built. (...) It was also weakly settled, with single-level buildings covering 85% of the city's territory" (in Maxim, 2017, p.149).

Such dry figures corresponded with striking realities on the ground, illustrated in visual chronicles of the time, such as the display-film *După zece ani/ Ten years later*<sup>3</sup> (1971), directed by Eugenia Gutu, which documents the transformation of a pre-war slum area into a modern, collective housing district. The old-new dichotomy is approached with a more objective technique, the movie restraining from propagandistic comments, while giving voice to a family of dwellers who witnessed the transformation of the area and are offering eyewitness accounts<sup>4</sup>. Their reactions are genuine and recorded while they are watching together archive footage filmed before the transformation of the area. Looking back, they realise the "hideousness" of the informal settlement where they once lived: without access to utilities, in overcrowded buildings, in an unhealthy and undignified environment. Their memories seem "from another planet" compared to the collective housing where they moved in and where they finally live "like human beings". Nevertheless, the residents keep pleasant memories of their former neighbours, thus illustrating the pre-existence of neighbourly relations based on solidarity among members of a community in need. Considered determinant for obtaining "urban comfort" in the socialist city, social mechanisms of "good neighbourhood", such as care for the living environment or the household spirit (Rău & Mihuţă, p.1969) were sometimes recycling previous patterns of living. Such are the relations triggered by precarious living featured in the film, but which were however boosted ant thriving during the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Translated from Romanian by the current author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> From the project and website <u>www.sahiavintage.ro</u>

collective experience of sharing the public infrastructure offered by the new housing context. So, not just the living conditions in the new apartments were highly appreciated by the inhabitants, but also the spatial layout and public facilities of the new districts were the subject of their gratitude. The public park arranged on the site of the former slum is generously featured in the film, illustrating the translation of the socialist city manifesto into specific urban spaces, such as accessible socio-cultural infrastructure. The emphasis on shared infrastructure underlines planning as a fundamental characteristic of the socialist city. The urban territory was approached as a whole and not as resulted from the additions of individual objects. Thus, planning, or *sistematizare* as it was called, which means 'systematisation', was understood as a scientific organisation of the urban territory. This process assumed a network of technical utilities and various urban equipment supporting socio-cultural, educational, sports or recreational functions. Such programs were provided following the equity ethos of the socialist city, but also destined for a population that was expected to have more "free time" as a result of technological progress and new relations of work (Rău & Mihută, 1969).



**Fig. 2.** Peripheral streets and dwellings bordering collective housing district of Drumul Taberei district, Bucharest (1973). From the "Mihai Oroveanu" Collection of Images, courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and *Salonul de Proiecte*.

Similar with other states from the Eastern Bloc, during Romanian socialism, the "urban form became an openly political artefact" (Maxim, 2017, p.150). Due to an inherited systemic urban inequality, post World War 2 Bucharest was an ideal battle ground for enacting the revolutionary

differentiation between the old and new (Fig.2). Bypassed by the war destructions, the city went through a politically motivated process of "reconstruction", rather as a "project of radical urban transformation in which the "chaos and inequality" left behind by capitalism would give way to a new, socialist spatial order" (p.50). At the same time, the political reconstruction of the city was accompanied by a process of living practices' adaptation to the new urban context. Processes and mechanisms tacitly inherited from previous housing experiences have been also adapted to the socialist city. But the radically new in size and program public facilities offered by the new collective housing districts further triggered distinct living patterns based on shared experiences, informal practices and relational networks. These immaterial qualitative features amounted to a culture of dwelling specific to the socialist city.

#### From rural to urban in socialist Romania

In only a few decades immediately after the end of the World War 2, socialist Romania was radically urbanised through an abrupt industrialization<sup>5</sup>. However, such rather quantitative assessment based on census requires a more situated understanding. Since the 1980s, the sociologist Ivan Szeleny (1981) argues for the need to contextualise the terms, such as "urban" and "rural" dichotomy. Empirically evidencing a "rather specific pattern of urbanisation", he proposes the term "under-urbanisation", which describes a phenomenon specific to most Eastern European planned economies. Here, there was a "relative delay of urban growth in a period of fast and extensive industrialization" (Szelenyi, 1981, p. 193). This means that the difference was covered by a commuting population still living in nearby villages, but working in city's factories. Such phenomenon was valid "to some extent" in Romania too, which however experienced it both ways. Thus, city dwellers were also doing *naveta*, meaning daily 'commuting', to the countryside. Starting with mid-1970s, in an attempt to ease off the pressure on the construction of public housing which couldn't keep up the pace with the increasing demand, while facing economic crisis and food shortages during the 1980s, the big cities, and especially the capital Bucharest, were virtually "closed" for the influx of newcomers. As part of the working class was commuting from villages to the cities, the intellectuals, or young university graduates, like teachers, doctors or engineers, were assigned posts outside the cities into nearby villages or small towns. For some, this was an undesired, temporary status, until they managed through different formal or informal systems of pile, a slang term for 'connexions' understood as shady relations, to get a transfer and "come closer" into the cities. For others though, it remained on the long term a way of life. Thus, naveta was a qualitatively different phenomenon than the Western commuting, as a direct consequence of the socialist planned economy and the social engineering processes, becoming an important feature of the local urbanisation pattern.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> With 76% rural population in 1948, Romania reaches 54% urban population in 1992 (INS, "Baze de Date Statistice," 2018).

Moving further, Szelenyi (1981) uses other terms, such as "slums", which were proudly missing from the socialist city. Therefore, through the naveta, the potential slums were externalised to the regional level into "village-slums" which became "the functional equivalents of the urban slums in the industrial city" (Szelenyi, 1981, p.196). Therefore, having a residency in the city was highly prized. It came together with a higher salary and access to urban infrastructure, like education, health and especially public housing. Urban residence was a privilege, an object of desire, materialising status and belonging to a higher place on the social ladder, for which inhabitants were ready to do anything. Acknowledging the extent of the illegal practices developed by dwellers to achieve an urban residency, the phenomenon was exposed even in popular movies carrying civic and moral messages. In the film Buletin de București/ Bucharest Identity card (1982), directed by Virgil Calotescu, Silvia, a young graduate from Agronomical School with a ID from the province, conveniently marries a taxi driver for a Bucharest ID in order to get a job in the capital city. As the inevitable divorce follows, she has to accept the state "repartition" to the countryside. This counts as a happy ending, as by chance the two newly divorcees get assigned in the same village and start a proper relationship in the sequel. Thus, the radical swing of the paradigm during socialist Romania from rural to urban appears in a more nuanced light, while the two situated terms are more interdependent than at the first sight.

#### Housing the collective

Bucharest, the capital city of Romania, accounts for a 100% population growth since 1948, going beyond 2 million inhabitants by 1992 (INS, 2018). At the beginning, in the 1950s, the incoming population was partially housed in the nationalised houses, mostly located in the inner city (Chelcea, 2018, Axinte & Borcan, 2010). In the same time, the state began the construction of few public housing complexes located outside of the central area (Voinea, et al., 2022). These were destined especially to the working class, which was constantly denied accessing the public housing program in the previous decades (Voinea, 2018). But these solutions were not enough to absorb the massive influx of newcomers. Moreover, there was an urgent need for better housing conditions of a large number of dwellers from the peripheral districts of the city, some being chronically poor areas, even slums. Demolitions began, initially in some of the less urbanised areas of the city, but later also into the more central, historical districts. So, there was a growing need to house this displaced population too. Thus, starting with the 1960s, the state initiated the planning and construction of massive housing estates, amounting to astonishing achievements, such as neighbourhoods for about 300.000 inhabitants, like Drumul Taberei, or Balta Albă, placing it among Romania's top five cities (Marin & Chelcea, 2018; INS, 2011) (Fig.3). The impact of this

process lasts until today, as the vast majority of Bucharest' inhabitants are still housed in these estates built during the socialist period<sup>6</sup>.



Fig. 3. New collective housing apartments from Drumul Taberei district, Bucharest (1973). From the "Mihai Oroveanu" Collection of Images, courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and Salonul de Proiecte.

Beyond just offering better living conditions for the numerous and previously disadvantaged sections of the population, the state' subsidized housing was also working as "an integral part of the labour economy" (Szelenyi, 1981, p.187). Like elsewhere in Eastern Europe, these estates became open-air laboratories aiming to spatialize the socialist project of "social homogenization" (Mihăilescu, 2005). Operated as "containment structures", collective housing was adjusting class tensions within the working force beyond the factory walls (Petrovici, 2017). Thus, the factory and the neighbourhood became components of the same mechanism, where collective housing was one of the tools supporting the industrialization process. Developing specific spatial practices and relational skills, the workers-neighbours were sharing a specific collective space. However, public housing and its civic infrastructure were an incentive not just for attracting workers into the urban industry, but it was appealing also for the emerging middle class of clerks, specialists and growing public service sector' employers of the fast developing socialist economy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The lack of detail in the latest public Census measurement tools makes difficult to assess the exact number of people that are dwelling in the collective housing districts built during socialism. However, researchers agree that most of Bucharest' inhabitants are living in these housing estates (Marin & Chelcea, 2018).

Intended as "housing for all", these neighbourhoods were qualitatively different from the "social housing" of its Western counterparts. Being taken off the market, they were the only available form of new public housing in cities, brewing a mix of social classes.

Drawing over the end of the industrial city, Marxist philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2011) identifies the city itself as taking further the role of the factory in producing what they call "the common", where "the metropolis is to the multitude what the factory is to the industrial working class" (p.250). This can be the case especially for the post-industrial collective housing districts. Constructed with the ethos of civic emancipation through and in support of the industrialization process, these neighbourhoods were further forging the common. Embedded from the beginning with strong, determinant features, such as generous planning, an unprecedented access to public resources and a high social diversity, these districts developed specific patterns of living. Facing several cycles of radical social, economic and political shifts, traces of collective living practices survived, adapted and transformed, becoming for some dwellers a way of life. In the context of processes of radical privatisation and extreme individualisation of the post-industrial and post-socialist city, the collective housing neighbourhoods are perhaps among the last remaining sites for manufacturing the common within society.

#### Utopia and neighbourhood

The massive urbanisation of Romania was possible due to an unprecedented industrialization of the construction process. A huge number of living units were constructed in extremely short time. The coordination of this monumental task was achieved through the top-down process of *sistematizare*. Assuming a wide scale, it even included the urbanisation of villages, aiming to reduce their footprint in favour of freeing up the land for industrialised agriculture. A socialist-modernist utopia was attempted by political and technocratic elites. The public housing program was no less ambitious, benefiting from a generous access to resources, conducted through top-down planning, using standardised design and benefited from pre-cast techniques. Especially after the demise of 'realist socialism' by the end of 1950s, the collective housing districts on both sides of the Iron Curtain were looking quite similar at a first glance.

The large collective housing estates built in the Romanian cities between 1960s-1970s stand out due to their radical application of the modernist principles and socialist values. Delivered by the grid, the promises converged naturally both with the needs of the Eastern states developmental system and with the Western welfare state project. But in the context of the socialist centralised and redistributive economy, full access to public land and top-down political decision, the modernist project flourished, mostly through collective housing. But sometimes, numbers have prevailed over principles. Cuts, delays and revisions affected the application of the scientific urban planning. Driven by an economic model prioritising the production of living units, not all the planned

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> After a decade long prologue of the 'realism socialist' style, the modernist project became official in Romania at the end of 1950s (Stroe, 2015, Tulbure, 2016)

socio-cultural equipment managed to get built on the ground<sup>9</sup>. However, the basic, small and medium scale educational, cultural or commercial facilities were done, even if delayed. Usually, the large facilities planned to serve the district at scale were lacking funds that were used to build even more apartments. In the same time, other key aspects of the planners' vision were amended along the way by budget cuts, such as the arrangement and maintenance of generous green spaces. Such gaps between planning, construction and use were in fact a chance for these districts, which triggered residents' participation into supporting and completing the planned vision. Thus, planners' universal model of standardised living was opportunistically adapted by the inhabitants according to their needs and desires. Through collective practices of producing and managing the common, the inhabitants domesticated the spaces and transformed the planners' utopia into a home in the neighbourhood.

#### The Post-Socialist City: Massive transformations of housing

After the 1989 violent change of the political regime from socialism to capitalism, facilitated by a subsequent hegemonic anti-communist narrative, thriving neoliberal policies brought massive changes within Romanian society. Besides the never-ending restitution saga of the nationalised private property from the 1950s Şerban, 2010), perhaps the most impactful change was the radical privatisation of the collective housing apartments built in the socialist period. Being the "first privatisation" of a public asset from a very long list, selling the public housing stock to state's tenants created almost overnight a real estate market. While some of the measure's initiators perceived it the as an ethical "reparation" compensating for the years of unrecognised contributions, frustrations and shortages<sup>10</sup>, for the tenants of the socialist state, the newly acquired owner status achieved at a relatively low price<sup>11</sup> was perhaps the most precious "gift of the revolution" (Mihailescu, 2005). However, the ownership transfer of the public housing was accompanied by state retreat, privatisation of utilities networks, followed by neglecting and dismantling the public infrastructure. Specific to neoliberal public policies, these processes contributed to a rapid degradation of the collective life in these areas during the 1990s.

Bucharest reached a "super-home-ownership" of 98%, with Romania having the highest rate in the EU (Pittini et al., 2017). But besides buying the asset, as the apartment itself, the owners also got the passive attached to it, including the wear, the repairs and the maintenance. Not just for their individual units, but also for the collectively used infrastructure. The state passed these costly maintenance problems to the loosely organised individual owners. After the closure of urban industry and the shrinking of the state' housing administrative institutions, the associations

<sup>9</sup> This was a generalised situation in other cities of Romania and other countries from the Eastern Bloc, such as Novi Belgrade (Le Normand, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> The tenants could purchase from the state their apartments in instalments, at a fixed price, during the 1990s when the inflation of the local currency was going into two, even three digits per year.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> A policy of repayment the IMF debt triggered radical austerity measures during the 1980s under the neo-Stalinist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceauşescu (Marin & Chelcea, 2018). Domestic consumption of energy was limited, which especially in the context of collective housing districts contributed to a major decrease of the living conditions.

representing the dwellers in relation with other institutional bodies were the last standing functional remain inherited from the socialist housing system. These associations were the dwellers' only formal type organisation. Fragmented, small and overwhelmed by the scale and type of problems triggered by the effects of multiple privatisations, these associations were working in a survival mode. Barely coping with keeping the buildings running, lacking governance skills, tools, resources, partners and formats for the management of the buildings and its shared spaces (Marin, 2009, Marin & Chelcea, 2018) they had to learn by doing the practice of the collective management in a ruthless neoliberal context. As residents themselves had to assume administrative roles, these associations tend to became personalized, mixing the management with collaboration and conflict among neighbours, which were inherent to collective living. In the recent years, a new phenomenon emerged, as the buildings' management gets externalised to specialized companies. By eliminating some of the problems associated with the personalized approach, they nevertheless lose in empathy levels. The neighbours-administrators can be important relational actors in the life of the building, as nodes between formal institutions, individual dwellers and informal, selfmanagement groups.

Starting with the 1990s, anti-communism became the dominant ideological discourse in Romania, defining what has being called the "transition period" (Poenaru, 2017), which should be understood "not as a temporary state (...) but a form and a freestanding political problem" (p.2). During the 'transition', housing "became a merit good instead of a right" (Chelcea & Druţă, 2016), reversing the previous, socialist paradigm. As the ideology which produced them was found quilty, 13 collective housing wasn't portrayed anymore as the dream of the working class, but as the nightmare of a 'vertical gulag'. In the context of the top-down "rigged race" transition orchestrated by elites (Poenaru, 2017), the "communist" bloc was associated with the losers, while the villas, the gated communities or 'green residences' by the city's outskirts to the transition's winners. In recent years, the residential offer for new apartments in Bucharest is dominated by collective housing, built by the outskirts as a solution to land costs and profit multiplication drive. Called "residences" by their new owners, they struggle to differentiate them as new and modern, with young (and middle class) neighbours, unlike those mixed from the old communist bloc. However, the blatant differences come rather from the radical lack of a public infrastructure supporting these apartments. Illustrating a regional phenomenon that is gaining momentum, it has been identified as a local form of "de-urbanisation" (Petrovici & Poenaru, 2023). In the same time, "zombie socialism" (Chelcea & Drută, 2016) was invoked by the winners' narrative as an escape goat for the current problems of the collective housing district built by the socialist state. The "difficult inheritance" coming from the previous socialist times was identified as the cause of all its troubles, in an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Translated from Romanian by the current author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> In 2006, the President of Romania, Traian Băsescu, following the "Tismăneanu Report" produced by the "Presidential Commission for the Investigation of the Communist Dictatorship", issued an official declaration in Parliament condemning communism as "illegitimate and criminal" (Buier, 2007).

14 Translated from Romanian by the current author.

attempt to draw attention from the ravaging impact of state retreat and massive privatisation measures, specific to neoliberal public policy (Fig.4).



**Fig. 4.** Unplugging from the centralized heating network and installing individual heating systems in the newly privatized apartments from collective housing districts, Sinaia, Romania, 2011. Personal archive of the current author.

Regardless of the hegemonic framing and subsequent functional difficulties, the inherited weakness from the past, stubbornly became strengths in the future. The previously contested process of "social engineering", has turned out to be a good "social mixing" supporting a healthy urbanity (Marin & Chelcea, 2018), mostly preventing the ghettoization and segregation encountered in some modernist Western social housing districts<sup>15</sup>. In the same time, the current highly individualist housing proposition proved its limits during the 2008 financial crisis. Also, seized in never-ending traffic jams, with low access to public and community spaces, green areas, public transport, education, health or sport facilities, dwellers from the recent popping-up residential enclaves of the profit orientated housing developments began to empirically realise how much is their quality of life dependant on these public facilities, besides the house itself (lancu in Odobescu, 2018). A local feature is the small number of three or four-room apartments offered by the real estate developments in search of increasing the number of units sold. Especially sought

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> There are also exceptions, as some areas in Bucharest entered a spiral of stigmatization and ghettoization, due to intersecting social and ethnic exclusion, completed by chronic lack of administration's support.

after by families with children, but also becoming attractive due to the pandemic perspective of working from home, these apartments are mostly still found in socialist districts. This phenomenon led to a recent infusion of new residents in these areas, further contributing to a partial and rather tacit reconsideration of the socialist collective housing.

From abandoned places to escape from, some of these districts "are enjoying something of a renaissance" (Marin & Chelcea, 2018, p.169). Slowly, municipalities are turning their attention towards these districts which are nevertheless housing a huge number of voters. In the past years, this attention materializes in visible actions and public programs such as buildings' insulation. investing in rundown public spaces, parks and playgrounds. However, it was also their inherited neighbourly networks and informal practices of care which supported their rejuvenation. Developed among the workers-neighbours, these networks were inherent to the interdependence between the factory and the neighbourhood (Petrovici, 2017). Produced in the factory and exported into the everyday life, expanded in the neighbourhoods and nurtured by the collective living, these relational patterns among dwellers became a distinct practice of living together. Sharing resources, mutual help and the reproduction of social spaces were cultivated among (some) dwellers. Despite major transformations of the post-industrial city, together with demographic changes and rising individualism, some of these features can still be traced into the everyday gestures, informal protocols and emergent civic practices. Impregnated by the organisational model of the socialist governance, still determined by the spatial and functional features of the generous modernist layout, carrying further this legacy of spatial informality, each bloc has the potential to act as a production unit forging the common.

#### DRUMUL TABEREI

# Making Home

She pulls harder from the straps of her bag and prepares to catch a good spot to climb. "Look at it, as if it's crawling down the curve". Every morning she takes the first trolley at 04:45. It's still dark outside and not much to see through the foggy windows. "Can you please stamp my ticket, too?" For the next stations she is squeezed like sardines among dozens of people going to work. Her arm is stretched up and hurts, while the skin underneath her wrist watch starts sweating. Finally, all the women get off at the textile factory and for the next couple of stops she remains alone in the bus with the driver. She still has a long journey ahead to the train station. While the sun rises and warms the compartment a bit, she commutes another hour or so to the small town where she works as a school doctor. It will be dark again before she's back at home with the old trolley. But she feels like floating today. Along with this decree of 1966 they've managed to raise the money and got the apartment! It was guite a big sum, and they had to borrow, as for the garage it was cash only. But everyone helped them. The apartment is spacious, bright and close to her parents, which can help them with the kids. And it's theirs!

Many residents moving into the district had similar stories. Excepting early and limited attempts of the socialist state with private ownership and housing cooperatives, most of the newly built public housing was state owned and dwellers were state's tenants. Housing distribution was usually trough the factories, which received a "housing quota" of the collective housing districts and distributed the apartments. The workers signed up on a list and received a score according to criteria including living conditions, marital status, position or qualification. But the system couldn't provide in time and for all. Since 1966, in need of alternative financial resources to sustain the rhythm of housing construction, the state began to sell apartments from the public fund. The population need for housing intensified even more with the adoption of the infamous Decree 770 from 1966 that forbidden abortions, which led to the doubling of the birth rate in 1967 compared to the previous year. Thus, selling the apartments through a public credit was an opportunity for those less favoured by the distribution system. This was the case for intellectuals and those on lists still waiting for their housing "repartition", while facing increasing overcrowding. It was also a chance for the emerging middle class who was looking for better conditions to live in better equipped, more spacious and well placed apartments. In theory, the rules were strict, house ownership was limited to one property and buying, selling and renting public housing were strictly regulated by the state, such was the Law 5 from 1973 which established the conditions between owners and tenants. But dwellers were creatively taking advantage of the system' loopholes, using their relational networks, social capital and financial resources to get by. As a former employee in the socialist state housing distribution system recalls: "There were house exchange ads in the classifieds and

"There were house exchange ads in the classifieds and usually there was the formula: "I exchange a studio apartment for a two-bedroom apartment, moving expenses covered". "Moving expenses" actually meant some money that you gave, they were somewhat equivalent to the money you would have given to buy the house, only much less, obviously" (N.L., former clerk).

In time, through this grey housing market, dwellers began "to pull each other", forming networks based on kinship and class, informally transforming the planned social structure of the neighbourhood. Although illegal and formally discouraged by the socialist state, such informal practices of bending the rules of the housing distribution system were quite common. The phenomenon was so widespread that it also appeared in the films of the era, such as Omul care ne trebuie/ The man we need (1979), directed by Manole Marcus. Vasile, the main character, is a construction foreman that has arrived at the end of his assignment of building a dam near the city. He should release the apartment assigned by the city hall which he occupies as a tenant and move to the next site. But he is thinking to leave the traveling construction trust and settle in the city, as his family have taken roots here. Still hesitating and postponing the flat's release, he is approached on the street by the person to whom his apartment had already been reassigned. Invoking the overcrowding conditions of his family, this guy attempts to bribe him to vacant the flat, disguising the transaction in the sale of some old furniture, "as customary". Such informal tactics were aspiring towards legality, rather supporting the socialist distribution system and allowing more citizens to access better living conditions. Sometimes, the scale of these practices affected the planned social engineering vision of the districts. From a designated predominant working class, Drumul Taberei district attracted a significant presence of intellectuals, like teachers, doctors or engineers. This became one of the perceived and projected features among other districts, feeding the locals' narrative of a "good" area and becoming a source of neighbourhood "pride". But this also enacted social exclusion or spatial delimitation. At the same time, emergent distinctions from socialism related to ownership status have been transmitted until today. By assessing the level of care for the shared spaces like the staircase, inhabitants "could see the differences" between private owners and tenants' blocs.

#### 1.3. Research Aims

The research aims to illustrate the manifestation of informal practices of collective use, transformation and management of the in between spaces of collective housing districts from the post-socialist city. Furthermore, informal aspects will be inquired also around users' adoption of formal spaces, such as public libraries. By evidencing informal based practices of repairing the public grid, carrying for abandoned spaces and collaboration among dwellers, neighbours or library users, the project seeks to empirical evidence forms of "latent commons" (Tsing, 2019; De Angelis, 2017). Through fieldwork case study investigation, the research seeks to identify specific local situations where commons' latency activates into spatial driven commoning. Adopting a qualitative methodology and carrying a participative approach, the research aims to develop tools and engage from within for the support of emerging urban commons. In the same time, research aspires to articulate a narrative that acknowledges and values the informal practices contribution to the quality of life in the collective housing districts (Fig.5).

#### 1.4. Research question(s)

The research intentions are translated into a main research question that is further detailed by four other secondary questions.

#### **Fundamental question**

What are the necessary conditions, resources and formats for informal spatial practices specific to post-socialist collective housing districts to enable practices of urban commoning? What can we learn and how can we act in order to maintain and expand commoning practices?

#### Research question 1

What are the spatial manifestations of informal practices in the context of collective housing? And how the local historical evolution of the public housing project contributed to foster urban informality?

#### Research question 2

Whether formal institutions, such as public libraries, can also stimulate informality driven commoning? And what role had the historical trajectory of local public libraries in cultivating such informal practices?

#### Research question 3

How informal practices can be engaged in order to support and articulate spatial based commoning? What kind of spatial practice can be developed and what is the role of the designer in this process?

#### Research question 4

What tools and strategies can be replicated in order to achieve commons based regeneration of collective housing neighbourhoods from local and regional contexts? What formats and channels are necessary for the translation, communication and application of knowledge produced during fieldwork research and practice?

#### 1.5. Research Objectives

Each of the research questions corresponds to a research objective that is operationalized through a series of methods.

#### **Objective 1**

To situate concepts such as informality and urban commons in the context of public housing characterised through its historical evolutions, technocratic representations and current living practices. Over this background, the research seeks to identify local patterns of informal practices and emerging forms of commoning specific to the in-between spaces of collective housing districts. This will be accomplished through theoretical explorations, archival investigations, case studies, mapping and qualitative research which involve architects active in the public housing project, as well as dwellers experiencing planners' intentions.

#### Objective 2

To expand the investigation over the informality potential manifestations also within formal institutions, such as public libraries opened in collective housing districts. By intersecting the local historical evolution of collective housing with the trajectory of public libraries, the research aims to identify the influencing factors contributing to the current profile of the libraries. From this standpoint, the research aims to trace typologies and identify conditions when informal driven commoning arise also among neighbourhood libraries. This will be achieved through archival inquiry, mapping, qualitative and participative research which includes librarians and library users.

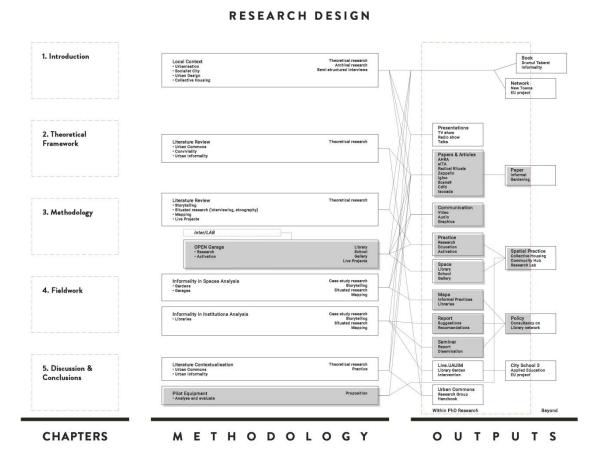
#### Objective 3

To engage with the ecosystem of local informal practices from Drumul Taberei collective housing district by operating the research process also as a community activator. Fieldwork research aims to become propositional by customizing methods, situating the role of the designer and identifying the potential of a spatial practice specific to the local context. From the ground, the research seeks to actively support informal based commoning by piloting a space which prompts the research, but also enacts a shared resource. This will be accomplished through participant observation, live projects, but also through spatial activation, which will involve researchers, educators, students, inhabitants and local partners.

#### **Objective 4**

To draw lessons from the inquired informal practices from the ground and evaluate the tools and strategies of the pilot practice in order to define a replicable support for local urban commons. Complementary, the research aims to address the public perception by articulating a narrative evidencing the role of informally-driven commoning in supporting the quality of life. Besides communicating its products, the research aims to translate them into actionable

knowledge, useful for researchers, activators and policy makers. This will be accomplished through articles, reports and seminars, but also by developing specific creative methods of dissemination, including storytelling and cultural activation.



**Fig. 5.** Research Design evidencing the Thesis structure in relation with research methods and tracing its outputs within and beyond the PhD.

#### 1.6. Overview of the Proposal

This publication follows the nature of my approach of the past years working within the topic of informal practices. The research process was a journey across different contexts, disciplines, places and life moments. The paper supposed to be divided in two parts, first the Thesis and second the Practice. But just as the relationship between the PhD and the Practice, things didn't entirely match this pre-established plan. Neither linear, nor clearly determined, the relationship between the two evolved in leaps and adapted to the topic, to the context and to the times we live in. From the ideal PhD by Practice, unexpected changes or basic needs transformed it into a PhD or Practice. There were moments when the two over simplifying categories disappeared completely, leaving just a way of life. However, sudden eruptions of meaning marked the everyday, consolidating in time a more theoretical understanding of the collection of facts. Like an urban planner project which gets outlined on the drawing board following a brief, the Thesis proceeds in tracing a table of categories aiming to cover the subject. However, as the text advances, among the cracks between the chapters, elements of the Practice grow. These are stories, such as texts, drawings, images or sounds which didn't found their place in the main sections. They were just stubbornly resisting categorisation, or they are there just to underline and support the main arguments. Stories, Tools and Pilot insertions sits among the Thesis chapters like informal practices in between the buildings. Their inclusion is not a complete break between parts, but comes more as an articulation, an informal place that allows for overlapping, extensions, temporary constructions, live voices and even theoretical drafts. By explicitly seeking articulation between concepts, methods, fieldwork and results, the alternation between chapters and insertions becomes a way of structuring the proposal. This construction illustrates how Thesis and Practice are not the same thing, nor two separate worlds, but something that takes place in-between (Fig.6).

#### **PUBLICATION DESIGN**

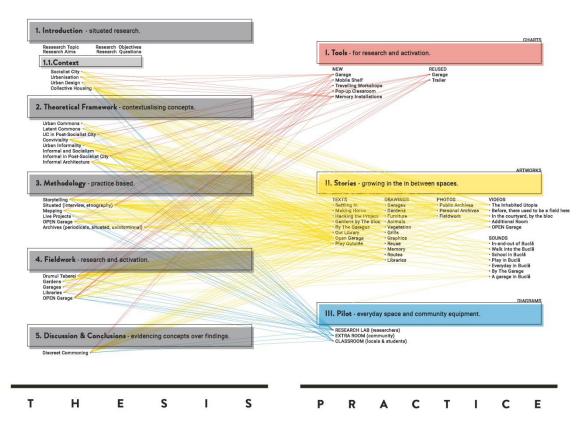


Fig. 6. Publication Design illustrating the Thesis and Practice relations that are structuring the current publication.

#### Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework

Commons, Conviviality and Informality

#### 2.1. The Commons and the City

Nurtured by neoliberalism and its discontents (Harvey, 2005), multiple environmental, economic, social and political crises are manifesting especially in the urban context. In the race for alternatives to state and market and for coproduced solutions for the 'wicked problems' (Richardson et al., 2018) affecting contemporary cities, the urban commons theoretical narrative has gained momentum. An increasing number of researchers, activists or thinkers like Elinor Ostrom (2015), Stavros Stavrides (2016, 2019), Anna Tsing (2021) or socio-ecological practitioners such as atelier d'architecture autogérée (AAA) or critical design practices like Public Works are supporting, testing and expanding the commons' model. At the same time, emerging processes and practices of collective management of resources arising in different contexts are described and valued as urban commoning. The city has become a critical arena where increasingly dominant practices of enclosure and commodification are being contested by social movements fighting for urban justice and reclaiming the right to the city for all. In this context, urban commons offered a political proposition which is able to challenge the capitalist mode of operation through accumulation, enclosure and extraction. Inherent to life, the potentiality of "latent commons" (De Angelis, 2017) can offer an alternative emerging social system which can tackle inequality and climate change.

#### From Traditional to Urban Commons

Definitions of commons in this context are acknowledging three interdependent components: the resources, the community and the governance processes (Linebaugh, 2008). These components exist only in a close relation, as commons are implying "a plurality of people (a community) sharing resources and governing them and their own relations and (re)production processes through horizontal doing in common, commoning" (De Angelis, 2017, p.10). Coming from a long history which precedes the industrial revolution and founded in similar practices spread all over the world, more contemporary forms of political and theoretical commons were empirically evidenced by Elinor Ostrom (2015) as an existing governing alternative that is more effective, democratic or sustainable than the state and market for managing common-pool resources (CPR). Her study "Governing the Commons" contributes to a turning point in transforming the perspective over market and state, signalling the return of this historical model into the contemporary arena of global thinking. The research was published in 1990 in the context of major tectonic shifts in the wealth distribution paradigms around the world, as the communist system was just collapsing throughout Eastern Europe, coinciding also with the end of the welfare state in the Western countries. However, from the dismantling of these models, the neoliberal version of capitalism profited the most and engaged in a global expansion since then. Coming out even stronger from

cyclical crises, neoliberal hegemony made capitalism "inexorable", while at the same time constructed the state as "inevitable" in assuming the role of the market's excess regulator (Méndez de Andés, 2023). Correlating with the major changes determined by the fall of the Berlin wall, commons were not adopted on a large scale. However, it consolidated in the past years as a radical alternative to this binary proposition of state and market, which failed in turns to tackle current global crises, like depletion of resources, climate change or shrinking democracy, if not being the very source of these crises. Yet, Ostrom's (2015) perspective is still inherently economic, focused on acknowledging how people can successfully manage CPR rather than governments or private companies. Based on the governing processes' investigation among several case studies, she traces a framework of these collective actions from where she identifies successful institutional patterns which are synthesised in eight principles, as follows: 1. boundaries clearly defined; 2. equitable and appropriated rules, specific to local conditions; 3. practical rules accessible to those affected by them; 4. accountability and a collective system of monitoring; 5. gradual sanctioning for rule breaking; 6. low-cost accessible mechanisms for conflict-resolution; 7. recognized rights of self-organizing from external authorities; 8. nesting structures at interconnected levels and scale, especially for CPR's survival in larger systems (Ostrom, 2015, p.90). Although drawn from assessing long enduring CPR, these design principles can serve as theoretical guidance and fieldwork orientation of further situating commons model in the post-socialist city.

According to Linebaugh (2008), commoning is traditionally embedded to a "labour process" (p.45). Assuming that "the commons is an activity" and thus abolishing distinctions between society and nature, being referred to as "a verb, rather than as a noun, a substantive" (p.279). From such a praxis perspective, commons' understanding expands beyond explicitly regulated resources' management specific to rural contexts. The commons' perception diversified and included various less tangible emerging forms, such as civic, cultural or social commons collected under the "new commons" paradigm (Holder & Flessas, 2008). Manifesting in a taxonomy of forms and dealing with diverse material and immaterial resources, urban commons can be found under diverse strands, from economies, ecologies, infrastructures, knowledges, to socialities, localities, and governance (Urban Commons Collective, 2022, p.6). Even more, De Angelis (2017) acknowledges commons' capacity to go beyond collectively managed resources and enact "social systems whose elements are commonwealth, a community of commoners, and the on-going interactions, phases of decision making and communal labour process that together are called commoning" (p.11). This aspect becomes more relevant in identifying an alternative proposition in addressing the current capitalist driven global crises of climate change, growing inequality and downsizing democracy, which are especially evidenced in cities. Here, the commons model carries the ethos of a political project, where social movements are explicitly engaging in commoning processes as "strategic alternatives" to capitalist driven development (De Angelis, 2017, p.203; Bollier, 2006). These political, cultural and legal experiments of self-management multiply in the

urban context, occupying abandoned spaces and transforming them into commons such is the ex-Asilo Filangeri in Naples (Urban Commons Collective, 2022, p.172).

However, the direct application of the historic land sharing model to the urban context falls short, calling for an "urban commons" paradigm, better adapted to the more complex ecosystem of actors and acknowledging a more diversified range of resources. The traditional commons' definition was expanded by including material and immaterial resources, such as culture, knowledge, infrastructure or neighbourhoods as a whole, setting wider parameters for the urban commons. Based on empirical research, Foster and Iaione (2017) points towards some of Ostrom's principles, like locally adapted rules, recognition of self-organisation and nesting bodies, which may still apply to the urban context, while others need to be revisited. Accounting for cities not just as exhaustible resources, such as fisheries or forests, but as "constructed commons" in an institutional, political and social diverse place, they reformulate urban commons principles down to five: 1. a community' collective governance system including at least three partners; 2. the state as enabler, facilitator and supporting the management and sustainability; 3. a socio-economic resource pooled between five urban actors; 4. an iterative and adaptive institutional design; 5. open access technology and digital infrastructure (laione & Foster, 2016; 2017). The city itself can be viewed and practiced as a commons and reclaimed collectively by its users, thus becoming a "co-city" (2016). Urban commoning can be an alternative to the logic of the market driven development and state-run regulation. In cities across the world, public spaces and services, as well as community places and their narratives are increasingly crushed under the offensive of privatisation, fragmentation, enclosure and commodification. Using theoretical and activist lenses, processes of commoning are described as carrying various specificities and developing under local patterns. However, they are especially identified as explicitly or implicitly articulated ways of resistance to this hegemonic paradigm of individualization and marketization. In this way, urban commons have become a socio-political proposition, enabling a more democratic, just and sustainable city.

#### Urban Commons - The Resources, The Institutions and The Community

In the rural version of commons, where resources are defined by their natural limits, the demarcation comes as a consequence. Ostrom (2015) identifies the "clearly defined boundaries" (p.90) as the first principle of successful commons. However, these resources' boundaries comes in contradiction with the open nature of the city, while in the same time facing the toxic phenomenon of "enclavisation" (Stavrides, 2016). Thus, the pursuit of equilibrium which manifests by the strongly defined borders in the management of natural resources is matched by exclusivist practices in the city. The expansion of urban enclaves defined by their boundaries which are clearly enforced especially to exclude others signals the risks of un-critical adopting the rural extraction model of commons into the urban ecosystem. As a support of social interaction, urban space and its associated services could be assumed as non-commodified shared common pool

resources belonging to all users (Foster & laione, 2016). However, within the context of the contemporary city, increasingly defined by the normalisation of exclusivist borders, the perspective over the urban space as a CPR calls for a new narrative. Using as a spatial metaphor, Stavrides (2016) proposes the term 'threshold' which is "establishing intermediary areas of crossing, by opening the inside to the outside" (p.56). The threshold spatiality and its practice becomes the shared resource for such new commons, thus avoiding the trap of further enclosure and privatisation, this time produced under the banners of 'community'. Qualitatively differentiated by the strong border pattern encountered in traditional commons, the threshold commoning is a 'hacking' tactic for constructing the commons in the city. Understanding urban commons not just as shared items, but rather as collectively driven process for creating porous borders, requires a distinctive set of tools and practices, which are able to reproduce commons for urban communities, bridging towards the institutional ecosystem of the city.

Transferring the commons model into the city also requires its redefinition from an institutional perspective. This implies taking into account the existing and complex urban governance ecosystem, while acknowledging for the latent commoning practices developed by inhabitants through the very practice of living together. In the same time, it should learn to deal with internal borders inherent to urban diversity, but also should seek to bridge out its external borders, dealing with enclavisation tendencies. In order to explicitly maintain its porous borders and being able to relate in a highly regulated urban context, some researchers argue in favour of urban commons' institutionalization (laione & Foster, 2017; Foster, 2016). Yet, an institutionalized urban commons adapted to the governance patterns of the cities could thrive and even attempt to transform them from within. Foster and laione (2016) envision commons as a framework that "can provide a bridge between the normative claim to the city and its resources and the way in which those resources and the city itself is governed" (p.288). Furthermore, they are accounting for several principles, such as horizontal subsidiarity, collaboration and polycentrism, which are able to support an experimental and iterative urban governance process. For them, commons' institutionalization seeks the gradual transformation of the Leviathan state owning the complete control, into a more "facilitator or enabling state" (p.290). However, such transformation which aims to reclaim the city as a common-pool resource governed by the redesigned collective institutions might not work, if it's not supported by an active and massive project of "collective subjectivation" (Stavrides, 2019, p.107) which comes from the everyday practices of commoners who are belonging to a community. The drive for commons regularization in principles, frameworks and formal protocols carries the risks of its failure. Anna Tsing (2019) understands latent commons being rather inherent to life, as they resist institutionalization. Isn't this regulatory drive similar with the historical attempts of socialist-modernist utopias to control every aspect of life? As we live among the present 'ruins' of the collapsed idealized and highly organised future worlds, we might better notice and learn from how emerging practices and latent commons erupt in valves within institutional fabric of the messy post-socialist city. In such moments of coagulation, latent commons

are taking various local forms while still carrying a low level of explicit organisation and thus lacking an institutionalization potential. Accounting for such variety of manifestations is a first step into situate the commons definition within the urban context, as its institutional version counts just as one of possible developments, but not as one size that should fit all. However, still largely latent, local manifestations compensate perhaps through an acute sense of creative disobedience against top-down control. Discreet and resurgent, they are rather taking advantage from the loopholes and contradictions inherent to the cacophonic institutionalization of the city, rather than seeking to become another regulated pattern among others. Forms of commons are unexpectedly articulating among the contradictory succession of social and urban projects. Perhaps an alternative option resisting impulses of excessive formalization towards public policies or political projects is looking more to the conditions when such latency might blossom into discreet forms of commoning and actively work in reproducing such conditions.

Accounting that commoning goes beyond being just an alternative way of managing common-pool resources, but rather being both a result and a goal of the commons, implies also redefining the community of users. Assuming a process driven framework, where "community does not merely exist, it is made", Zibechi defines the community "not an institution, not even an organisation, but a way to make links between people" (2010, in Stavrides, 2016, p.45). Community is thus inherent to human nature, which is affirmed through social interaction. Moreover, in order to get articulated, communities need to share a practice. Therefore, the management of common-pool resources could act as a powerful incentive to trigger communities' crystallization. As a community enabler, the commons can further shape the ways communities develop into a practice, introducing the ingredients for being and acting in common. For the communities forged around urban commons, which are explicitly engaged in bridging its borders, common space is both a resource to share and a tool to connect, to act and to transform the users. At the same time, the community is not a phase or a stage that once reached it ends the process, but rather an on-going process of continuous production and reproduction. Commons are then constantly produced by a community which is articulated "through processes of participation of its members, considered as equals", that is "a process that produce and educate in the same time" (Stavrides, 2016, p.107). Henceforth, participation, adopted both as a productive and a pedagogic tool, is a critical condition for creating and sustaining urban commoning.

#### Latent Commons

Yet, urban commons are not an exportable model, which can derive only from Ostrom's (2015) economic based reasoning or from Foster & Iaione (2016) institutional diagramming. It's not enough to evidence their ideal formal organisation, define suited administrative conditions and isolate necessary legislative measures which can be packed and universally applied to produce urban commons. Their containment in prescribed universal recipes carries the risk of eventually losing the relational ingredient that makes it an alternative to state and market and which is highly

situated. Acknowledging for more relational forms could rescue the urban commons model from the prescriptive of institutionalization. Thinkers and activists are accounting for the importance of spontaneous nature of doing-in-common process, as implicit to human nature and inherent to living together. Often, these perspectives acquire the dimension of a political project, which manifests against current trends of capitalist driven urban development. Stavros Stavrides (2016) is evidencing case studies from around the world, which are depicting commoning situations. Although rooted in different contexts, they are all gathered to illustrate situated versions of open systems and spatial generators based on collaboration and solidarity, which are transforming its users and shaping the relation among them. Moreover, they are illustrating an "explicit resistance" against the dominant model of urban enclavisation, assuming that "everyday collectively organised survival tactics" are able to "produce potentialities of different forms of social organisation" (Stavrides, 2019, p.17). Traditionally nested by a productive activity, commoning is assumed to emerge in the urban context as well, as lived space itself becomes "the result of labour" (Stavrides, 2019, p.15). Thus emerging commons are at least implicit, entangled in the practices of living together, while spatially performed, as they are unlocking their alternative potential in the urban context.

Even in the absence of their explicit manifestation, commons are acknowledged as already existing in any society. But their existence is not just recorded as a specific manifestation. Commons are an ingredient more or less active depending on the local culture. Called by De Angelis "latent commons" (2017) a series of practices which are defining how we live together, such as "loyalty to friends, conviviality, mutual aid and even struggles" (p.12) can act as alternative living patterns of pursuing profit, which arrived to dominate and structure urban living and social relations. Furthermore, these emerging urban commons can thus support "process of transformation towards postcapitalist society" (p.11). Also the American anthropologist Anna Tsing, in the context of living among capitalism ruins illustrated by the tale of mushrooms' commodity chains (2021), talks about commons' latency, seen from a dual perspective: "first, while ubiquitous, we rarely notice them, and, second, they are undeveloped. They bubble with unrealised possibilities; they are elusive" (p.255). Thus 'latent' implies a hidden, an undercurrent, less explicit presence which lurks like an unspoken promise, always ready to erupt any time and take different forms. Avoiding fixing them in laws and principles, she goes further and makes several observations in the negative. She especially notices their low institutionalization potential for a process originating in interstitial practices in between laws, which are actually "catalysed by infraction, infection, inattention - and poaching" (p.255). So, their transfer to public policy will probably strip them of the very ingredients which makes them latent. Furthermore, she warns against the idea of commons as another utopian project that will "redeem us" (p.255). Quite the opposite, however latent, commons exist "here and now", they are with us, part of us (p.255). Therefore they "stay with the trouble", in the sense that they don't represent nor "awful or edenic pasts", neither "apocalyptic and salvific futures", but prepare us to became "truly present (...) as

mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (Haraway, 2016, p.1). As latent commons are inherent to life with all its complexity, they cannot be scaled up into an over controlling project. Meaning that they are "not amenable to precision-nested scales" (Tsing, 2019) without re-conceptualizing the world devastated by the uniform and heterogeneous modern project of 'progress' which was based on scalability (p.162). From this perspective, a whole series of strongly institutionalized processes, such as urban planning, are brought back into question. But maybe, it is not necessary to radically reconsider the planning all together. Rather, the de-scaling of a specific type of planning thinking and acting should start from giving up the serial repetition of spatial and organisational forms as its product. In other words, planning could become more of a caretaker and facilitator of basic conditions and processes that allow for participatory, diverse, open-ended and creative manifestations of commons in the city.

#### Urban Commons and the Post-Socialist City

The legacy of the socialist city makes the contemporary manifestations of urban commons quite specific. In agreement with neo-Weberian researchers such as Ivan Szelenyi, which assumes the hypothesis that different socio-economic systems will produce qualitatively different urban contradictions, the Eastern European city is the product of the socialist organisation of planning and management. The socialist city has industrial development and public housing as its core. As the "socialist system produced historically unique patterns of urbanisation", different from any Western counterparts development at a similar stage of economic growth, thus also the postsocialist "dismantling of the inherited socialist patterns of urbanisation and urban forms is a historically unprecedented process" (Szelenyi, 1996, p.316). In other words, what may seem at first sight just a stage on a convergent trajectory in which the post-socialist city becomes pre-socialist again, that is a capitalist city, is in fact an entirely new path growing from an already distinct urban pattern. Within a process lasting for several decades already, living practices have been formed and have perpetuated across generations. Built on the institutional 'ruins' of the socialist city, the new post-socialist organisations and living practices have developed specific behaviours, different from similar institutions from a generic capitalist city. Along its historical evolution, some features specific to the capitalist city actually emerged during the last decades of socialism, only to explicitly accelerate during the 1990s. Also, practices specific to socialist city survived well into everyday habits, adopted even by the post-socialist generations. Such is the privatisation, enclavisation or urban segregation, but also mutual aid, solidarity and a relational form of collective living which are not anymore so clearly belonging to one or another type of city, depicted in Cold War binary representations. A whole series of failures, adaptations, complicities and more or less silent or explicit resistances allowed the post-socialist city to develop distinct characteristics, matching the regional socio-economic processes of peripheral capitalism. Thus, by taking Szelenyi's argument further, also urban commons have developed a specific local version to the post-socialist context.

Even if developing variations which follow local historical developments, these phenomena are somehow similar in all countries of the former Eastern Bloc.

However, commoning practices are inherent to a way of life, situated in diverse historical contexts and attached to the local practices of living. They can take different, even contradictory forms from one context to another. Often, what works in one place can have the opposite effect in another. Thus, the translation and adaptation of their narrative to the local context becomes an essential process in their valorisation and support. In Romania, commons' explicit practice is discouraged, triggered also by the legacy of abused collective values during the communist dictatorship. This heritage led to their further depreciation and their strong connection with communist values, as their ritual condemnation became the base of the hegemonic anti-communist narrative. The "civilization" discourse which flourished during post-socialism is excluding commoning practices as "communist remains" and praises market solutions led by the heroic figure of the entrepreneur. Even when the state is inevitably needed, it is envisioned as slim and minimal, its main role being just to serve the market and emulate its practices. As a consequence of this phenomenon, a civic response has crystalized in the past years. Explicit civic actions are characterized by the conflict paradigm, coagulating in the wake of crises in which citizens coalesce as a last form of defense against the dismantling of public infrastructure in the face of aggressive privatization, tacitly supported by administrative passivity (Borcan, 2022). Ostrom (2015) identifies low-cost accessible mechanisms for conflict-resolution as one of the principles for commons' functioning. In the local context, the relationship between civic, public and private actors is mainly set in a confrontational paradigm. Technocratic administrative language, bureaucratic hurdles, limited and shrinking access to legal mechanisms, or even explicit intimidation actions from economic agents, wear down over time the initiators of civic actions, who become tired, emotionally overwhelmed, and end up abandoning these 'struggles' (Borcan, 2022). This fundamental state of conflict between the administrators and the users of public resources indicate that this phenomenon generally still remains at the level of emerging, potential urban commons, without being able to fully establish, function and becoming explicit as such.

Evidencing commons is even more challenging, as even the language associated with 'collective,' 'solidarity,' or 'common' is loaded with a history of abuse, misuse and utopian mockery. Thus, affirmative commoning is positioned here in a conflict zone between grand historical narrative plates, which are still active three decades after the fall of communism. Therefore, commoners often choose not to actively manifest in direct opposition with the hegemonic narratives, but rather disguise their practices and dilute it in less explicit forms of everyday gestures and rituals, sometimes even without being aware of it. Still volatile and temporary, they however cultivate a resurgent character, becoming highly agile, adapting to sudden shifts coming from "above". By learning to keep a "low profile", commoners are in the same time maintaining as by default an "against" or "in spite" attitude towards any attempts of control and institutionalization (Mihailescu, et al., 1994). The local culture of living developed something like a 'disobedient'

character of manifesting its citizenship. As Bachelard (1990) understands disobeying in a constructive version, as "creativity" in "action" through in everyday acts, which are "clever, well thought out, and patiently pursued, so subtle at times as to avoid punishment entirely" (p.82). Thus, spatialzed informality can amount to a local version of disobedient commoning practices.

Different from the use of public space, common practices were partially transferred to the cities by rural or urban peripheral inhabitants. But the collective ethos of sharing infrastructure was especially related to the socialist pattern of supporting civic empowerment. This was a historical trajectory, specific to the socialist cities of the Central and Eastern Europe becoming a unique phenomenon. The collective living was actively supported through institutions, dominant narratives and shared valued at a scale unmatched even by the welfare state of the Western counterparts. New commons specific to contemporary urban ecosystems began to emerge in the forms of everyday public space appropriations, but also as "collectively managed spaces meant to support a common urban life that creates new (and not simply traditional) social relations and bonds" (Stavrides, 2019, p.23). These processes of collective reclaiming the public spaces especially manifested in the post-socialist city as a reaction to the dismantling of the public grid, becoming implicit political acts of resistance to neoliberal fragmentation and privatisation. Under constant threat in the past years, the public infrastructure made up of parks, libraries, district's centres and most of the community's places, triggered collaboration and care among some of its users. This could be evidencing Ostrom's "nestedness" principle (2015), which is considered among the conditions for the commons' existence within the city (Iaione & Foster, 2017). With a low level of explicit organisation, if not completely lacking such self-awareness, while the commoning resource is often partially out of users' control, the post-socialist version is perhaps closer to forms of latent commons becoming active. Local commons are thus highly relational and inherent to everyday interactions among dwellers. The cultivation of (some) dwellers of ephemeral and informal practices produced a specific space and a distinct culture of living. Growing on institutional remains, such as socialist inherited tenants' association and attached to post-socialist habits of using the in between spaces, like informal gardening, multipurpose garages or caring for street animals, the manifestation of commoning' latency are highly influenced by the local historical transformation of the past decades. These patterns have formed a post-socialist version of urban commoning which manifests with discreet disobedience, while being highly creative and diverse.

#### 2.2. Conviviality

However, the urban common theoretical model cannot be easily evidenced by the empirical findings from the ground in the context of post-socialist city. The informal practices of care and repair of the public infrastructure developed by the residents of the collective housing districts are characterized by a low level of explicit governance, at the same time having the resource out of users' control. Perhaps these situations are better described by "latent commons" (Tsing, 2021; De Angelis, 2017) which are already existing in everyday patterns of social relations and are nevertheless life supportive. Among them, 'conviviality' is one such everyday pattern that can develop into commoning protocols. Designated by Ilich (2009) as "the opposite of industrial productivity" (p.11), conviviality stands as a basic ingredient for the emergence of informal networks based on solidarity, mutual help or friendship. In a convivial society, "convivial tools" are enabling the emancipatory visions of creative and autonomous persons in relation with their environment, which go beyond the dominant imperatives of efficient production and permanent growth (p.11). Considered "intrinsic of social relationships" (p.12), these tools have to be recognized and shared by their users. At the same time, their usage assumes a certain level of users' agency, which is accessed through action. In other words, convivial tools could be understood as informal practices, as they can "be easily used, by anybody, as often or as seldom as desired, for the accomplishment of a purpose chosen by the user" (p.22). In post-socialist Bucharest, such 'tools' can range from carrying for abandoned spaces in between the building, or to private spaces opened for the collective like garages, to shelters for non-humans in the proximity of living, up to personalized usage of institutional spaces, such as public libraries.

As convivial tools allow for the articulation of a convivial society, while users are becoming convivial agents, it doesn't amount to a utopian, radical future world. In Ilich's (2009) understanding, a convivial world happens here and now, as a "complementary" ingredient which brings "balance" among existing other systems, such as state and capital. This hybrid description resembles the context of post-socialist city, where people have to make do in between hegemonic systems of the state supported market by adapting living environment to suit their everyday needs. The transformation of living spaces and the redesigned of spatially mediated relations among themselves is done with convivial and tactical tools (De Certeau, 1988) based on improvisation and creativity. As Ilich (2009) is using the ideal library like an unmediated repository as a metaphor for the "prototype for a convivial tool" (p.65), also the post-socialist city works as a reference for a spatialized repository of conviviality enablers. Through spatial adaptations, such as repurposing garages, or by allowing carrying-driven spatial visions to grow, like community gardening and animals sheltering, the post-socialist city is fostering conviviality tools. Seen as a "commons-based forms of social cooperation", such tools carry "the potential to expand and reshape their boundaries, renew their social compositions, develop multicultures of horizontality, destabilise official science", to finally to "give rise to commons ecologies" (De Angelis, 2017, p.12). Thus, from a pre-commoning perspective, conviviality situations can enact the latency of the commons, which

can potentially further lead to their explicit activation into forms of alternative modes of production to state and market.		

#### 2.3. Urban Informality

Similarly with the commons, the concept of informality also comes via the economic sector, where it was used to describe local 'shadow economies' (Meili, 2012). From there it was imported in urbanism, in academic research and even became a concern for public policies. 'Informal urbanism' has been frequently used to describe the "formal's 'other" and invoked in policy for regulating housing, public space use or economy (Acuto, et al, 2019, p.476). Usually carrying a normative approach, placed in a subaltern position and caught in dualisms illustrating local resistance to global neoliberal control, the study of informality has evolved and became in the past years a fertile ground for enhancing and even revitalising urban studies (Acuto, et al., 2019). The rise in informality studies coincides with the rediscovery of the 'ordinary city' as a reaction to cities' increasingly narrowing perception as powerhouses of the global market. Calls for mobilising cities' social capabilities for restoring social justice were beginning to acknowledge the role of "immobile or non-tradable factors, notably tacit knowledge, informal or face-to-face contact and relations of reciprocity and trust" (Amin & Graham, 1997, 419). Such existing patterns are already mobilizing in answering real social needs, thus valuing autonomous groups and their practices. Going beyond its dualisms' limitations, the perspective over informality got interdisciplinary multiplied and included various manifestations occurring in different geopolitical contexts. The debate grew and began to demonstrate the usefulness of its research by illustrating specific aspects of urban informality from spatial categories, forms of organisation and governance or negotiation processes (McFarlane & Waibel, 2016).

The inclusion of the informal manifestations in urban studies and architecture was also supported by a wide range of 'resistance literature', produced by Western anthropologists and philosophers who became increasingly critical over the effects of radical modernization and postwar capitalism. During the 1970s, Lefebvre (2013) proposes an understanding of the production of space through the "perceived-conceived-lived triad". This three interconnected realms are spatially translated into specific representations. The everyday spatial practices of deciphering the existing as such is enacted by the dominant representations of spaces by institutions, scientists, planners or technocrats, and is completed by the dominated representational spaces of the users that seeks to change and appropriate it (p.38-41). Thus the city is the resulting form of the intersection between the project, the perception and the usage. It is the "lived space" where informality physically operates over its conceptual and normative representations. The key relationship between the 'lived' and the 'conceived' is further illustrated a decade later by De Certeau (1988) as a spatial confrontation between two operating paradigms: tactics and strategies. Performed as "an art of the weak", tactics as "calculated actions determined by the absence of a place" (p.37) corresponds to the 'lived' space. While strategies, understood as the "manipulation of power" which "postulating a place that can be delimited" (p.36), coincide with the 'conceived' space. From this binary perspective of the spatial manifestations of power between institutions and users, the city resembles a conceptual battlefield. Being at the origin of these informal practices, the quite generic

and even subaltern 'user' is constructed through diverse illustrations from different periods following a creative outline, derived from the improvised nature of his actions. Thus, an imaginative, opportunistic and possessing a tacit knowledge to act, the bricoleur (Lévi-Strauss, 2000) engages in bricolage actions of creatively making do with available resources (Derrida, 2014). These intuitive and ingenious bricolages are the illustrations of the tactics operated by the creative bricoleurs enacting their living space. As theories accumulate, an understanding of informality emerges not as an autonomous practice, but as part of a complex and dynamic ecosystem of spatial manifestations, perceptions and representations, which are also grounded in local histories. However, such an abstracted model carries the risks of explaining prior to investigating, following Universalist claims in distance from the specific local contexts. Such theoretical construct needs to be informed by the situated manifestations of informality, which are contradictory and fluid, sometimes escaping and resisting conceptualization, being constantly changing and reformulating.

#### Informality and the Socialist State

Among the ways to overcome the tyranny of the abstract model and its fundamental dualisms is to reconsider the informal subordinate relationship in urban planning. As a key feature of the socialist city, planning the urban territory has always been the prerogative of the exercise of power. Therefore, the informal manifestations are usually considered a mark of state failure and a sign of its dysfunctional institutions which are unable to apply the rules. However, considering how urban planning sometimes uses exceptions and deregulations in supporting and valuing certain elite groups, while discouraging and even sanctioning marginal ones, we could understand informality also as a process adopted at the heart of the state. Informality works also as another form of consolidating and exercising power by creating subaltern subjects and practices (Roy. 2018). Thus, the mechanisms through which groups and practices become informal or subordinate in order to legitimise regularisation and normalisation can also be seen as a process of top-down urban planning. Informality is in a way a shared practice among rulers and users.

For a long time associated with the uncontrolled urban growth in the Global South. informality's manifestations have been identified also in other geographical and historical contexts. The relationship between the citizens and the socialist state among the countries of the Eastern Bloc also illustrates the ambiguity of a less clear formal-informal delimitation. More than just a simple exchange of roles and practices between the formal state and informal citizens, the framework of socialist society allowed the growing of interstitial spaces along its boundaries. Within these 'grey zones', informal practices were actually aspiring to legality, while at the same time formal rules were adapted by tactics outside the norm (Grashoff, 2019). These unauthorised, but acknowledged and sometimes tolerated by the state, urban informality manifestations thrived in Romania during socialism. Banned as "illicit" practices, like house exchanges, apartments' transformations or individual productive gardening, have become almost mainstream, thus

illustrating a unique manifestation of informality. Resulting from a mixture between formal measures, institutional complicities and individual negotiations, they were actually supporting the socialist spatial planning by compensating and supporting its goals. This is however a feature which they share with many other related ways of practising the shadow economy across the Eastern Bloc (Ledeneva et al., 2018). Without frontally challenging the authority of the totalitarian state, while even seeking compliance with the law, they were developing a kind of "cautious courage" of which Grashoff speaks of when describing the phenomenon of house squatting during DDR (p.551). By taking advantage of the generous resources made available by the carrying socialist state, citizens were 'hacking' them by opportunistically using blind spots within the state's total control. Such manifestations were only resembling their contemporary Western counterparts at the time, but perhaps were being closer to the "guiet encroachment of the ordinary" (Bayat, 2000, p.545) detected in other totalitarian contexts such as the Middle East countries. These are process enacted by atomised, lacking ideology, ordinary people engaged in a prolonged and "pervasive advancement" over the powerful for their survival and life improvement (Bayat, 2000, p.545). In a similar way, these ephemeral informal practices 'encroached' the material and immaterial structures imposed by the socialist the state. Driven by basic needs, without any explicitly political motivations or high values attached, being enacted more individually and within neighbourly based small networks rather than as explicitly articulated collective initiatives, they became part of a specific and unique way of life.

Perhaps at a first glance, through a thin description, the spatial manifestations of informal practices in the South and East may seem similar. But the motivations, mechanisms and the role of these practices in the specific economic and social context differs in several points. In contrast to the Global South, where informality is practiced rather by the 'urban poor' as a tactic driven by basic economic needs and survival, in the context of state socialism of the Global East, the residents who transformed the in between spaces of the collective housing districts were rather representatives of an emergent middle class, more or less recently urbanized, employed in a centralized economic system, with access to socio-cultural infrastructure and public services. Informality in the socialist East had the particularity of being tacitly accepted or even partially supported by the formal socialist-modernist system of top-down planning. The informal practices ultimately aspired to legality and sought (albeit implicitly) to solve and complete the sometimes overwhelmed capacities of the socialist state system through vernacular means. Moreover, the ethos of voluntarism and productive citizenship, explicitly encouraged by the ideology and practice of state socialism, generated, resourced and allowed that a certain level of informality to exist, not as a form of open confrontation to the system, but as part of a collective effort to organize life, where everyone participates and manifests according to its means, formal or informal. Thus, the pre-capitalist legacy of a regional culture of living strongly infused with informal practices, continued and expanded during the period of socialist urbanization, where it became a specific way of life in the city, which continued to manifest itself also in post-socialism.

Informality in the Post-Socialist City

These practices did not disappear with the end of state socialism in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries in 1989. As the whole society had to adapt to the dramatic changes during the 'transition' period, informal urban practices have also gone through a process of change. Paradoxically, economic and social liberalisation meant an acceleration of some processes which, however still discrete, had previously gained momentum towards the end of the socialist period in Romania. The inhabitants' practice of bending norms and developing make do tactics amounted to a massive decrease of trust in state's protocols and rules, which some local sociologists framed as "anomic" (Bulai, 2005). This process was only amplified and became normalised during the 1990s. Strongly supported by the dominant ideologies of individualisation and the promotion of self-initiative ethos, this phenomenon was completed by the massive privatisation of the socialist city public resources. In other regional contexts, such as the breakup of former Yugoslavia, phenomena like the "turbo culture", with its spatial version of "turbo urbanism", reached the amplitude of a post-socialist identity revision processes, which had wide scale informal practices in its core (Topalovic, 2012).

In the Romanian context, informal practices exploded and transformed the post-socialist urban context into an 'informal city' at scale (Elian, 2017). Especially manifesting as forms of appropriation and privatisation of the public domain, informality is being practised in the same time by citizens, by institutions and by private companies, becoming one of its local features. Over the background of the anti-communist ideology, the dominant narrative begins to devalue some practices legitimised during socialism, while in the same time normalising others previously considered illegal. By using the tool of 'civilization' discourse, still as a form of anti-communist declination, processes like informal gardening became illustrations of despised 'communist relics' of the past. Thus, from a practice encouraged, supported and even imposed by the state during the socialist period, it became devalued, discouraged or even sanctioned. However, while creating subaltern actors and practices out of the informal agents, such as the gardeners carrying for the green spaces in between the buildings, in the same time the state informally privileged others. Through derogatory urbanism, private developers manage to build on those very lands in between buildings, or even in public parks. Additionally, the mainstream discourses in contemporary Romania places the current anomie and distrust in authority and social norms, or the alteration of the civic ethos and communities' disintegration still into on the back of the socialist legacy. This attitudes once again illustrates the 'zombie socialism' phenomenon (Chelcea & Druţă, 2016) which blames the previous regime for all the problems of the present. Such practices of resurrecting the past are in fact dissimulation tactics over the effects of current radical privatisation, neoliberal deregulation and arbitrariness of the state. Favouring certain elite groups against the ordinary citizens in the name of the 'free market' has become the dominant practice of public administrations. Thus, in addition to their negative connotation inherited from socialism, a new spectrum of challenges confronts informal urban practices transforming their motivations, tools,

protocols and finally their material manifestations. At this point, the understanding of the post-socialist urban informality meets other theories of informality which frame it as "an organising logic" emerging out of the neoliberalisation process (Roy & AlSayyad, 2004, p.26).

Against its framing as state failure, informal practices are depicted as a positive phenomenon from various disciplinary angles. By inquiring into informal household economies from Poland and Czechia, similarly found in other post-socialist CEE countries, which include forms of self-provisioning and sharing food, Smith & Jehlička (2013) propose the term "quiet sustainability" and define it as a practice which achieves environmental and social outcomes, but without specifically aiming for such goals, while taking place outside market relations (p.155). Identified as everyday practices and local cultures of sharing, repairing, gifting or exchanging among family, friends, colleagues and neighbours, quiet sustainability might include all those independent and co-produced manifestations which are not explicitly seeking 'resilience' or challenge formal economic systems, but somehow achieve it as a "daily practice of satisfying life" (p.156). Such perspective can compensate the official discourse of 'sustainable development' adopted by the CEE countries during the 1990s, again only from the narrow perspective of the 'free market'. Thus, sustainability appears as a practice already shared by a large part of the population, while the informal practices are at its basis and actually have a positive role. Therefore, such manifestations should be acknowledged, supported and not discouraged by public policies.

#### Informality as Vernacular Architecture

As large housing complexes were being built all over the world aiming to impose a universal living environment based on identical living units, the urban informal boom of 1950-1960s global metropolis fuelled a critical current against the modern project (Topalovic, 2012). The Situationist movement, groups like Team X or manifestos such as "Learning from Las Vegas" (Venturi, Scott Brown, & Izenour, 2000) cultivated a fascination for the local, the everyday, the spontaneous and the vernacular. This process allowed for a more nuanced understanding for the use of architecture, where appropriation began to be regarded as a legitimate inhabitants' response, born out of the need to personalize their living environment. Critiques of the strict logic and aesthetics of functionalist architecture specific to the collective housing districts have emerged in the West since the 1960s (Boudon & Bony, 1985). By inquiring in their studies of the ways of using these housing ensembles in time, researches evidenced the gap between the project and the living experiences, arguing in favour of the inhabitants' capacity and creative skills to adapt the original space to their current needs and desires. As Lefebvre (2013) showed, living is not just a passive act of using a house, but a result of a process of transforming the whole physical environment. Such inclusive perspective led to the discovering of a 'vernacular landscape' (Jackson, 1984) as a lived environment transformed by local communities to suit their living culture. From a related perspective, Sennett (1992) describes a need for 'narrative spaces' in the

city. Such positions described and at the same time inspired explicitly political movements that Western scholars grouped under the "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 2009; Harvey, 2003).

However, without being a political project, similar vernacular reactions over modernist architecture' constrains were developed also in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. A silent kind of resistance has been researched by anthropologists of material culture of the collective living. Inquiring how residents of a collective housing apartment building from USSR cope with political and social pressures and top-down demands through the manipulations of their material world, Buchli (2000) illustrates the mechanisms of response and adaptation which were triggered by the need of personalisation and customisation, which became intense in a highly standardised environment. These sometimes "conflicting" social strategies between compliance, eluding or resisting to the imposed rules allowed for "spaces, gaps, and 'incisions'" where "individual agency resides and culture change is effected" (p.197). With a similar methodological approach, Fehérváry (2005) looks at how residents from the early post-socialist Hungary transformed their collective housing apartments through high-quality commodities and spatial designs. By materialising the "normal" discourse, these changes are illustrating the middle-class aspiration towards a European status, aiming for reaching the Western living standards which they consider that were never attended by the unfulfilled promise of the socialist modernization project.

Versions of this narrative of 'normality' can be found throughout the post-Soviet bloc, such is the Romanian version of 'civilization' discourse. At first sight, this phenomenon illustrates a paradox, as the informal practices of individualisation of the in-between outdoor spaces are increasingly devalued by the public perception, while the informal indoor transformations of upgrading the living spaces are accepted and even highly desired by their residents. However, upon a closer look, the reception of outdoor informal practices by authorities and some residents alike is actually more nuanced, as it evolved along the transformations of the living culture. Thus, a process of differentiation in their making and their evaluation emerged in the past years. Those transformations which are closer to the materiality and aesthetics of the socialist industrial vernacular tend to be increasingly rejected, while those which are using references and resources specific to the contemporary culture of creative recycling, up-cycling or ecologically friendly arrangements are more accepted. Yet, all these informal practices, inherited or adopted, accepted or rejected are highly creative activities. As Mihailescu (2011) observes, their practice in the local context has less to do with architectural choices, but rather with a lifestyle choice. They are also in a process of transition, triggered by the change of generations, but also marked by class differentiations. From a culture of repair, improvisation and tinkering inherited from socialism, they became middle-class aspirations of a Western DIY culture, strongly supported by a big number of specialised stores opened after 2000s. Nevertheless, the boundary between the socialist vernacular and DIY paradigms is not so clear, allowing for numerous resistances, hybridisations, borrowings and continuities. From their hybridisation results a specific local manifestation of informality. Understood as 'architecture without architect' (Ioan, 2021), the local urban version of

the vernacular architecture was produced through a multitude of informal creative practices, which gradually insinuated themselves over the physical spaces. Their materialisation takes place by the construction of rather ephemeral spaces. Through everyday repetition, these spaces are harbouring a permanent practice. They become almost an urban ritual for living together. Thus, by looking out from the window of the once prefabricated living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms, now frantically individualised and improved, we see a vernacular landscape in constant making and remaking, transformation and adaptation to reflect the new normalities. But even if the aesthetics are new, the practices are not. In other words, informal practices survived and adapted, creatively developing and using specific tactics to cope with different eras, becoming an essential component of the local living culture.

#### Informality in support of Commoning

By gathering diverse perspectives on urban informality, both disciplinary and geographical, various researchers and activists, including Acuto, Dinardi, & Marx (2019), are calling for building a form of urban theory "that emerges out of particular, embedded contexts rather than universalisms", which relate between categories of thought and adopts a multidisciplinary epistemic approaches (p.479). At the same time, following post-colonial thinkers, Roy (2018) calls for recovering the subaltern agency of informal practices through an ethnographic research that avoids "to become an accomplice to categories and cartographies of rule" (p.2245). Thus, in order to better frame the purpose of this research, the urban informal needs to be situated starting from the three key ingredients of the local context: the socialist legacy, its post-socialist transformations and the *bloc* of the collective housing districts.

First, the socialist legacy assumes the articulation of some informal practices that fit only partially with the binary theoretical models. Driven by basic needs, seeking legality, without developing a political project or an explicit organisation, a unique manifestation of informality grew within interstitial spaces of the negotiation enacted by citizens and institutions alike. Without being bold or loud, but persistent, creative and resourceful, the ecosystem of informal practices functioned as an intermediary space for the absorption of the socialist modernization project. A careful, quiet and rather discreet form of informality slowly encroached over the prefabricated environment and the political project, emerging into a shared living practice. Second, the postsocialist transformations meant rather the acceleration of such pre-existing informal processes. In a context that has become an archipelago of grey areas, some of the informal practices have reached a 'turbo' mode, even becoming dominant. Along the 'civilization' discourse and the massive liberalisation, differentiations between informal manifestations emerged. Depending on scale, actors and resources involved, some became subordinated, while others normalised. Nevertheless, stubbornly cultivating their disobedience and opportunistic features inherited from socialism, the everyday version of informal practices contributed to a local form of sustainability. Little assumed and unrecognised, but still practised by many, informality remains an authentic way of sustaining life. Third, the *bloc* is the context where informal practices initiated in socialism and adapted and developed in post-socialism are constantly reproduced. By spatializing inhabitants' drive for personalization, the *bloc* supports and determines urban 'vernacular architecture'. Benefiting from the generous narrative spaces offered by the empowering nature of the modernist project, the residents' creative engagements into domesticating the standardised environment grow into a daily living practice. The *bloc* acted like a sponge, absorbing residents' habits and at the same time, exposed them to the collective living condition. By enacting practices of shared resources and infrastructure makes the *bloc* a specific case of spatial organisation which differs from the individual manifestations of personalization carried out by atomized actors. Informality benefited, thrived and expanded of the 'social condenser' nature, intrinsic to the *bloc* functioning. Thus, the vernacular landscape by the *bloc* manifests as an informal domestication (Mihailescu, et al., 1994) of a pre-existing structure. This spatial and organisational structure however doesn't dissolve, but determines further the patterns of living culture.

Over this context, I formulate a paradoxically hypothesis of informality in support of commoning practices. Through the very drive to domesticate by individualising, personalising and thus breaking away from the highly predetermined and standardised nature of the initial project, (some) inhabitants arrive to recognize each other as belonging to a "community of practice" (Wenger, 2002). They use and transform together a resource through a familiar practice. Thus, informal urban practices may not only contribute to the creation of the ephemeral spaces of a vernacular landscape made out by the sum of individual actions, but they could articulate each other as a collectively shared practice. Therefore, informality might indicate in the local context the presence of a less visible, explicit or affirmative version of commoning. Just as in the natural world, where the existence of a chemical element or a living organism testifies for the existence of another one, less articulated, harder to reach or just eluding detection, so the strong presence of informality related to everyday life practices could actually hint for the existence of activated latent commons. Historically situated and developed within the context of the bloc, these informal practices have contributed to establishing specific neighbourly relations among (some) residents. Furthermore, they might also be understood as situated manifestations of tacit, embodied and discrete forms of urban commons. However, the discreet character of such commoning activities doesn't imply just a passive attitude, as they are borrowing informal features, manifesting careful and prudent disobedience, while remaining highly creative. In other words, the living together in the bloc could be enabled (also) through a sort of informal and discreet commoning.

# Playing Outside

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And this rain doesn't stop.

After countless trips back and forth to the window, still no one. I finally declare myself defeated by boredom and decide to go outside, no matter what. With my raincoat on, I drag on that terribly broken ball. I hope that someone will hear it shuffling against the asphalt. Perhaps they are lurking like me behind those cigarette smoke-soaked curtains from above and they will join me. You know, like in those cartoons when the smell of fried turkey brings you as floating, closed-eyes, smiling dog by the nose. It's so soft I can't even kick it properly. I rather hook it with the tip of my foot and throw it with a slap against the back wall of the grocery store. There we drew a proper goal with white chalk, so we can play the game "twenty-one", where the ball must not hit the ground. We could also use the carpet beater which has real crossbars and it's like the goal proper size, but it's not always free there, as the older boys have priority. But here it's our spot. Just like Steaua FC who won the European Cup last year in '86, we even play official games when there are enough of us to make two teams, with numbered T-shirts and all. Still, we have to make the opposite goal from two big stones, I know, it doesn't have crossbars, so we always argue when it's over the post. As I'm about to give up on this poor ball and bitter rain, I hear Mihăită jumping three steps at once from his bloc's staircase. "Man! Give it a pass, will you?"

Children's' self-organised play was one of the main informal activities that took place every day in the generous open spaces between the blocs. Especially during socialist time, certain games developed more in this context and even grew specific to it. In the absence of formal playgrounds within their reach, large groups of children living in the same apartment buildings and sharing the same courtyard spent a lot of time "outside", in front of their bloc. With their parents gone to work, which in factories sometimes meant working in shifts including at night, many of these children were left at home on their own after returning from school. With "the key around their neck" they went out together and played all day. Thus play by the bloc was an inherent collective activity, highly creative and carrying an exploratory dimension. Any piece of infrastructure, however small or insignificant, could be interpreted and reused to support children's imagination and their games. The bloc's staircase, the gangways, the carpet beaters, the fences, the construction sites, stores' warehouses and the street in general lost their utilitarian role and became playground infrastructure. Kids didn't just stay in front of the bloc all day, but from time to time they went on truly exploratory adventures around the edges of the district. The collective housing district became one huge playground. In time, generations changed, children became teenagers and didn't play street games so much during post-socialist times. Perhaps except football, which was defying any age stereotype. Although the parks or the boulevards became new destinations, teenagers didn't completely leave the *bloc's* proximity and kept hanging out around the same places. Thus, the street was a space in a continuous negotiation between them, other kids' groups, the increasing number of drivers parking their property and the neighbours more or less tolerant to their use of the shared spaces.

Many of these games and the experiences recollected by the children of those days were surprisingly similar across the country. It is possible that their wide occurence was achieved by the children's enrolling within the state's system of summer camps, schools, kindergartens and sport clubs, where some of these games were taught by sport trainers, following formal guides and rules. Once returned home, children continued the informal play of these games, sometimes twisting their rules and adapting them to the in between spaces of the districts. Adopted on a wider scale, they were in fact enacting children's specific ways of taming the territory, occupying it, hacking it, while negotiating with other various groups, from other groups of kids, to adults. The games were creating and maintaining invisible boundaries, establishing ad-hoc rules and were training them into the practice of social interaction and constant negotiation. Transferred from generation to generation and developing some regional variations as they were responding to local specificities, they however amounted to a true practice of living, specific to the socialist city.

One of the most complex activities was street football which was played in all kind of formats and places, from games on leftover spaces by the district's edges, to more technical and static ones specific to blocs' concrete courtyards, or even to proper football games in the schools' sport fields outside their schedule. Football included a high level of explicit self-organization and constant negotiation. In the same way, potentially as a result of some formal activities initiated by the sport teachers from the district schools, such as local championships or trials for the sports clubs, the children took over and continued these activities on their own. This phenomenon was so widespread that it appears in many films of the time, such is Duminică în Familie/ Sunday in the Family (1988), directed by Francisc Munteanu, where a love story between Alexandru, a distraught computer programmer and Oana, a young

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architect who takes care of her siblings unfolds in the context of collective housing, illustrated by the Drumul Taberei district. The film starts with a heated dispute among the children involved in a football match between two major districts, which was settled by the adult programmer, who thus becomes acquainted with the sibling of his future wife. The match is treated very seriously by the children, who are self-organised, have equipment, negotiate the rules and play on a rather generous football field near the local school, equipped with proper goals and encouraged by spectators. Thus, the film illustrates a series of practices specific to the life in the district, among which street football occupied an important role. Without just being staged for the sake of the film, street football was an important activity for many dwellers growing up between the blocs. Such informal championships between self-organised teams from different schools or even between districts were usual. Compared to the small games behind the bloc, these championships involved participants' explicit organization and the active sharing of resources. The kids improvised their own equipment, collected money to buy the ball, negotiate rules and even engage in producing spatial infrastructure from leftover materials. Making the posts for the match could go from a simple chalk sign or a rock, up to sticking poles into the ground and connecting them with a net. They took the roles so seriously, as some had a medical team for intervening in the case of an injury! Moreover, street football became more than a game, involving various groups, crossing social divisions and transforming the spaces of the neighbourhood. As one resident (N.E), a woman who was a teenager in the early 1990s remembers standing in front of the closed gates of a district school her participation into these special moments for the community:

"Everyone was coming. All the friends came, almost the whole neighbourhood came. They also have supporters, because they also came with friends, girlfriends, brothers, sisters. You know, I was there to watch all the matches. It was just like a football game, except it was in the school yard" (N.E., resident).

Football was part of an ecosystem of living practices of social interaction, spatialized and formalized through the game. In the movie *De dragul tău, Anca!/ For your sake, Anca!* (1983), directed by Cristiana Nicolae, the illustration of a young girl, Anca, passing through an adolescent crisis is mirrored by the family's move to a new *bloc*. In this context, street football works as a universal language, helping the new comer to integrate, crossing social as well as gender stereotypes and barriers. Pursuing a neorealistic approach of recreating the universe of life by the *bloc*, we see ordinary people in ordinary situations

in the *bloc's* courtyard. Here, some neighbours have set up a garden as others are playing backgammon, while the children are playing around all the time and always in large groups. Both spatially and in terms of exposure, children's play is still dominated by football, at least when the drivers are not chasing them away or the gardeners are not cutting their ball with a knife. Such scenes were usual, even in my own memories. The universe of living and playing by the *bloc* is quite authentically reconstructed in these movies and not purposely staged.

With the densification process which started in the mid-1970s and continued in force during the 1980s, the reduction of the spaces between the *blocs* by adding new buildings was accelerated. Following the 1990s radical privatisation, the remaining spaces were occupied by more structures and buildings. Thus, one of the most affected categories of residents by these processes was the children. For them, these spaces were essential in the organization of street games. Still, some of them continued well into the post-socialist city of the 1990s. However, they have slowly died out following changes in the culture of living, including other alternatives of spending free time, but especially triggered by the physical occupancy of the in between spaces by the wave of parked cars. Whatever remained was fenced, enclosed and claimed by other groups. Kids were contained in standardised playgrounds and parks and the informal street play become almost extinct. Present mostly just in the memory of today's adults, playing outside became over time an important ingredient for crystalizing the residents' feelings of belonging to their neighbourhood and community. Moreover, as if testifying for their enduring capacity to mobilize not just nostalgia, but a real spatial practice, was during the recent pandemic, when residents from collective housing districts were forced to spend time around their buildings. Hanging on the few remains of that generous infrastructure, the residents rediscovered the practices of play specific to their childhood. Now adults and parents, they showed their kids how to use the carpet beaters for gymnastics, or for hanging swings, they played street football between makeshift goals and they drew together with chalk the asphalt among their parked cars. They rediscovered through practice the streets of their childhood. And this was again, a collective, shared, creative and disobedient practice. These games and the practice of playing outside in general were part of a larger relational web made of meetings, visits, birthday celebrations, mutual help, collaborative homework, food exchange and gifts among neighbours which amounted to a practice

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of living specific to collective housing districts. Moreover, playing outside exposed its participants early on to an implicit practice of commoning, even without knowing it. The embodied memories of that experience were perhaps continued and expanded by some of them into other forms of informal practices of commoning, from community gardening, hanging out by the garages and active *neighbourhooding* in general. Even the memory of playing outside the *bloc* is still cherished and shared today by the former kids with "the key around their neck".

### **Chapter 3. Methodological Framework**

Constructing situated methods

### 3.1. Research Methodology

The research aimed to document the manifestations of collective use, management and transformation of the in between spaces through informal practices and inquire their potential to support processes of emerging urban commons. Initially, the fieldwork research was set to investigate the role of participatory design to ignite and articulate urban commons nested by a public-civic institution. Initiated in February 2020<sup>16</sup>, the Intermediary Laboratory (inter/LAB) was a research project intended to engage in case study research over a neighbourhood public library turned into an informal community centre. The project had an applied education component, involving Sociology students who were conducting field research on informal green practices in the area. Aiming to initiate a community garden together with the group of library users in between nearby green spaces, the project aimed to organise a series of design workshops, as a continuation of previous actions developed with the library branch<sup>17</sup>. By including stakeholders into research topics, orientation and products, the project could be assumed as an Action Research (AR) process (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). By investigating while supporting the pooling of resources, the action research was aiming for the community's consolidation while developing a democratic governance model which could articulate in a situated approach to urban commons. By spatializing coproduction, inter/LAB was designed to become a practice which explicitly acted as an "active intermediary" (May & Perry, 2011) among local actors, spaces and topics.

Aiming for the transformative involvement of the users during the research process, Inter/LAB looked also at related research approaches, such as Participative Action Research (PAR) methodology. Described rather as a "research style" (Bergold & Thomas, 2012), PAR works as a methodological umbrella that especially aims for the involvement of the "researched" in the process of knowledge production. Guided by the principle "nothing about us, without us" (Doucet et al., 2022, p.4), PAR's research design, operation and evaluation are done together with more than on those affected by the research. This approach is part of a broader paradigm shift, where the production and evaluation of knowledge leaves the disciplinary silos of modernism for a more porous approach, in a problem-solving context (May & Perry, 2011). Such transformation requires new formats, adapted to the interdisciplinary, participative and co-production driven approaches. Also the classical role of the expert delivering technocratic evaluation for top-down policy implementations radically changes, by increasingly involving multiple stakeholders, which in turn

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> The calendar and the budget of the project were already agreed together with the project partners. After the first working meeting at the library with the students in March 2020, the project was postponed and later cancelled due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> The "Emil Gârleanu" library branch is located along the Octavian Goga Boulevard at the ground floor of a collective housing apartment building in the Timpuri Noi district. During a participatory design action organised by studioBASAR in 2016, we designed and arranged together with librarians and readers a temporary furniture in front of the entrance to the library. Furthermore, library users wished to arrange and use the green space behind the building, where the library had access through the back door, but due to lack of funds, this set up was never realised.

are producing a "relational knowledge" (Doucet & Janssens, 2011, p.3). By referencing PAR, inter/LAB aimed to produce actionable knowledge for the empowerment of the readers' community.

Yet, the pandemic affected the project's ability to explicitly involve the participants in the research process and in the end it questioned the entire research design. The Inter/LAB project was cancelled, but its methodological ethos was transferred into the next research project. While keeping the focus on supporting and articulating collective processes of using, transforming and managing in between spaces among the collective housing districts, the OPEN Garage research design didn't explicitly involve stakeholders from the beginning in the research process. Aiming for an incremental participation of the less explicitly organised dwellers, OPEN Garage adopted a practice-based research, aiming to produce transformative knowledge through the everyday usage of a community space. Without pursuing the collective transformation of a space as the project's core, the research evidenced the already existing informal transformations of the spaces. Researching the surrounding area and the activation of the garage aimed to transform the public perception over these spatial practices, offering coproduced arguments for their valorisation, support and development. Maybe the repurposing of the garage space into an informal library was the more explicitly participative component of the process, as readers became directly involved in the assembly of the collection and orientated the activities organised. While offering explicit experiences of a collectively shared space, OPEN Garage aimed to intermediate the construction of participative understandings over the informal practices. Everyday local practices, such as planting the in between spaces or opening up private garages, seek to articulate into research products as forms of transformative knowledge

The transition from inter/LAB to OPEN Garage didn't follow a clear path. Adapting to the 'new normal' of the pandemic's highly uncertain context was done by avoiding any strict planning ahead, which could become once more a weakness of the research process. In fact, the lack of a clear research design in the early phases of the project<sup>18</sup> proved to be a serendipity for the process. Found between the impossibility of replicating earlier research parameters and struggling to keep a related topic and similar approach with previous fieldwork, while facing a partially different context, new challenges and opportunities, OPEN Garage grew as an open process. The inherited premises didn't entirely match the new found situations, growing into a gap between intentions and realities. In this gap the research developed tacitly at first, through the use of the space and everyday interactions, filtering and developing situated methods, such as narrative drawing or the opening of the space itself. This slow transition allowed other research directions to become more important, such the ecosystem of informal practices, which even individually driven sometimes, are still enacting a relational type of dwelling.

Viewed retroactively, OPEN Garage implicitly adopted grounded theory in the research process. Described as "a research approach where data collection and analysis take place

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> In the first months since I rented the garage, it functioned just as a working studio away from home and as a base for exploring the area.

simultaneously" (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014, p.153), grounded theory assumes that "researchers and participants co-construct data" (p.154) while relying on abduction, which means "selecting or constructing" a provisional hypothesis which orientates further investigation (p.153). Sometimes, the mismatch between theories and data from the field triggered a creative response for their iterative adaptation. The concepts of informality and urban commons were tested, tinkered and adapted through the practice by the garage, meaning in the context of their application. At the same time, the methods' selection, their customization and operation in the field followed to evidence, to confirm or to infirm initial theoretical concepts. Thus, based on the on-going accumulation of field research' data, "theoretical coding" was developed as an aid to "tell an analytic story that has coherence" (p.160). In the end, grounded theory worked for the OPEN Garage practice based research project by increasing its adaptation and flexibility, and by allowing the research to construct its way from within the fieldwork. Creativity, disobedience and discreetness were noticed and experienced during fieldwork research, but also through the lived experience of a garage goer. In the same time, it prevented its slippage over a highly empiricist path, contributing to the development of a situated version of the theoretical concepts.

Pointing towards the "reassemble the social not in a society, but into a collective" (Latour, 2005, p.17) Actor Network Theory (ANT) lenses were useful as an operational tool for evidencing the emerging elements of commoning from the ground. For ANT, the 'intermediary space' is not just a neutral transit space which only allows for the meaning flux between parts, but it spatialize and makes possible diverse overlapping and allows opportunities to grow in between neighbouring actors. Hence, commoning practices can develop within intermediary spaces among active actors, or actants. Moreover, actants can be sometimes commoners. By embracing the multitude, ANT supports what Anna Tsing (2021) calls "arts of noticing" (p.37) of the latent commoning which are happening beyond the edges of scalable worlds. But perhaps one of the most innovating aspects in ANT which is relevant for this research is the accounting for non-humans and also the relational aspect of seeing things (or actors) in relation. ANT assumes that they are able to take part in networks and carry transformational agency. The understanding of non-figurative actors in action through multiple associations as actants allows also for objects to fill such a role. Therefore, the social action can be "delegated" to others, including objects, entailing that they are not acting in their place, but rather "are able to transport the action further" (Latour, 2005, p.70). Through such agency sharing, objects are becoming capable to embody social connections, as they are also invested with the capacity of intermediating action. However, the nature of the association among objects and humans is rather momentarily. So Latour is calling for "specific tricks" that "have to be invented to made them talk, that is, to offer descriptions of themselves" (p.70). Perhaps one of such special tool is the "relational mapping" (Petrescu, 2012), which together with ANT theoretical perspective can notice and articulate the role of objects in action within commoning processes. By assuming that also objects count, ANT becomes useful in illustrating process of commoning which

re unfolding spatially and where shared material and immaterial resources and latent practices ould be evidenced in transition through activated objects, such as urban commons.	3

#### 3.2. Methods

Grounded in participative and constructivist epistemologies, which acknowledges the relations among people as the source of knowledge (Silverman, 2014) the research adopted a qualitative methodology and combined methods from social sciences, archival theory, pedagogy, urban planning, landscape and design including: storytelling, situated research, semi-structured interviewing, architectural ethnography and drawing, completed by mapping, live projects and archival inquiry. The research often used a "case study method", which accounts for the knowledge dependency on the context (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.222). Allowing the research to "retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin, 1989, in Mason, 2018, p.209), the adoption of case studies supported the project's relational perspective over knowledge production. Furthermore, case studies enabled inquiring of the urban commons concept, which assumes an ecological perspective for the city as an ecosystem.

### 3.2.1. Storytelling

What I'm calling in this thesis "fieldwork research" was not always so explicitly assumed, at least not from the beginning. The desire for a restored "research" and the promise of an accessible "fieldwork" has only articulated along the way, after I rented the garage. However, the ingredients of the trajectory which followed were planted as if in a story from its prologue. Thus, one retrospective opening phrase of the story could be: "a guy enters in a garage from Drumul Taberei", or more autobiographically put it, "where he claims he spent some of his childhood", or becoming more disciplinary aware, "now an architect and sociological trained researcher". No matter how the story began, stories and storytelling accompanied the research all the way. Without being explicitly assumed as a method from the start, storying functioned as a way to understand through participation. Not only the production and communication process of the stories mattered. but especially at the beginning, the active listening of others' stories. But, being a designer, this was quite difficult, as I was used to quickly identify a problem after a more or less abstract evaluation from a professional perspective and then propose a design to fix it. By becoming a garage tenant, such reflexes were questioned. No one had called me to solve anything and at first sight there was no obvious problem that my abilities could have addressed. So, what was I doing there? What was I looking for?

The desire to enact my own memories about that district by going in a garage played the trigger role. For a while I started looking, listening, observing and walking around. More than casually strolling, walking through the area became an embodied research tool and a pedagogical exercise. These extensive walks didn't take place over long distances, but rather in small circles around the garage. Constantly revisiting the same places over and over again allowed me to record the slow accumulation of the passage of time. I noticed seasons' changing along with locals' habits. Avoiding thus the limitations of a quick snapshot, walking in time loops prompted reflection and analysis over spatial practices seen as a context dependant process, enacted by diverse

actors. In the same time, walking became an ethnographic "method-as-route" (Cheatle, 2020, p.113), further prompting storytelling. Physical walks were continued by fictional following of the residents within their memories about the district. However, even hearing Les Back (2007) appeal for practising "the art of listening to the world, where we take the people we listen to as seriously as we take ourselves" (p.166), of course I couldn't change overnight and denounce my professional reflexes entirely. So I started engaging the district around the garage, wearing the glasses of a designer, while using the tools from the socio-anthropologist toolbox to move about.

For those who write them and for those who read them, stories have always been real. As the writer Adrian Romila (2023) says it with almost demiurgic conviction:

"Any piece of life, no matter how short, however true or important, if it doesn't get to be told, it doesn't exist. That is why someone must say it, must write it, if possible. This thing is also valid for the life that you only imagine, without having ever lived it, because the imagined life is as true as a lived one" 19 (p.209).

More than that, whoever manages to tell the story, will do it so by becoming part of the story, inevitably bringing a situated perspective. Thus, acknowledging my architectural training, I pursued storytelling in a quite natural way. Exchanging bricks and mortar with memories and feelings, still stands as a world making activity. As Emma Cheatle (2019), herself an architect and storyteller, understands buildings as "creatively constructed objects" which are setting up the scene for histories. In the same time, writing these histories became for her a "creative endeavour in the present through the work of writing, and in reverse through imagining and reconstructing the past" (p.2). Along these lines, for the narrative architect, both buildings and their users alike become characters, as design turns into storytelling. Even more, the anthropologist Anna Tsing (2021) affirms that "to listen to and tell a rush of stories is a method" (p.37), thus reclaiming its scientific agency, as a contribution to knowledge accumulation. Therefore, I have also embraced storytelling as a rush of uses and formats along the research process (see Stories).

Containing my need for design was not so much done through materialization or spatialization, but through testing and organizing. The phased opening and activation of the garage space, the events, exhibitions, communication and the fieldwork research were designed to match the context and the research goals. I resorted only to several designed tools, more as a pretext for participating in the ecosystem of local informal practices, which I became fascinated with. Referencing examples from the vicinity, I realised few structures from up-cycled or repurposed objects, useful for supporting activities by the garage. Such was the library's mobile unit made of storage crates weaved together and placed in front of the garage, or the indoor ad-hoc installations assembled from recovered and found elements (see Tools). However, my garage neighbours were much more innovative, resourceful and resilient in their ephemeral transformations of the in between spaces. Reacting to the local context, where these practices were devalued in the public discourse, either from an aesthetic or a relational perspective, considered "kitsch" and "uncivilized"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Translated from Romanian by the current author.

by the administration and mainstream professionals, my aim was rather to design a narrative of support and value. This is how storytelling has become an important tool for me, acting as design trained researcher, where the design product became a situated way of engaging these practices.

The research was modelled in relation to the fieldwork dynamics and grew in layers, like the horizontal sediments are settling in the soil. In the beginning there was the existential layer, which gave impetus and motivation, followed by the socio-anthropological row of listening and looking, finally being toppled by a purposive design attitude. Nevertheless, this entire methodological sandwich needed to be articulated in order to work together as a research process, not just as consecutive sheets. An important factor for their integration was the garage space itself, where the disciplinary limits and temporal differences between methods application could hybridize, overlap and customize. But as the research advanced, the stories and storytelling became the real methodological glue. Being practiced extensively, resourced by the local practices and everyday interactions, storytelling functioned as a relational tool. Engaged in a continuous conversation of telling, listening and retelling, the differences between researcher and residents became blurred, allowing their participation in making the tools while using them. But beyond its ability to situate the research and to publicly communicate its results, the stories have also become an analysis tool.

By cultivating a narrative agency, purposely tracing theoretical ingredients, using temporal condensation and carrying a disobedient expression, drawings acted as a multipurpose tool along the research process. From fieldwork method useful for fixing data, to analysis tool identifying patterns of use and up to communication device effective for public communication, drawings were a storytelling format, specific to this research. However, it was not the only one, being extended through various other complementary formats, from video, to audio, exhibition installation and text. Each of these formats tried to creatively construct from different perspectives the story of the inhabitants and their district. Thus, a series of videos illustrated the difference between planners' initial intentions and the residents' use of the district, which have a voice and tell themselves their stories of the informal practices (see Stories Videos). A set of short audio stories assembled from fieldwork recordings aimed to offer a less mediated and more sensorial access to the everyday experience of the *microraion*, by illustrating its main characteristics. These stories of the district were further spatialized in the garage and materialized through installations and dioramas that sought to add textures, volume and stimulate touch, as tangible references for three-dimensional narratives of the local memories (see Stories Sounds). The audio, visual and physical objects formats were ways to synthesize and publicly communicate the research products.

Perhaps closest to drawings' capacity of supporting also the analysis process was the storytelling by texts. Practiced limitedly during the research online communication phase and featured as anthropological vignettes along with the few articles published in the cultural press, the stories as texts emerged especially during in the analysis phase of the research. Based on notes recorded in a research journal format during fieldwork, mainly following participative observation,

but also including scenes, references and even quotes from the interviews, their initial role was to trigger the writing-up phase of this thesis. Growing in between main chapters, these stories began resembling in between spaces and informal practices of their content, where things are stored, with areas more ordered, but also with ephemeral practices and leftovers in some parts. Here, scenes, gestures and feelings were harboured as in a temporary situation, where the distinct chapters of the thesis expanded and overlapped, getting closer to the lived experience. Also here, living characters emerged from words and found a place to live, populating the intervals between the abstract landscapes of the thesis and translating the theoretical concepts into sketches of concrete histories. But all the scenes described in the stories come from authentic situations, shared by the interviewed participants. However, the texts also have a fictional note, when sometimes they combine several stories in a single character or when they fill the blank spaces with collages borrowed from movies or using auto-biographical references. In the same time, their writing became also part of analysis, as the time spent writing them were for me moments of enacting the experiences and situations of those characters, allowing to clarify and verbalise a puzzle of clues which remained unspoken during the interviews. Such was relating the collective values pursued by the architects and planners of the time in a spatialized situation as they were always working in a collective proximity. Likewise, tracing the librarians and users care for their library seems that it grew proportionally with their material situation was getting worse. At the same time, without being explicitly identified by most dwellers, how private ownership, family structure and middle-class status shaped the living practices among Drumul Taberei district. By multiplying themselves, these stories acquired a kind of autonomy from the thesis, as their characters were being related or continuing their journey from one text to another. Thus, they can be read as pocket stories of the main chapters, but also as a body of independent texts, similar to Julio Cortazar's novel "Hopscotch" (2005) which contains some "expandable" chapters, their reading order remaining at the readers' choice, thus allowing for multiple journey and outcomes (see Stories Texts). However, the stories supported the thesis, acting as drafts for the discussion and conclusion chapters. If at the beginning they were easier to write than the main chapters, as the writing progressed, their ethos was partially assumed also by the main texts, as the thesis became a story too, the one of the concepts and the methods evidenced through practice during fieldwork. But beyond their contribution to the analysis and the progress of the thesis, the stories functioned as a way to access the collectively shared imagination as a form of latent commoning. When evening falls over the neighbourhood after another hot summer day, seen from the wide open doors of the heated garages, these stories are lighting up one after the other from the apartments' windows joining the colourful spectacle of collective life.

## SOUNDS

A series of audio samples illustrating the atmosphere of the *microraion*, adding context to the research and activation project.

## In-And-Out of Buclă

RESEARCH



Link: https://on.soundcloud.com/u1sAe

### 01. In-And-Out of Buclă/The Loop (2023)

A bus trip into the "new town" district of Drumul Taberei, built on the edges of the city, with which it always had difficult transport connections.

## Walk into Buclă

RESEARCH



### Link: https://on.soundcloud.com/iQWus

### 02. Walk into Buclă/The Loop (2023)

A sound walk which passes from the major traffic and public transport circulating by the edges of a *microraoin*, into the intensively pedestrianized green interior.

## School in Buclă

RESEARCH



Link: https://on.soundcloud.com/w7YYk

### 03. School In Buclă/The Loop (2023)

An intermission in the *microraoin*, that was dimensioned by the schools and kindergartens located in its heart, which were frequented by children who live nearby at walking distances.

# Play in Buclă

RESEARCH



Link: https://on.soundcloud.com/FWab9

### 04. Play In Buclă/ The Loop (2023)

A break in the middle of the *microraoin* where the planned playgrounds were not always realized, prompting children's creative improvisations, explorative play and ad-hoc street games, especially football.

# Everyday in Buclă

RESEARCH



Link: https://on.soundcloud.com/dUxv3

### 05. Everyday in Buclă/ The Loop (2023)

The beginning of a day like any other in the *microraoin* as the residents follow their routines, greet in the alleys, chat in the stores, while their neighbours tinker something by the entrance and the garage doors are opening.

# By the Garage

RESEARCH



### Link: https://on.soundcloud.com/mKJyK

### 06. By The Garage (2023)

The beginning of a typical day by the Garage: I open both doors and turn on the light, sweep the alley in front and then take out the boxes with books, boil the water for the coffee and finally sit down and wait for the readers to drop by.

# A Garage in Buclă

RESEARCH



### Link: https://on.soundcloud.com/DoAHh

### 07. A Garage in Buclă/ The Loop (2023)

From the pipes' dripping Garage, listening to the *microraion* outside, where birds sing, the kids return from school, as their parents park their cars, some turn the music on, or going out to beat their carpets, walk their dogs, while others give away their scrap metal; few pass by, wave, come in to get a book, join a workshop or just say hi.

#### 3.2.2. Situated research

As one of the main methodological pillars, the research ensured a situated approach. Methods, such as place-based semi-structured interviews, participant observation, architectural ethnography and mapping, have been used for their stimulation potential for a collaborative production of knowledge. Some of these methods also carried the capacity to generate a social space, which stimulated the spatial practice and prompted further research opportunities. Initially adopted in support of PAR's research methodology, qualitative methods aimed to go beyond mapping, towards making the world.

#### Interviewing

Described as a "conversation with a purpose" (Burgess, 1984:102, in Mason, 2018) the qualitative interview was especially inherent to the participative ethos of the research, aiming for "the construction or reconstruction of knowledge more than excavating it" (p.110). By approaching the interview as a "social interaction" (p.112), the research intended to build trust, creating a social space by actively seeking the encounter, thus increasing the co-production capacity of the research. Acknowledging for the "new mobility paradigm" (Sheller & Urry, 2006) gaining ground in the social sciences, the research used, in certain situations, walking or place-based interviews. By using place as elicitation, the mobile interviewing allowed the display of "tacit knowledge" beyond verbalising (Holton & Riley, 2014). Moreover, it was a useful tool for the more engaged attitude of the research (Kusenbach, 2018). In the same time, such place-based interviews were best suited for approaching spatialized topics, while carrying a participative potential through its operation protocols. However, the spatial dimension of these interviews was also the source of their limitations, assuming only able-bodied participants (Evans & Jones, 2011), without explicitly dealing with sensitive aspects relating to social, cultural and emotional factors (Warren, 2017). Through a multi-method approach, the research aimed to address these challenges, as methods were criss-crossing and enabling each other, seeking to be inclusive, while increasing research' reflexivity.

During fieldwork, qualitative interviews were used in different stages of the research. engaging with various stakeholders. The interviews were consented and located as much as possible in the researched area. Almost all of the interviews with the residents of Drumul Taberei district (N20) were walking or place-based interviews. They were especially useful in connection with the use, the management and the transformation of the in between spaces that were being turned into urban gardens and garages into workshops. By talking with the gardeners in their gardens while they were gardening, with the garage goers by their garage or with original residents right in the streets of their childhood, the research aimed to elicit a relational in-depth knowledge, triggered by ad-hoc experiences, while in the same time seeking to join local habits of everyday social interactions and spatialized relationships among neighbours. However, there were situations when gardeners avoided discussing in front of their garden, due to the contentious nature of their

relation with other neighbours and administration regarding the transformation of the green spaces. Such situations were nevertheless very useful for understanding the less visible mechanisms and especially to account for conflict as a constant among spatial practices. On the other hand, sometimes these interactions contributed to the valorisation of the informal practices on the ground. As the research became more activist, place-based discussions elicited support for the cause of some gardeners threatened with evictions. However, most of the interviews with the specialists involved in the design of the spaces, such as architects, urban planners, landscape designers and sociologists (N13) didn't take place outside. Also conditioned by the restrictions of the pandemic period<sup>20</sup>, some of them took place online or over the phone. This format encouraged the participants to share professional information, making more historical connections and giving institutional insights, complementary to the spatial use evaluations, which were largely covered by the discussions with the residents<sup>21</sup>. However, many of the specialists interviewed were living or had lived in the district and they carried also a resident's view which they combined with the professional and historical perspectives, such as for example being familiar also with local landmarks and local legends or with successful spatial stories. In a similar approach, attempting to delve into the residents' perspective by inquiring the informal practices associated with neighbourhood libraries relied on place-based interviews. Organising discussions with the librarians (N21) and with library users (N8) in the libraries during their daily programme offered an opportunity to observe the spatialized everyday interactions and access an implicit understanding of the place while using its facilities. As a special feature, numerous group interviews were organised, following the specifics of some libraries which were managed by teams of librarians. These conversations contributed to elicit relational accounts and a collective view. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and were further thematically analysed using Nvivo software. At the beginning, the resulting themes were rather specific to each group of interviewees, but as categories from the theoretical concepts were introduced in the analysis, the themes started to converge. At the same time and in relation to the interviews, the research was carried out by applying several methods.

#### Ethnography

In addition to the retrospective or reconstructed accounts which occur during even placebased interviews, the research aimed to understand the social interaction while it occurs in its specific context, allowing the researcher to become a "knower" engaged in participant observation (Mason, 2018, p.141). Depending on the nature of the activities, the research tried as much as possible to take part, to experiment and to be actively involved in the setting, seeking to access the implicit and relational knowledge which goes beyond articulation and expression. I, as a

tool, which partially functioned as a place-based stimulation at the larger scale of the neighbourhood.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Due to the various restrictions imposed in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic, but also out of the desire to protect some of the participants from the possible risks of travelling and meeting, some of the interviews took place remotely. <sup>21</sup> There were also situations when this format constituted an advantage through the creative use of Google street view

researcher, wasn't limited only to visiting and observing, but tried to use as much as possible the facilities being offered by the residents. For example, the investigation of garages transformed into small corner shops or proximity services, such as tailoring or shoemaking, was done while I used them as facilities. Touring all the small shops for getting the morning coffee, or repairing every worn off shoes or torn clothes that I had was both an explorative method, but also a way of integrating myself into the local context, almost becoming local (Fig.7). These encounters, part research method, part everyday life, have trained me in the "arts of noticing" (Tsing, 2021, p.37), as an immersive and poetic way to practice ethnography allowing for a multitude of collaborations and contributions.



Fig. 7. Several 'tools' used as prompts in the participant observation of garages transformed for public use, like corner shops and small services. Drumul Taberei district, Bucharest (2021). Photos by the current author.

Accepting research as a continuous encounter was reflected also in the way some of the methods were planned and operated, which constituted opportunities to carry out additional observation. Such was the place-based interviewing situations or participative mapping with residents, librarians or library users, which became also occasions to observe their interaction with the environment. The observations were less mediated, witnessing everyday human and nonhuman dynamics. Moreover, through the spatial activation and pedagogical components of the practice, new situations were constructed, which functioned as opportunities for further participant research. This was the case for example when we organised a series of educational workshops in the informal gardens that were also research case studies. Besides the educational and activation

goals, the actions allowed for the researchers' immersion. Informal discussions, spending time together and experimenting hands on and side by side with the participants the very activity which was inquired, further situated the knowledge coming only from interviewing or non-participant observation. Such situations worked as a sort of embodied and creative interview, which supported the investigated topics also through the very methods used to inquire it (Fig.8). As the theoretical framework initially adopted from the Inter/LAB project didn't entirely match the fieldwork data, the research gradually became grounded through the immersion and active participation in the setting. Taking an active part in the researched situations and thus growing my own agency as an actor in the field allowed the research to assume a more ethnographic approach, where the concepts were developed through exposure to field data. During the various phases of the research, several other ethnographic methods were used, such as the collecting objects (Steinhauer, 2013), which contributed especially to the spatialization and public communication of the research results within the open exhibition at the garage.



Fig. 8. Gardening Workshops were initiated both as educational activities for Garage's younger readers and as provoked situations eliciting the research of informal gardens. Drumul Taberei district, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

Data collection from participant and non-participant observation was done through photographs and partially through drawings. Besides avoiding the intrusive nature of the camera, the drawings had the ability to function not just as a tool of documenting and representation, but

also of analysis. Adopting drawings into the practice comes from a long-term process which started with the representations of minor and informal architecture.<sup>22</sup> By referencing the "architectural ethnography" representations of Atelier Bow-Wow (Kaijima, Kuroda, & Tsukamoto, 2001) the early attempts were aiming to archive the architecture of the everyday which articulates residents' sense of belonging to a place. Next, drawing became an important feature of the practice of studioBASAR<sup>23</sup>, functioning both as a tool of show and tell stories about the everyday, while valuing informal practices. Moreover, drawing became useful also in educational contexts, while supporting various more activist causes. By combining drawings' narrative agency with its disciplinary conventions, the representations were aiming to trace the spatial uses and reveal situations, rather than just represent the built environment.

Based on these developments, I started to use drawing more often as a research tool, as architectural ethnography.<sup>24</sup> Drawing has become more reflexive, part of a research design. I began to use architectural perspective combined with an ethnographic account, including surveying, participation and situation description. Thus, the site plan became an everyday life scene, where the position, dimensions, functions or materials were completed with users involved in real life situations. I, as a draftsman, was taking part, recording quotes, making notes and drafting observations. Sometimes the tracings were imperfect, reconstructed and filtered by my own perceptions and evaluations, as memories usually are. Without reporting everything at once, the drawings assumed a selection and a hierarchy while progressively tracing the elements. The choice criteria came at first from the theoretical concepts, such as highlighting the ingredients that make up for the urban commons. But as the research progressed, they began to follow certain features emerging from the field. Temporary uses of spaces, marginal at first, everyday objects that developed relational features, patterns of interaction and relationships among neighbours, were emerging through a constant process of drawing and redrawing (Fig.9,10). Never final, the drawings were as Huda Tayob (2018) describes them as more "imprecise" than objective representations, acting as a narrative "portrait" of the informal practices (p.209).

Focusing more on situations and relationships. I gave up the axonometric view previously used in favour of a top view, which combines the structural capacity of a diagram, with the narrative potential of a perspective converging to a single vanishing point. The "bird's eye view" is referencing the bi-dimensional perspective of the original urban planners used when they were drawing the collective housing districts. Moreover, the drawing style is alluding to the graphic language used by the architects of the time. What they were calling "entourages" – people, plants,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> The publication "Graz the Usual City" was a research project realised in 2006 by Alex Axinte archiving more than 20 examples of the ugly and the ordinary constructions discovered through extensive walks in the city of Graz, Austria, more

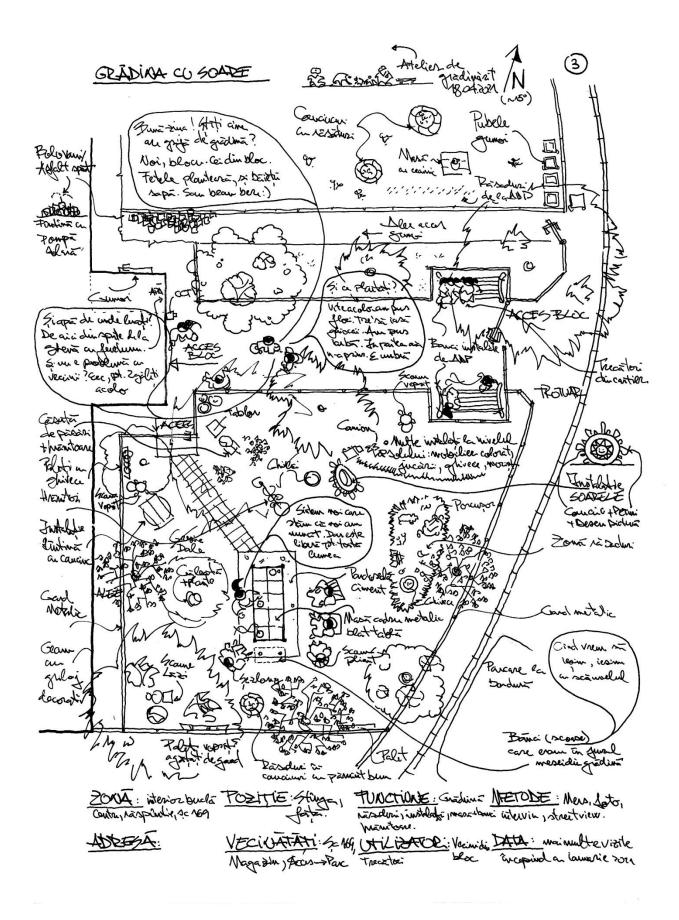
here: http://www.studiobasar.ro/?p=3132&lang=en studioBASAR is a spatial practice for the production of public and community space founded in 2006 by Alex Axinte and Cristi Borcan in Bucharest, Romania.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> The research "Indoors, in a tent. Dwelling practices during the pandemic" realised by Alex Axinte and published in Zeppelin 158, 2020, represented data obtained with different methods, but also produce new data by analysing the spatialization of relationships in the home, more here: https://e-zeppelin.ro/en/indoors-in-a-tent-dwelling-practices-duringthe-pandemia/

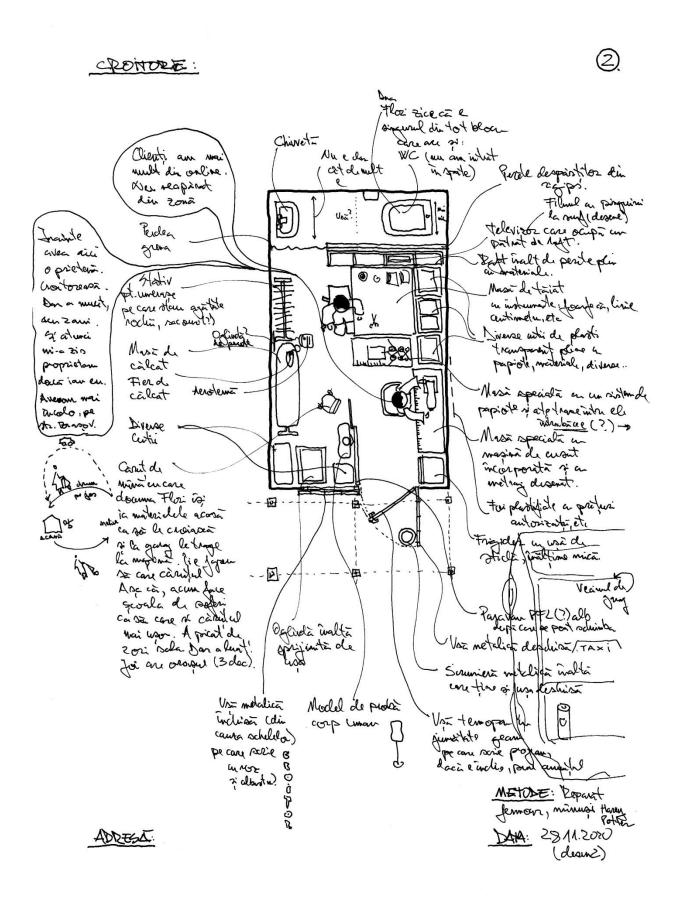
animals, furniture - which were rather giving scale to the plans and facades of buildings or were useful for the graphic composition of the project, have become the main subject now. Trained myself in such hand drawing techniques<sup>25</sup>, I reused the type of line, the craft and the tricks, took out even the old instruments, the ink, the drawing board and the tracing paper. The entourages come back to life. Standardised abstract people have become characters. They relate to each other, take the centre stage as they use and transform the built environment, rather than just populate it. Thus, the very process of drawing was performed like a retroactive ethnography of the architecture as a discipline. Also the time spent while drawing re-enacted everyday gestures of the original planners, as if in an embodied dialogue over time. Decades later, these drawings are narrating retrospectively about the time spent in between, sketching the way of life of those abstract entourages only imagined in the planners' optimistic graphic visions of the future.

The drawings were of two types, first as a series fieldwork diary notes, and second representing the typologies constructed during the thematic analysis. Realised in short time after participating in an event or observing a situation, the fieldwork drawings were adding up, tracing meanings as they progressed (see Stories Drawings from Fieldwork). Sometimes, successive visits in the same space generated a series of consecutive drawings, with some new elements coming up, while others either clarified or disappeared altogether. The topic imposed its characteristics on the reporting protocols, such as the case of documenting the garages, where a blank standardised sheet with a garage plan was drawn over with the different observations of uses and interactions. This approach reflected to the prefabricated nature of the space and to the creative features of its use. Given numerous reports, as with the garages, the drawings became a series from which also spatial patterns could be evidenced (Fig.11). At the same time, drawings of less standardised situations, such as gardens or libraries, allowed relations to be traced among emerging groups of stakeholders. Based on fieldwork tracings, a second set of drawings was further produced to represent the typologies of the informal practices or neighbourhood libraries identified (see Stories Drawings Synthesis). These drawings summarised the characteristics identified in the fieldwork drawings and aimed to communicate the results of the research (Fig.12). Through the drawings' process and outcome, by detouring graphics and techniques into representing 'minor' subjects instead of the built space, the drawing aimed to evidence their value and communicate the research' support for these subaltern practices (Tayob, 2018). In sum, the narrative drawings were operated also as a generative, and not only a representative method, tracing the material elements and immaterial relations which contributed further to the mapping of the latent commoning.

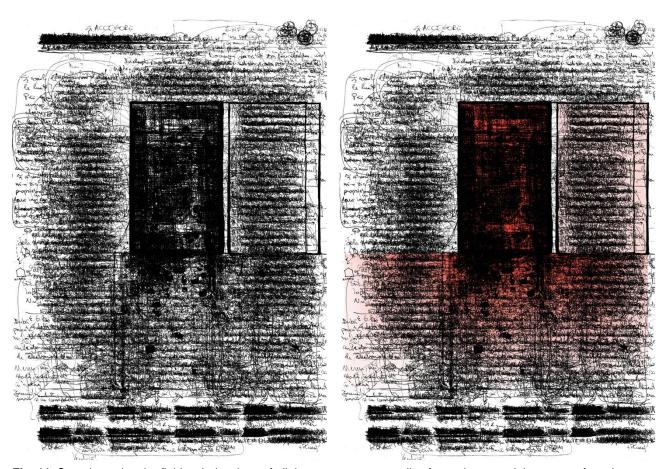
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> As my father was an architect active starting with the 1980s, I grew up playing with these techniques, which I developed also in the architecture school in Bucharest, as most of the teachers I've had during the 2000s were using a similar approach to drawing.



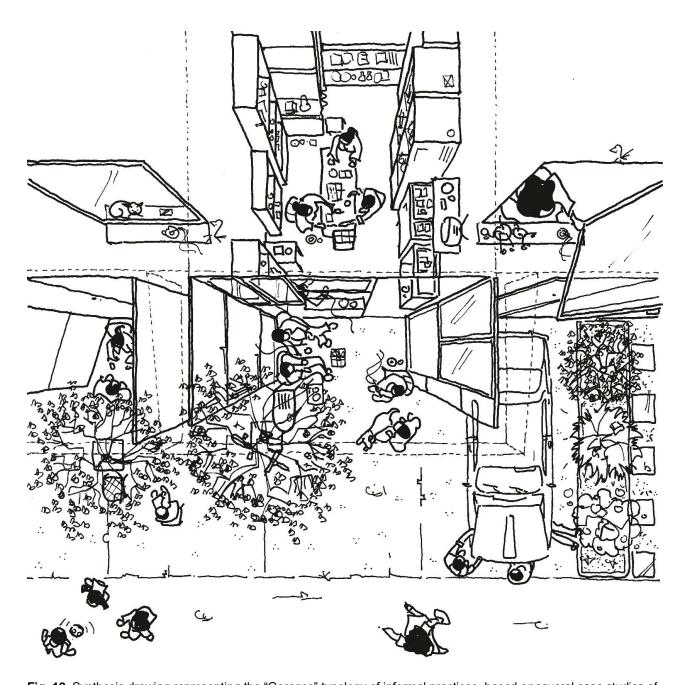
**Fig. 9.** Fieldwork drawing representing one of the case studies of gardens by the *bloc* taken care of by the residents. Drawing by the current author.



**Fig. 10.** Fieldwork drawing representing one of the case studies of open garages transformed into commercial space or for small service. Drawing by the current author.



**Fig. 11.** Superimposing the fieldwork drawings of all the garages case studies from where spatial patterns of use become visible (in red), such as their function sometimes in a pair, but especially the use of the space in the front of the garages. Drawings by the current author.

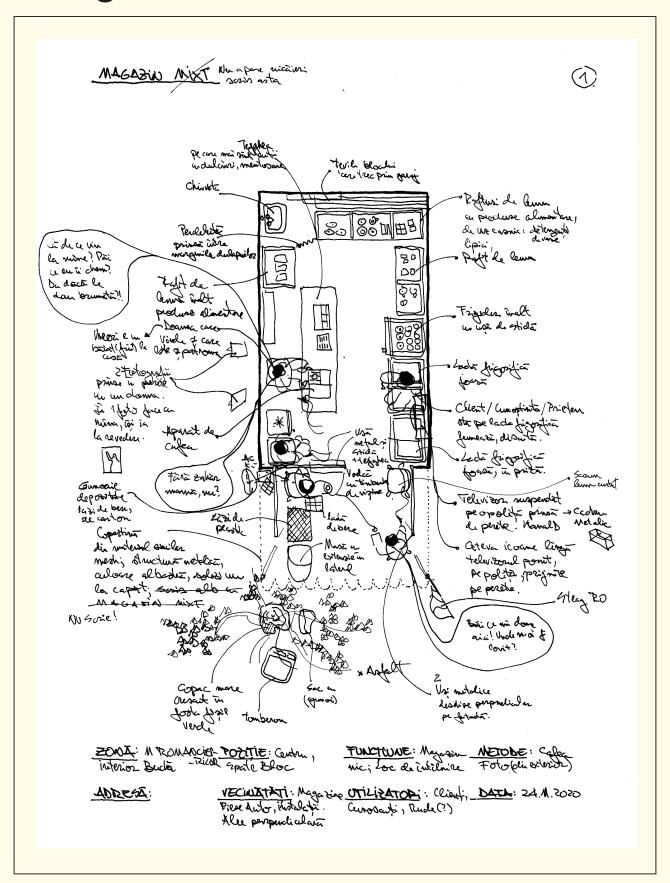


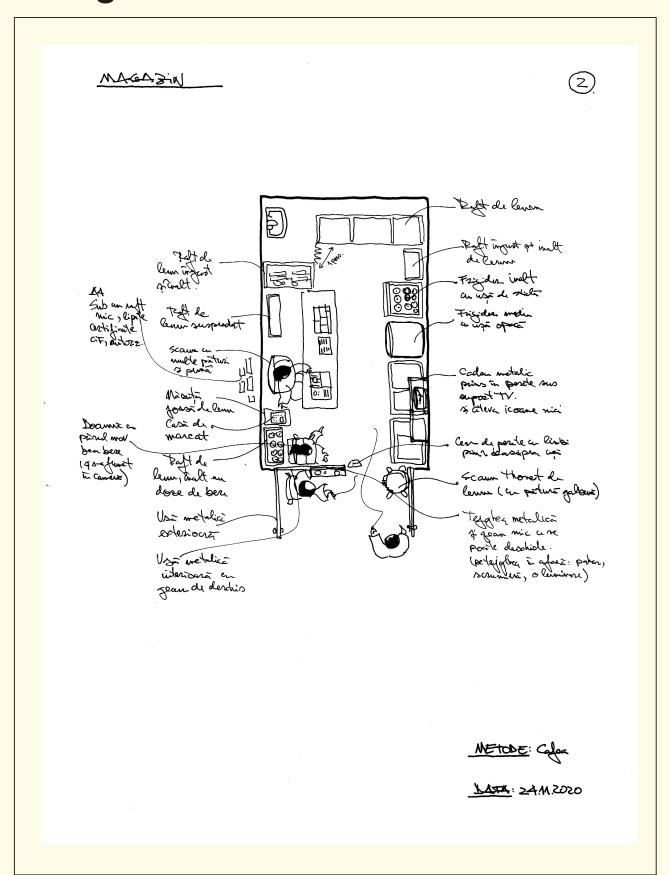
**Fig. 12.** Synthesis drawing representing the "Garages" typology of informal practices, based on several case studies of transforming the garages by the *bloc* in alternative spaces. Drawing by the current author.

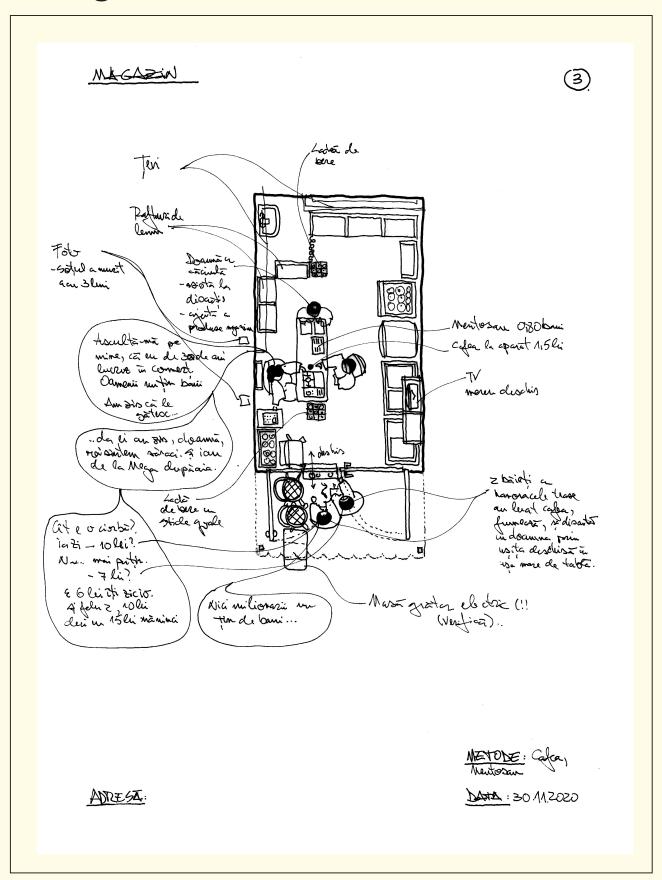
#### **ISTORIES**

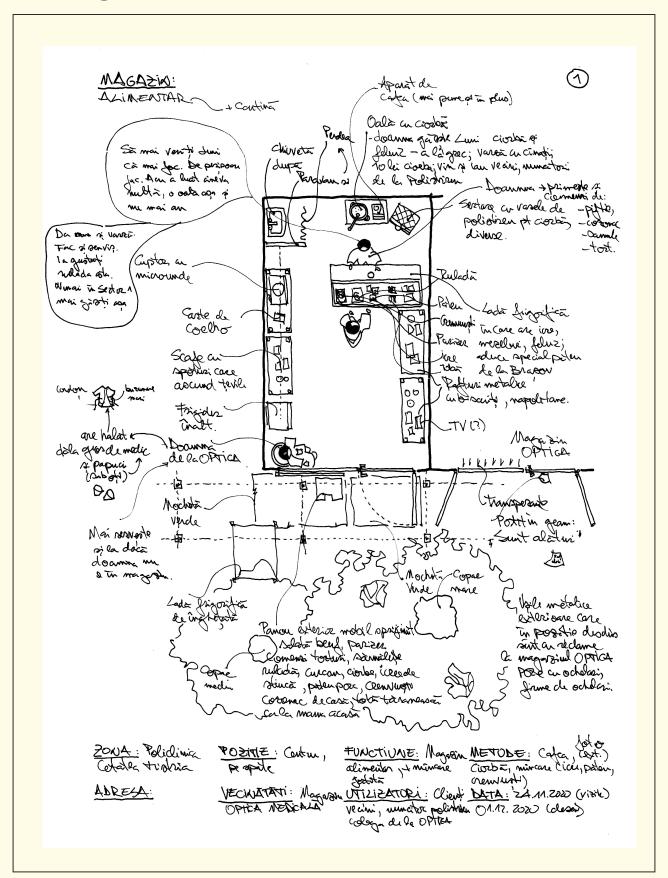
#### DRAWINGS from FIELDWORK

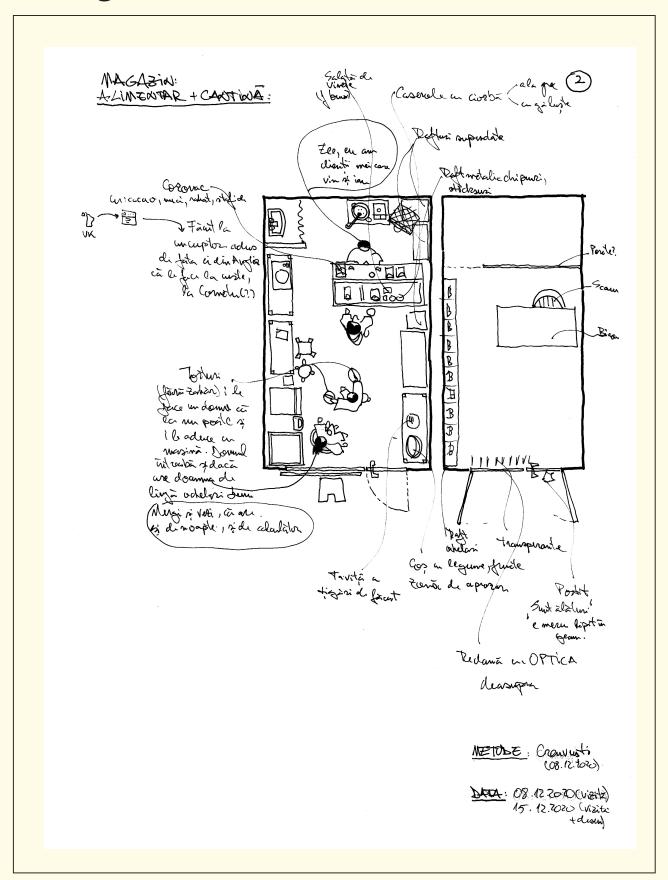
Narrative sketches made after multiple field trips that added up as a series, from where meaning and patterns could be traced.

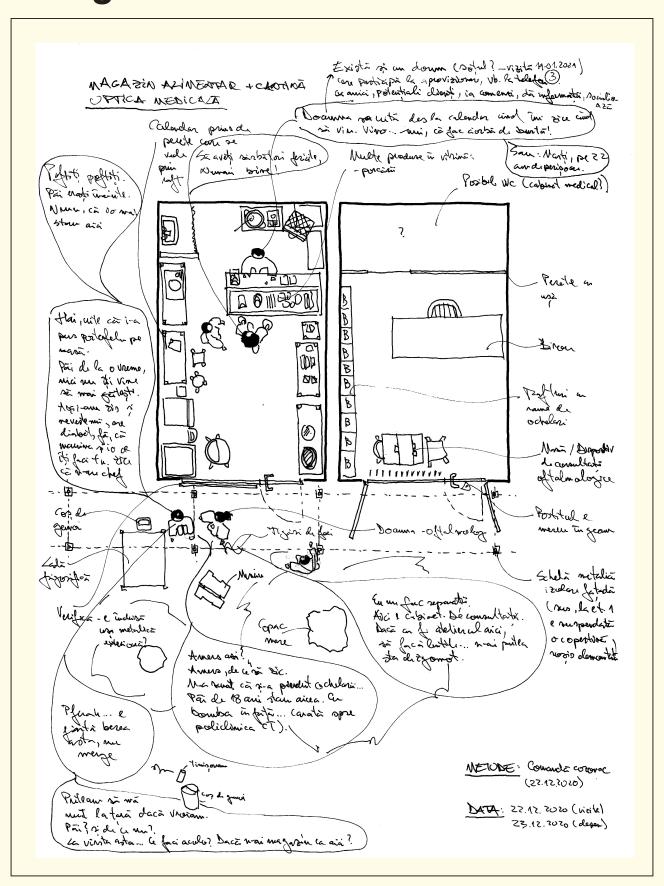


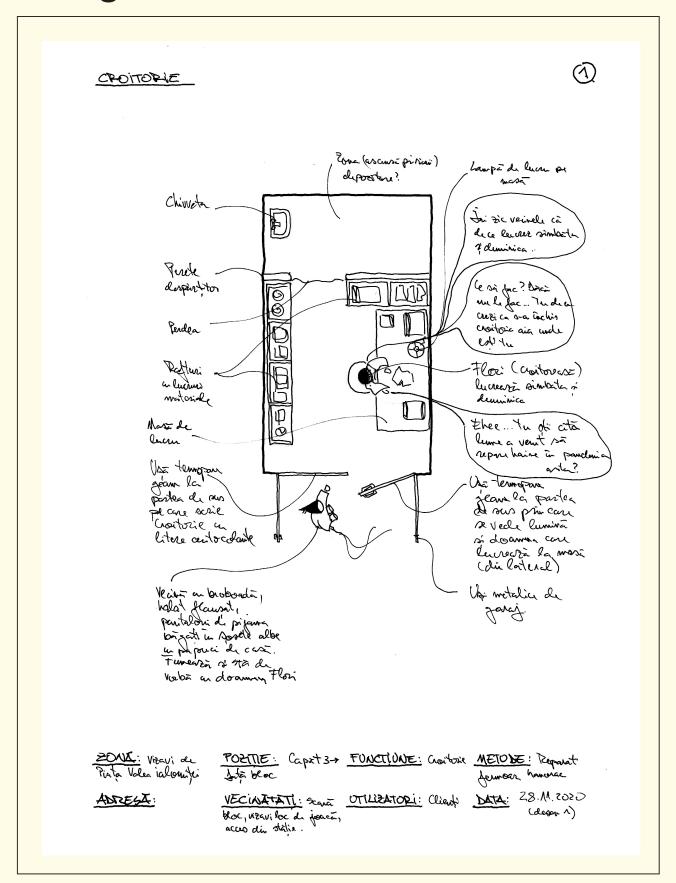


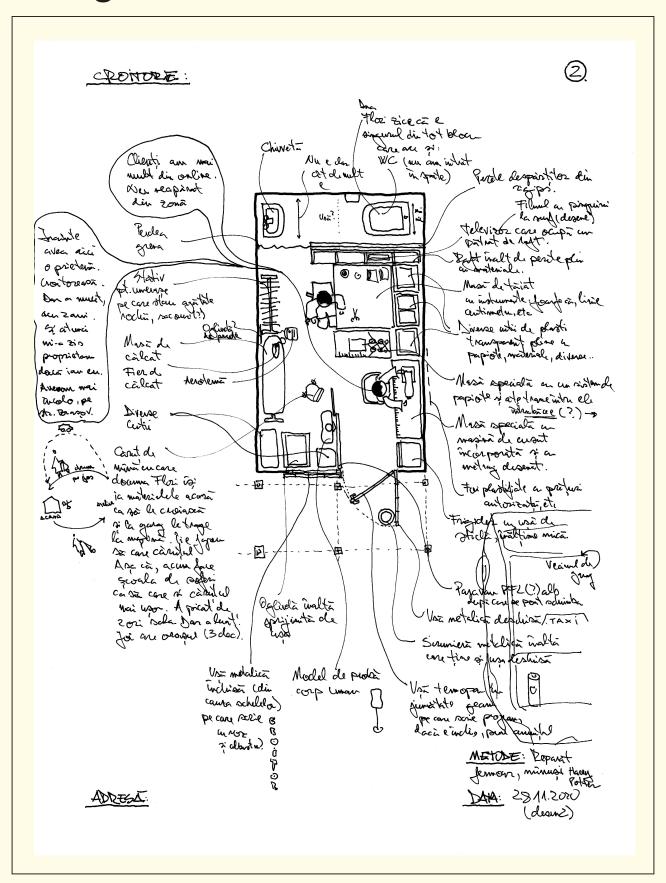


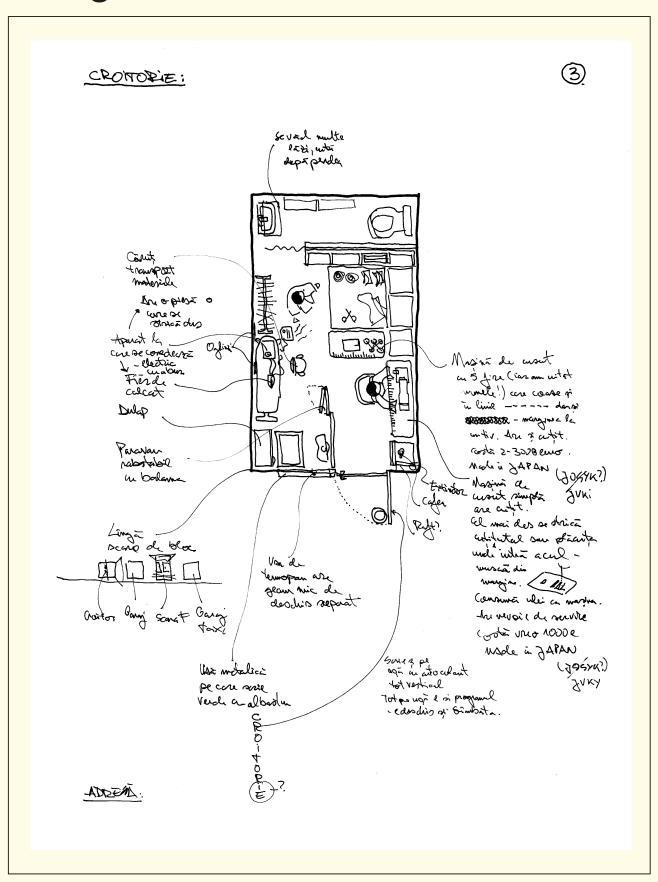


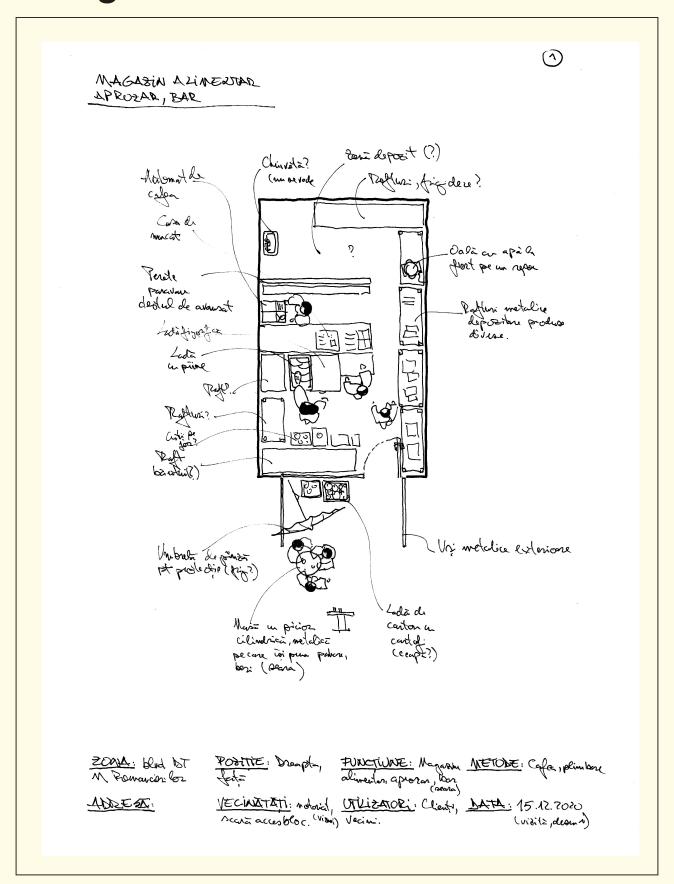


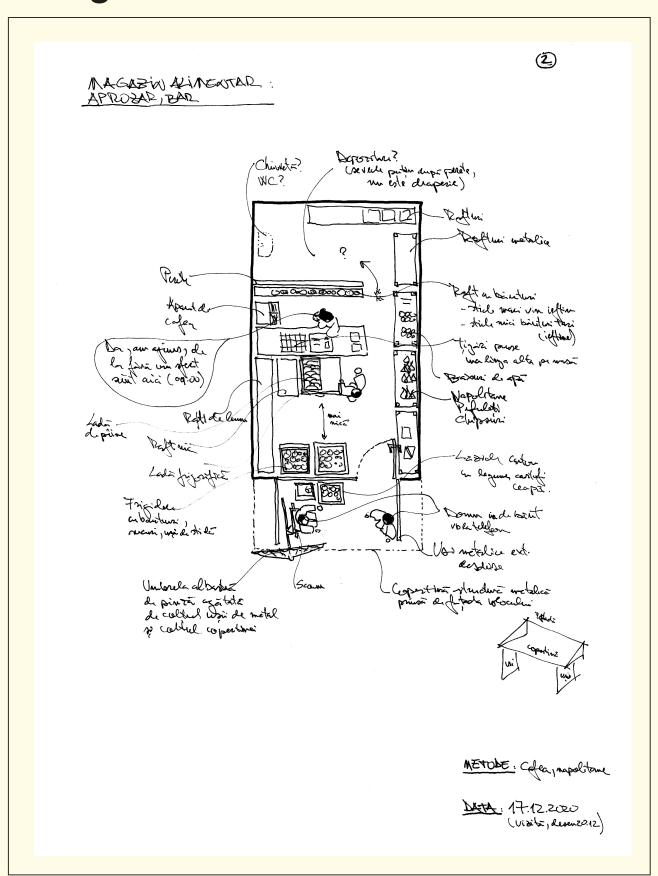


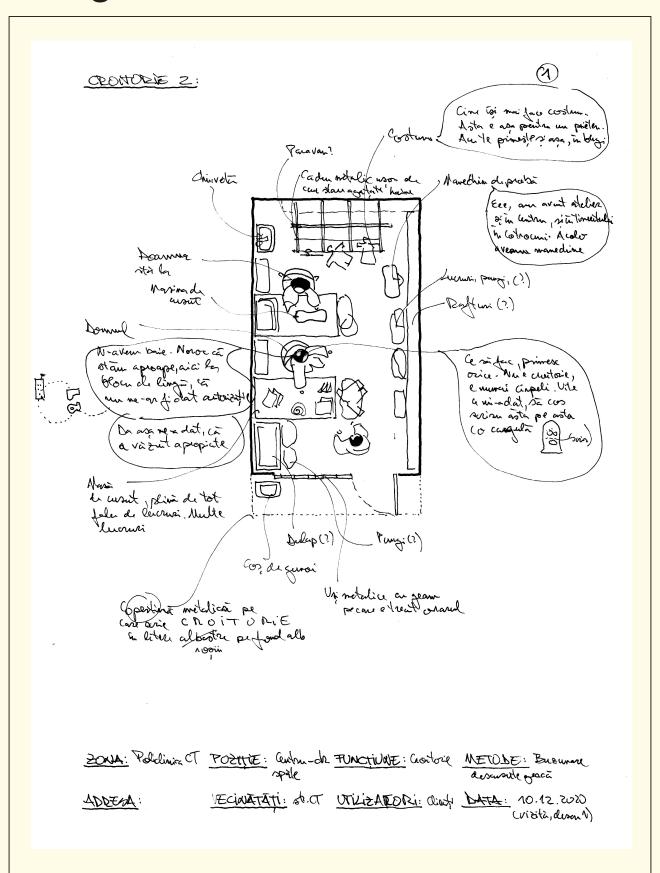


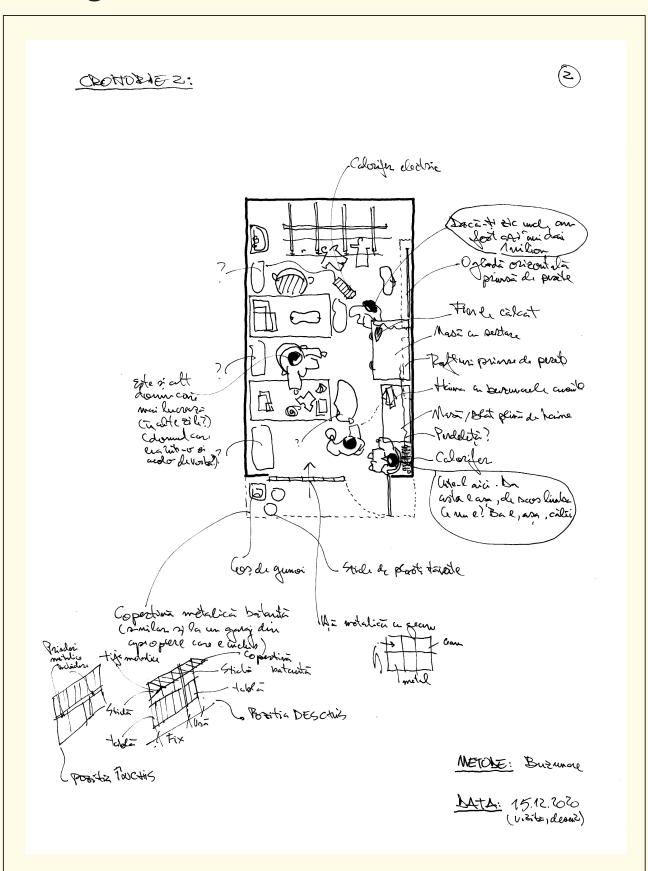


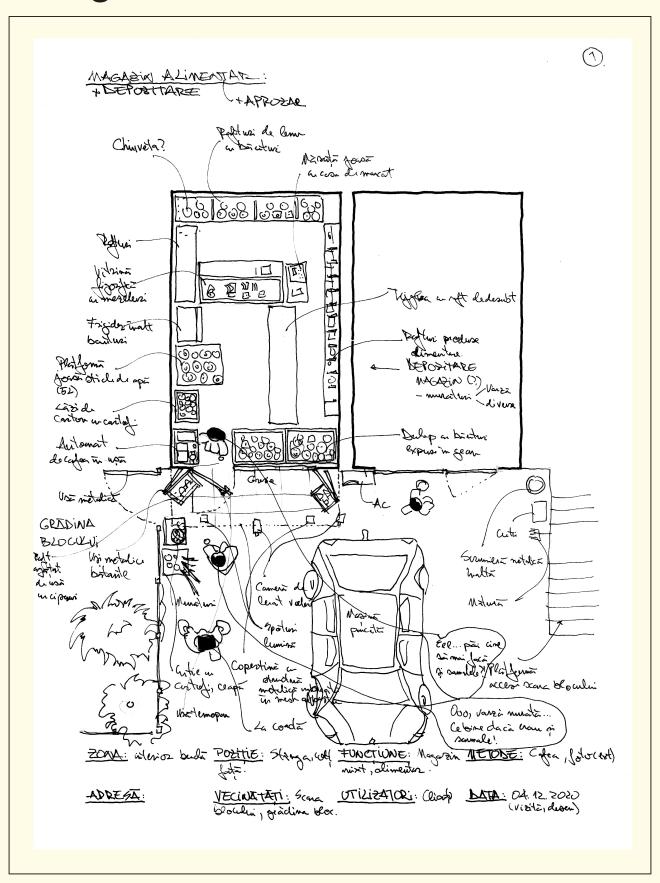


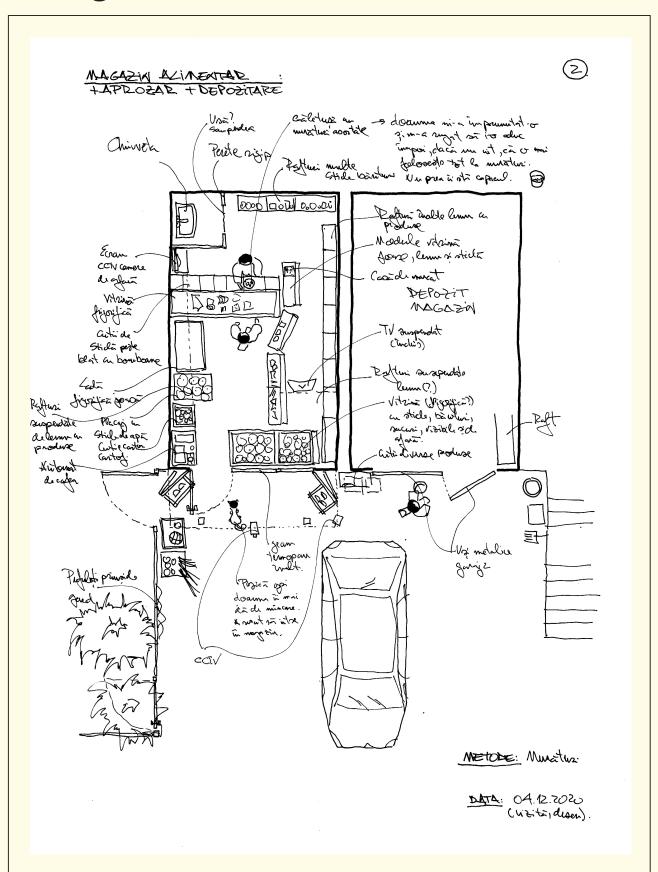


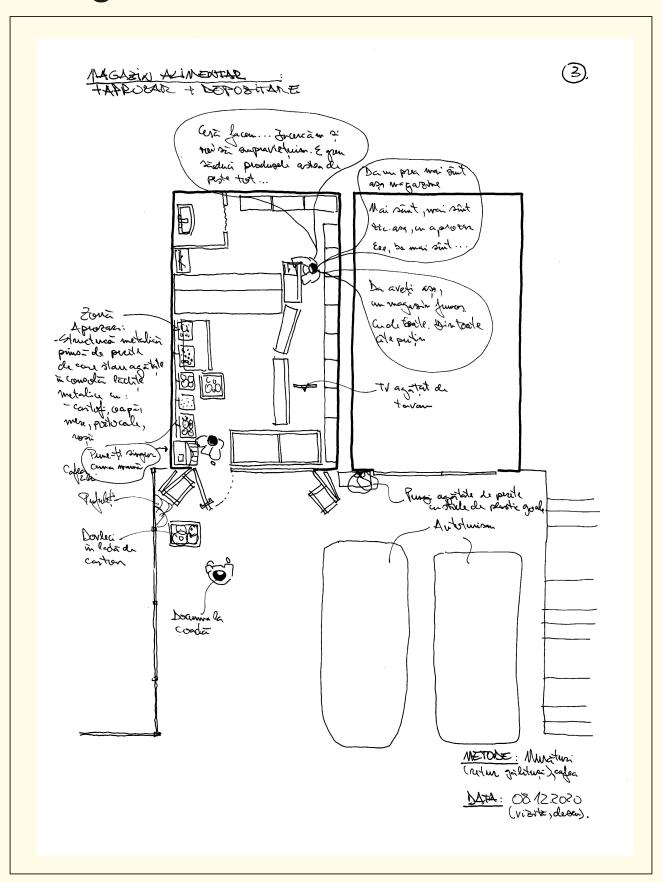


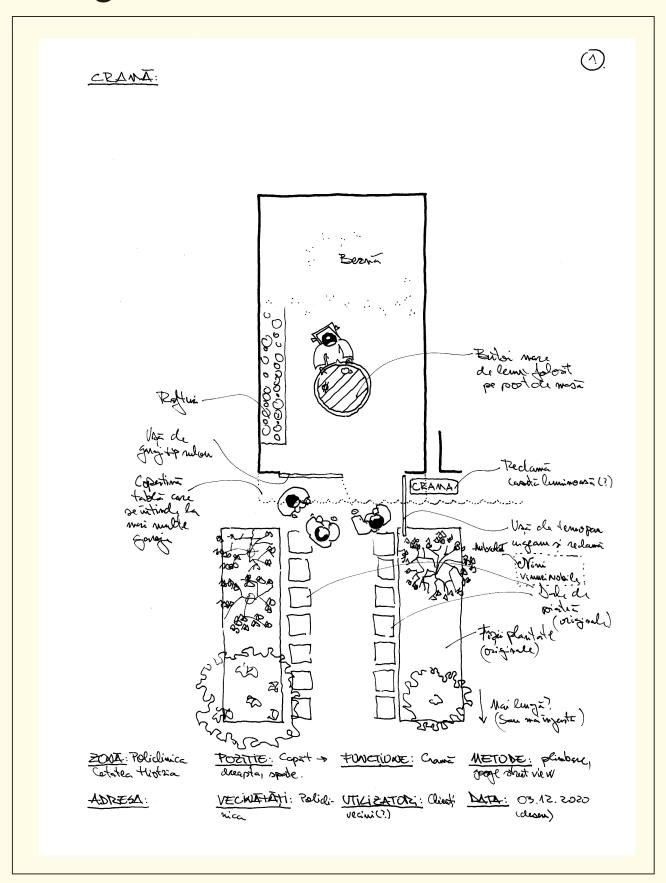


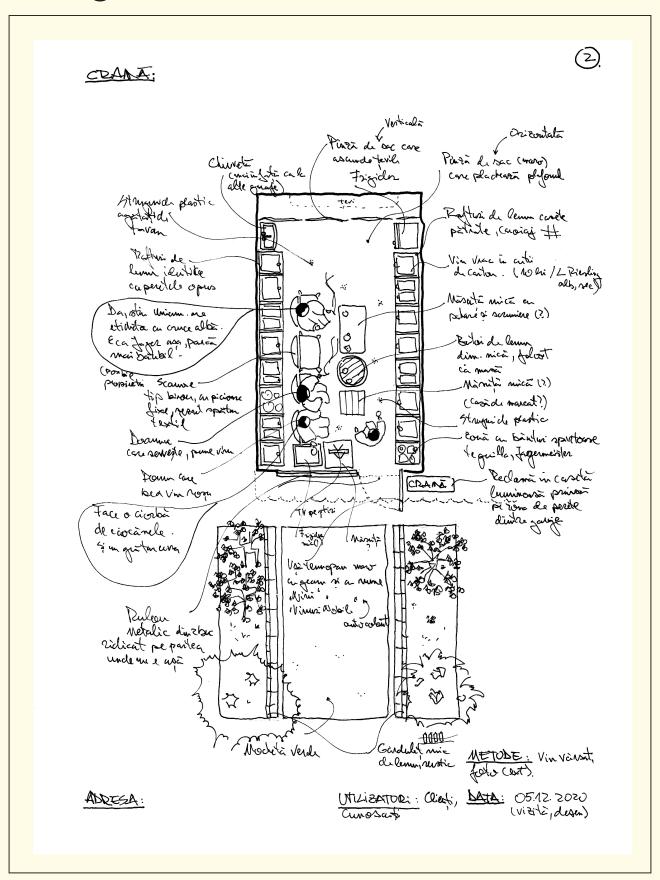


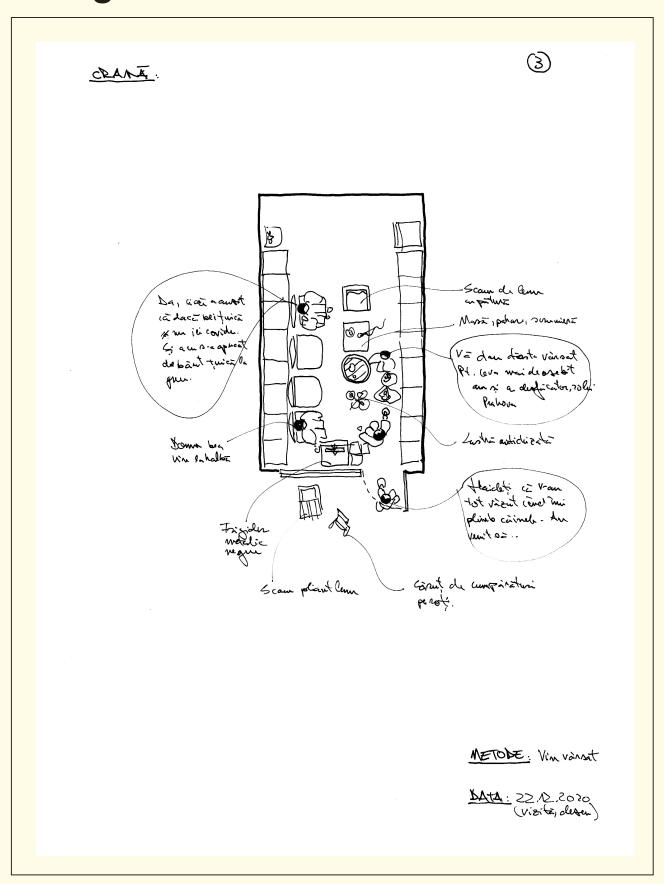


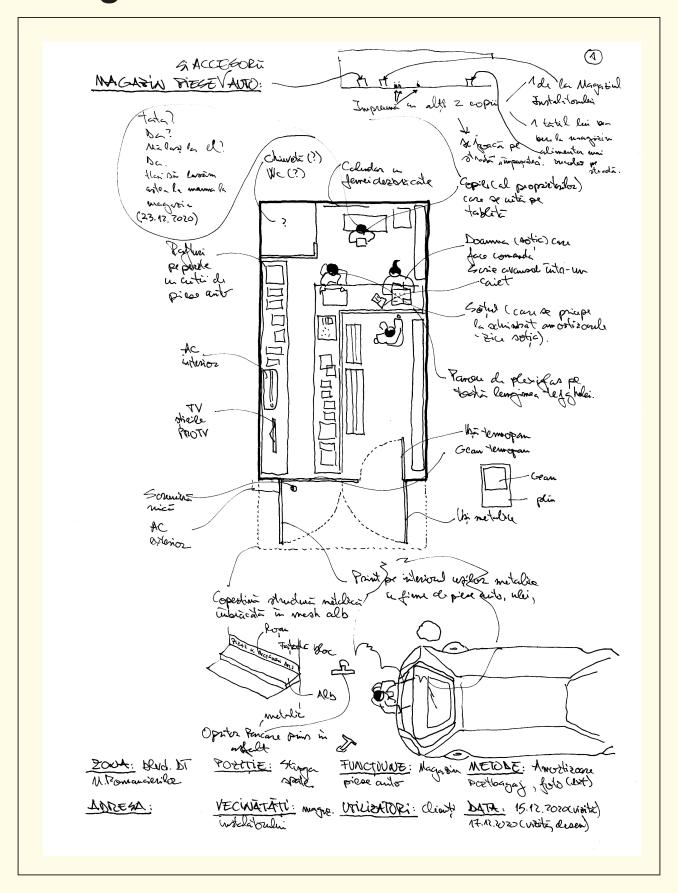


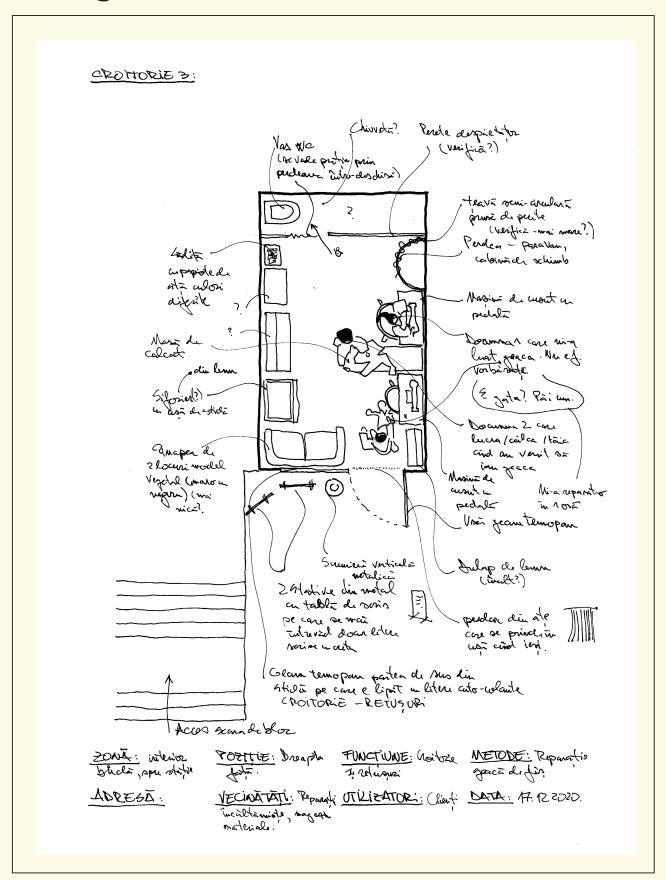


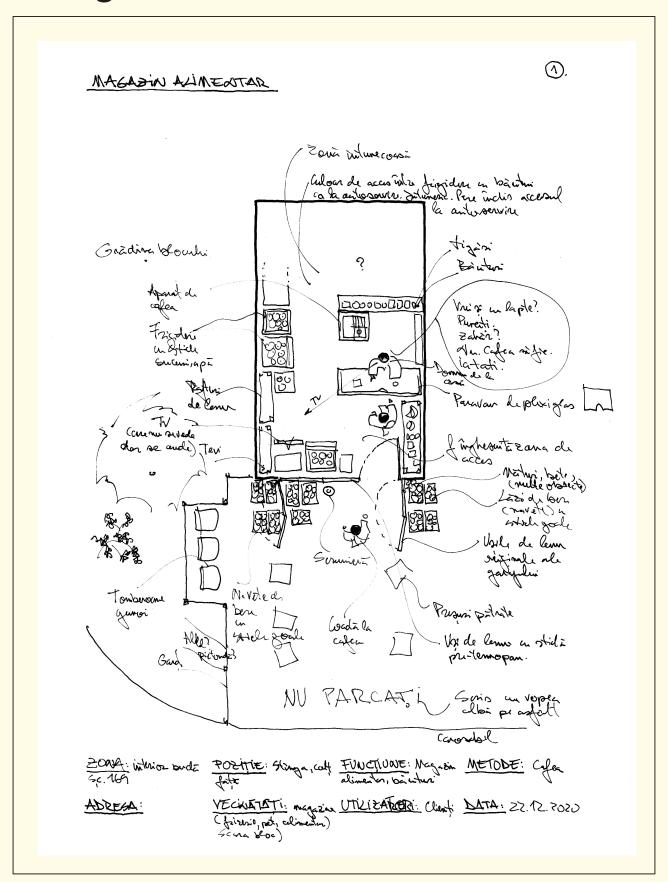


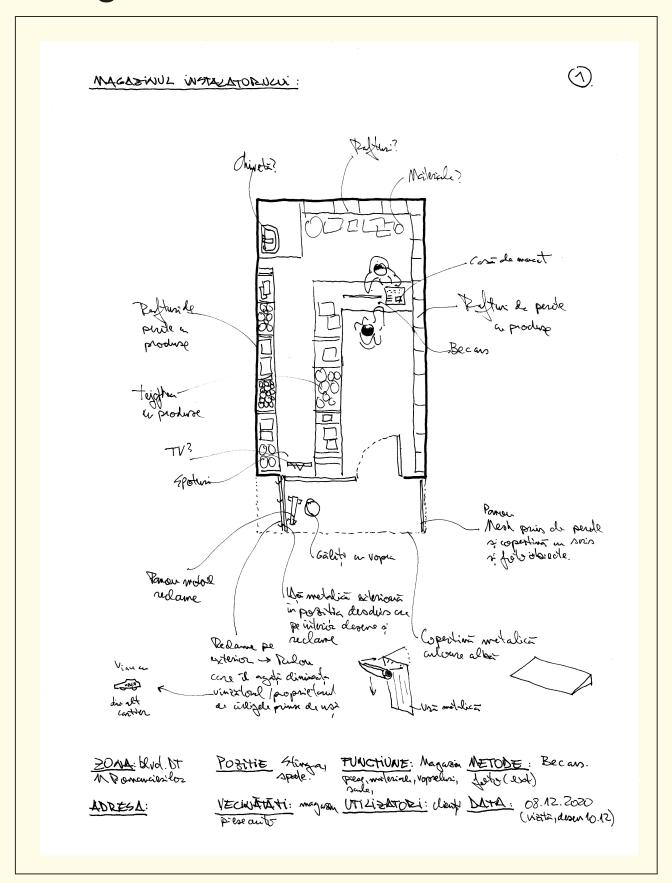


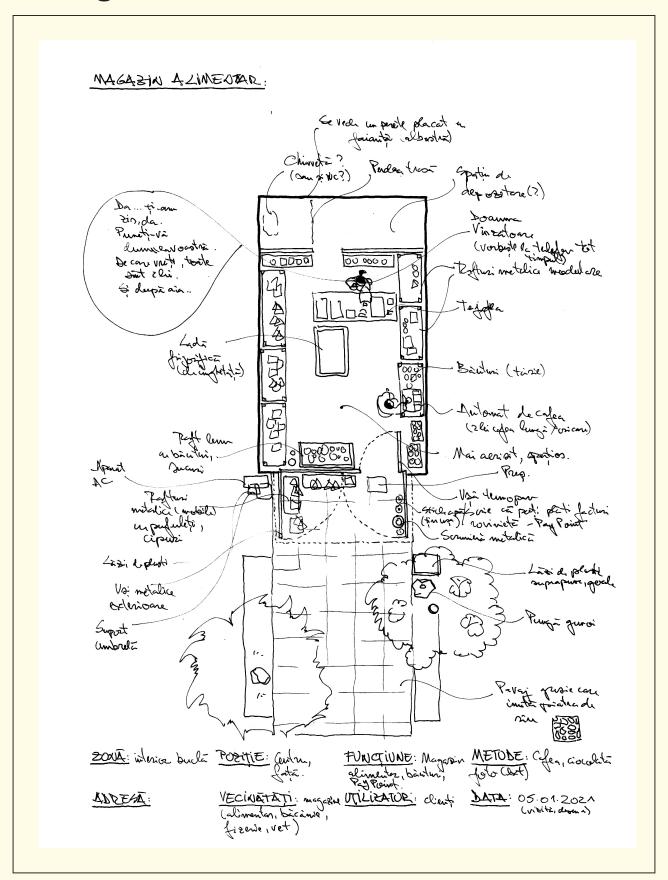


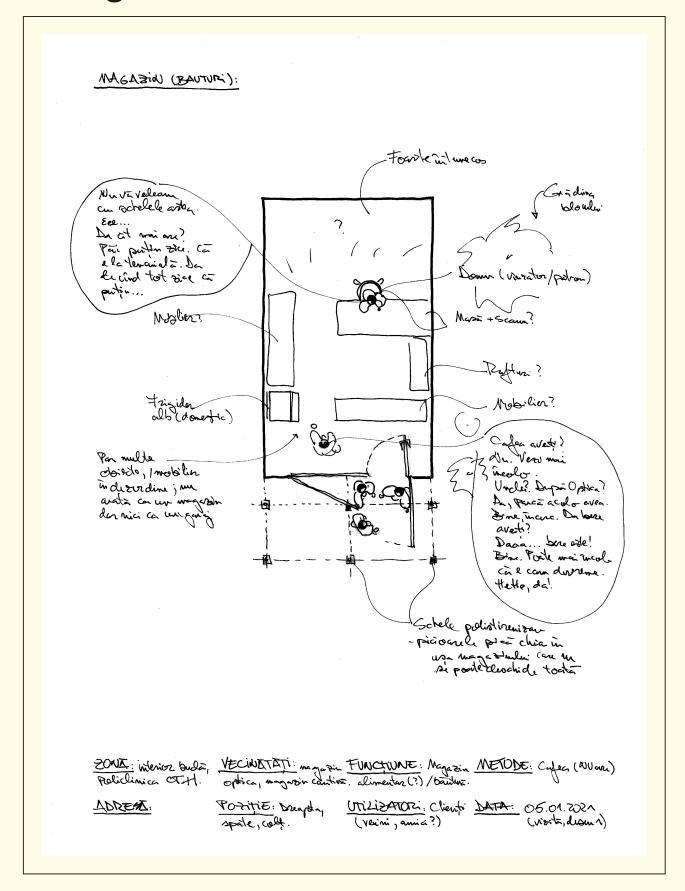


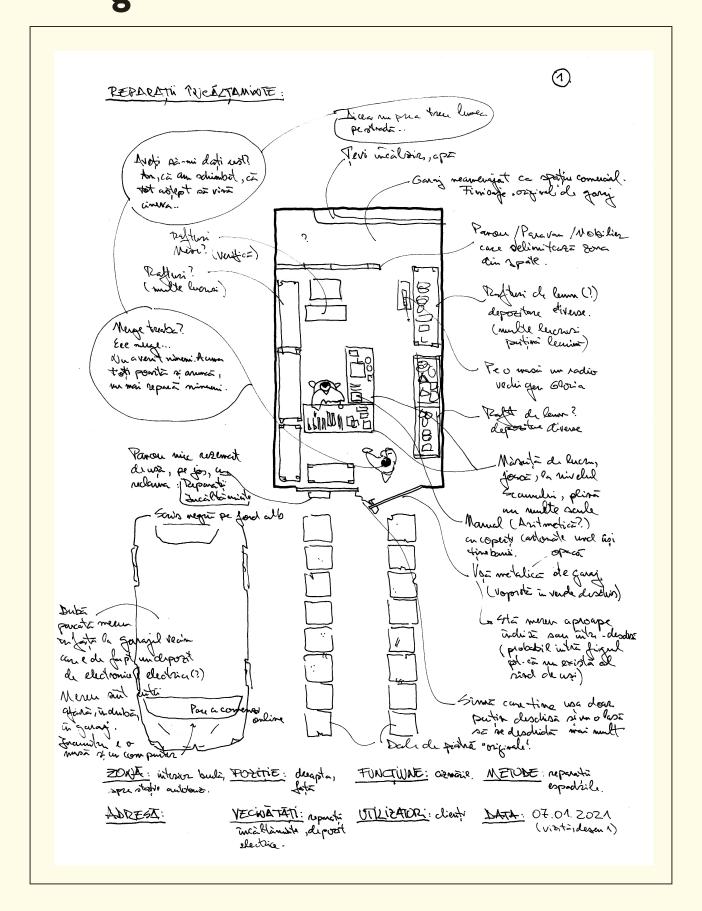


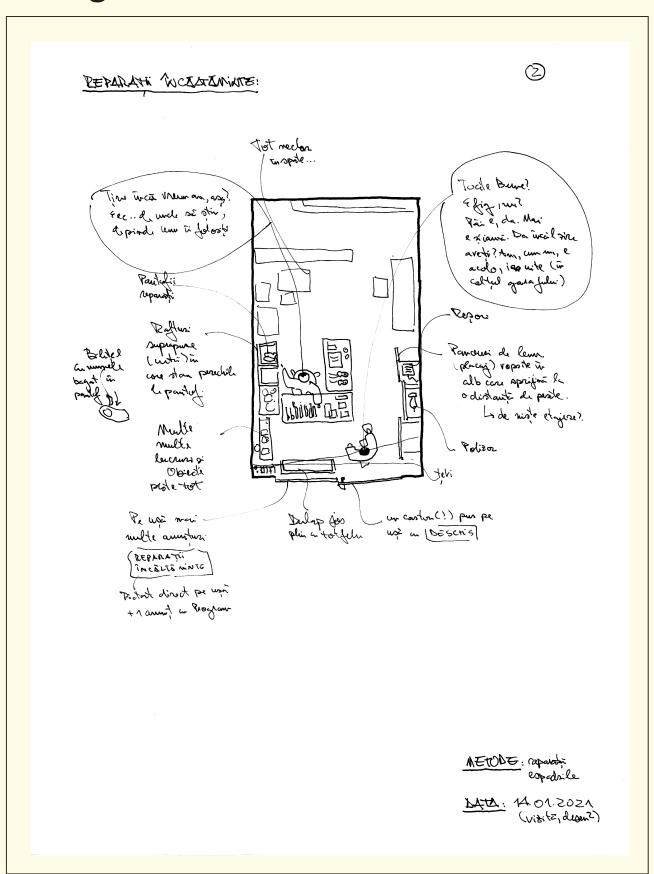


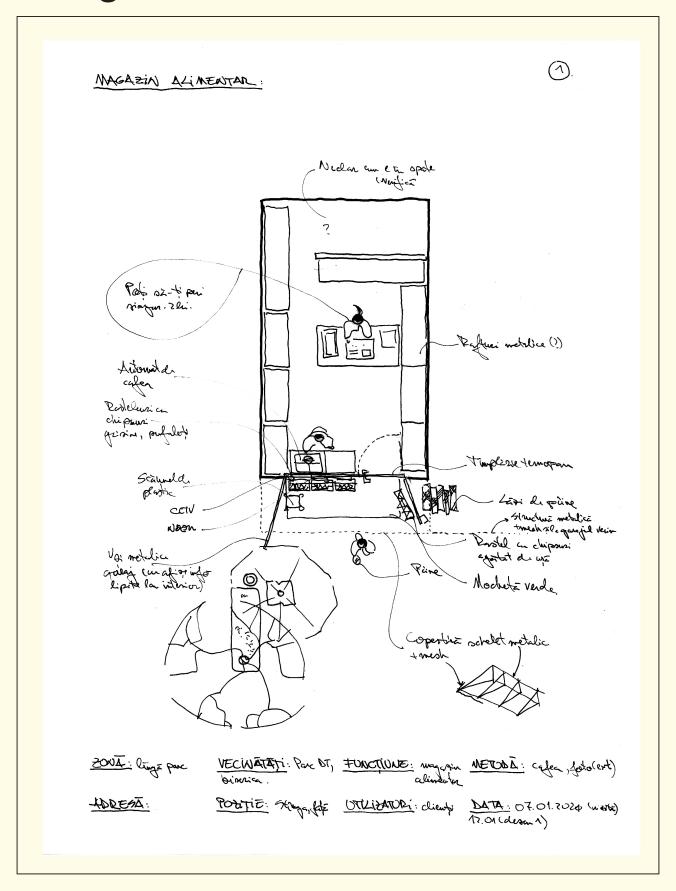




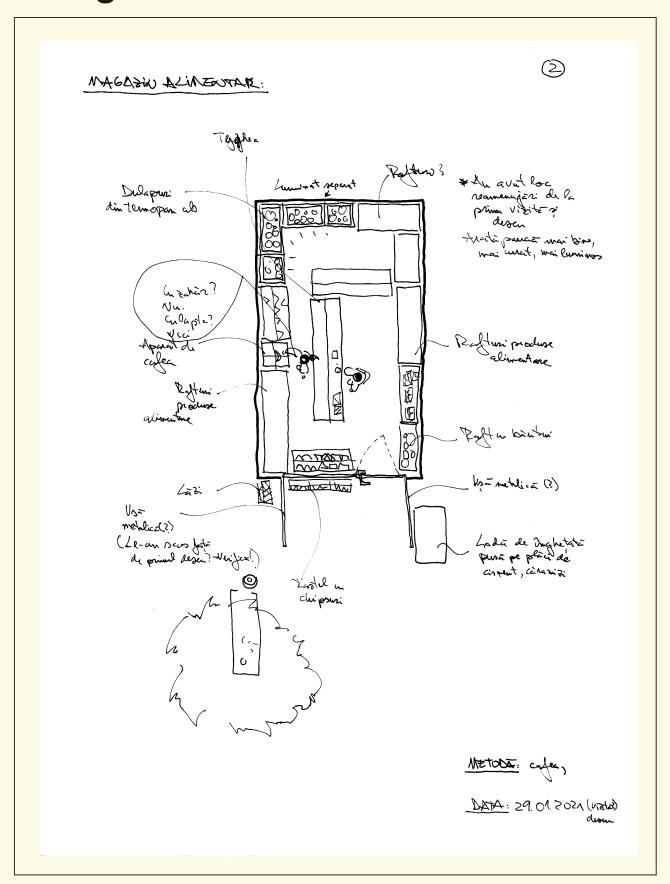




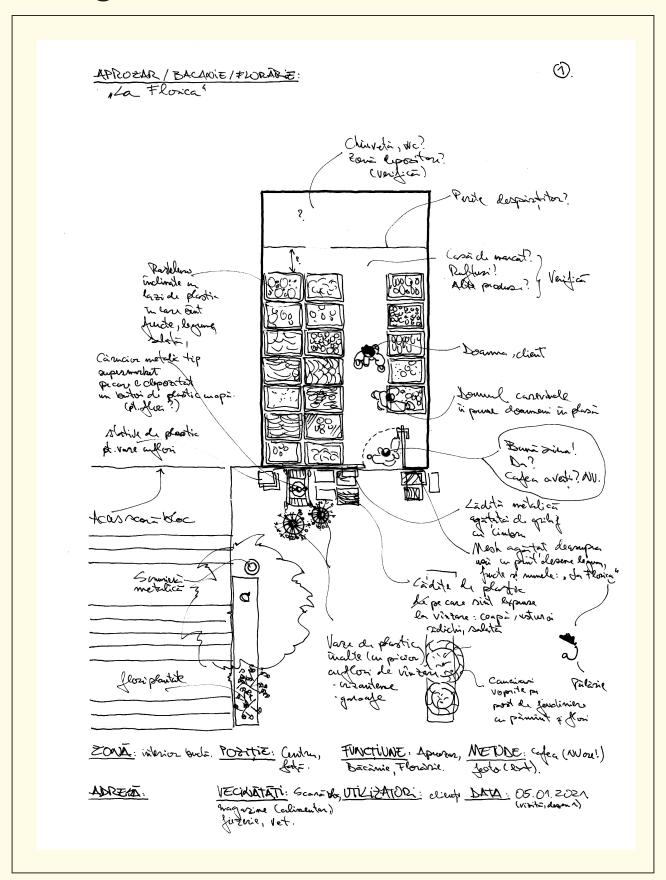




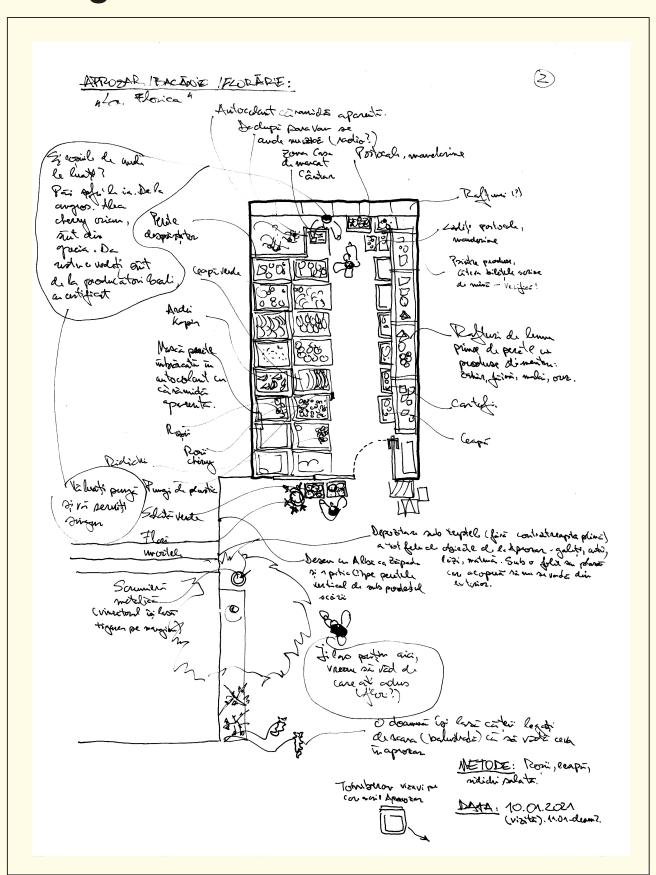
# Garages

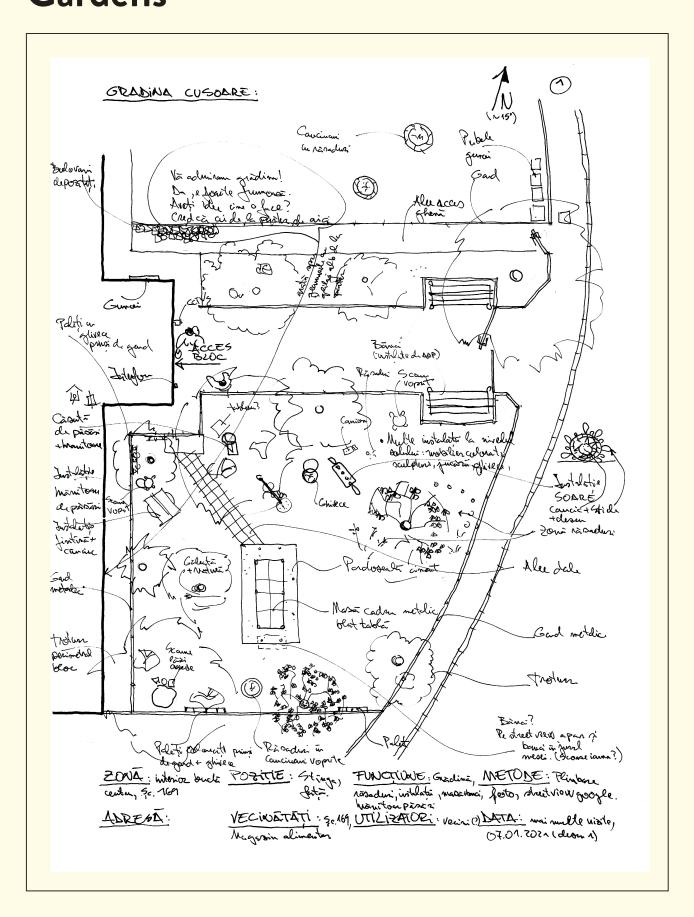


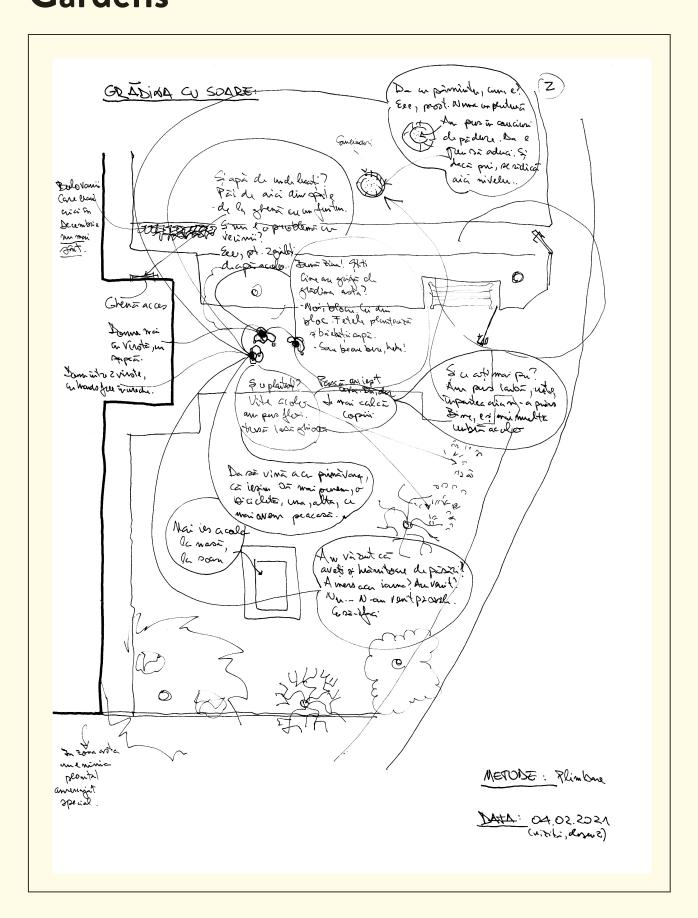
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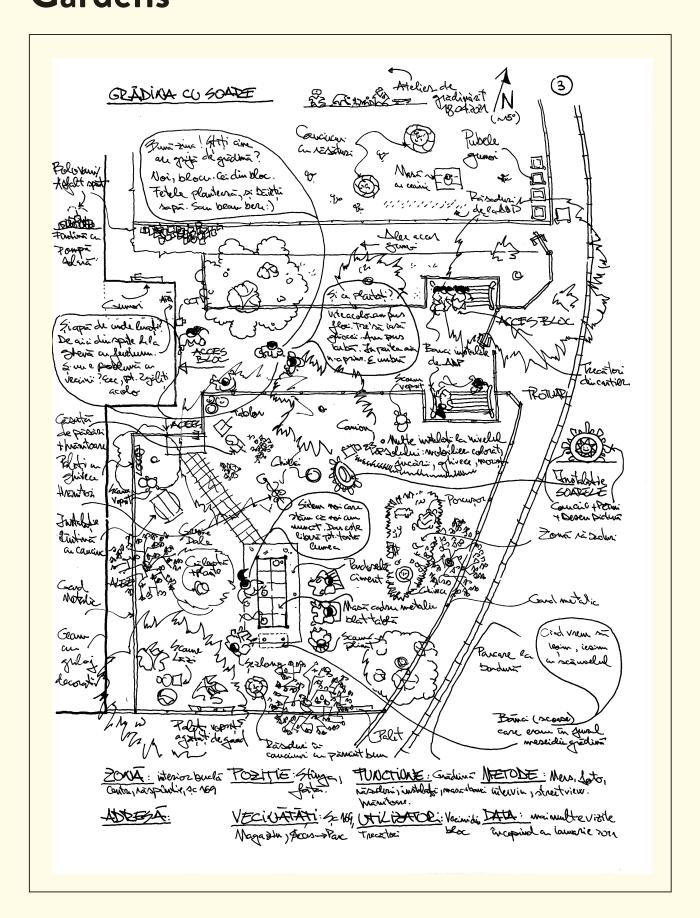


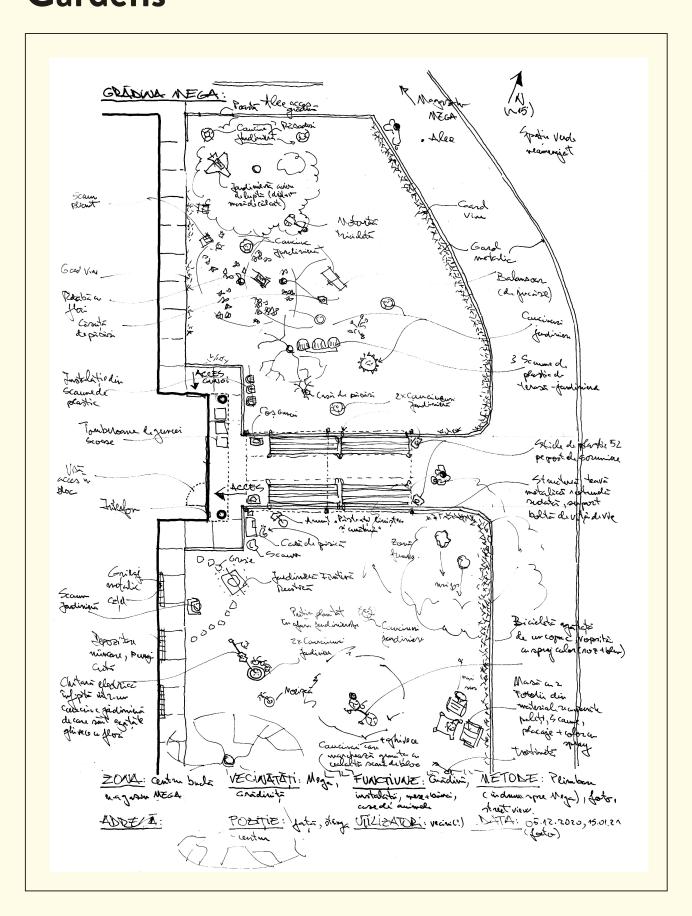
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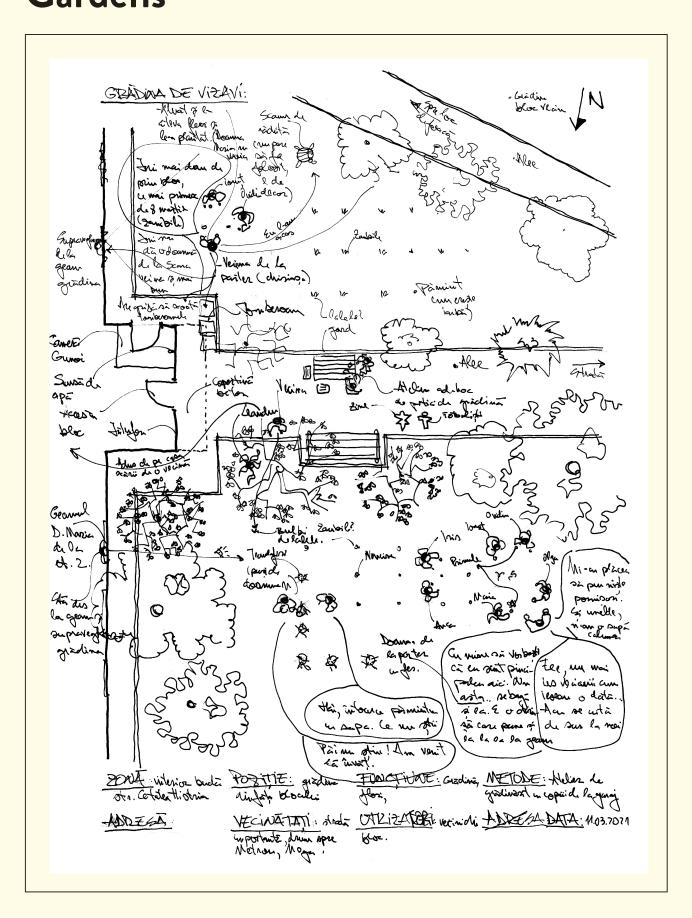


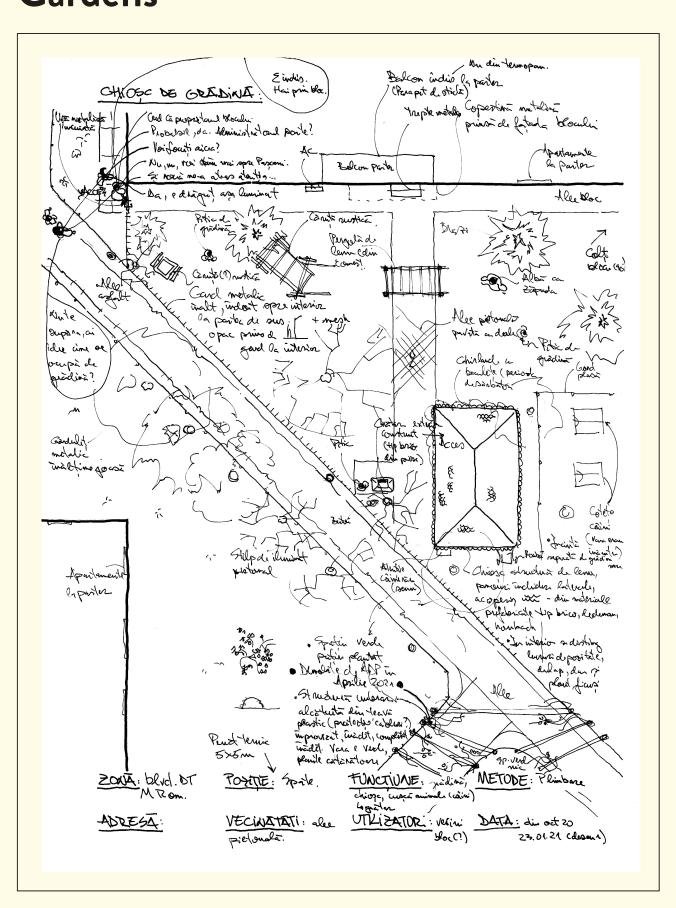






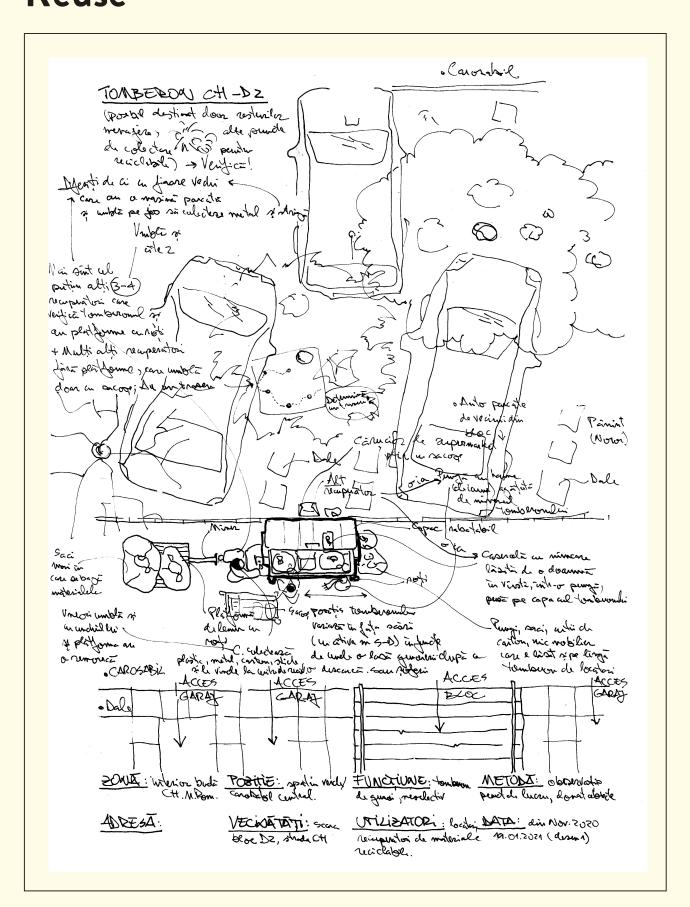






### **ISTORIES**

Reuse



### 3.2.3. Mapping

Besides tracing stories, the architectural ethnographic drawings were also supporting the wider process of mapping informal, everyday practices' patterns. Accounting for an alternative approach gaining momentum, qualitatively different to 'classical' maps, which excludes relationships, experiences or memories (Halder, et. al. 2018), the research relied on mapping as one of its main pillars. Mapping played a vital role as it allowed a way of visually representing the spoken, written and observed data co-produced through interviews and ethnography. Acknowledging maps' inherent political character and limitation (Awan, 2020), mapping aimed to go beyond representation and generate spatial knowledge by evidencing the informal practices impact at the district scale. As "a conceptual glue" able to connect the tangible with the intangible networks (Abrams & Hall, 2006, p.12), mapping was useful for making visible latent commoning practices. Tracing implicit connections between existing informal practices and their ephemeral spatialization was attempted through a "relational mapping", which aimed "not only to 'represent' or 'conceive' but to enhance experience" (Petrescu, 2012, p.140). Assuming the participative actiondriven ethos of the research, the map-mapping process opened up at some point also to the ones being mapped. Addressing experts' ownership and power imbalances, the method seeks the empowering effects that mapping as a collective process has on the map-makers themselves, where "change is generated while mapping" (Saija & Pappalardo, 2022). Connecting the evidencing goal of the research with the transformative drive of the practice was achieved also through such different ways of map-making.

The field research took place on two levels, geographically and qualitatively differentiated. The microraion 7, or Bucla area, translated as The Loop, from the Drumul Taberei district was the main fieldwork where informal practices of using, transforming and managing the in between spaces have been inquired. The fieldwork was extended to the scale of the city by inquiring the network of neighbourhood public libraries spread all over Bucharest. Here, the users' informal support for the libraries was investigated. For the ephemeral spatial transformations in the microraion, the role of mapping was at first to articulate an ecology of related practices and superimposed it over the initial urban plan of the district. Informal gardens, converted garages, DIY furniture, animal shelters, edibles, graphics, paths, minor landmarks and even memories were illustrated as popping up like mushrooms through the forest of modernist buildings. More than four hundred examples of dwellers' transformation were inventoried through repeated visits. The encountered examples were recorded in Google maps and represented in the "Map of Collective Practices from The Buclă". The map made them visible at scale, evidencing the relationships among informal practices and with the built environment. By referencing urban design representations specific to the initial planning<sup>26</sup>, the mapping artefact – a folded printed A2 map – worked as an informal master plan of the *microraion*, retrospectively annotated by the users'

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> The support map of the *Buclă* was drawn by Ioana Capotă, while the informal practices typologies were drawn by Alex Axinte, in the framework of OPEN Garage project.

interventions (Fig.13,14). Second, the mapping worked also as an analysis tool, by identifying typologies among the interventions' inventory. Especially classified by their spatial outcome, the typologies of informal practices contained insights of the shared resources, active stakeholders and organisational frameworks detected in the fieldwork. The articulation of these typologies argued for the existence of a specific way of living in the district. Thus mapping supported and communicated the need to take into account these informal practices and value their role and impact over the residents' life.

By investigating the informal support for the public libraries, the role of mapping was twofold: to tell their story in the local context and to further supports their cause. The research reports and mapping products allowed for the research team<sup>27</sup> to engage in public communication and advocacy for increasing the visibility, valuing and public financing of local public libraries. In a synthesis of archival research<sup>28</sup>, the mapping traced libraries' historical evolution from the perspective of their role in communities' life, evidenced against the background of urban transformations. Libraries' historical timeline was correlated with the major events occurring in national political life and local urban history, offering a new perspective of their placement in the midst of major socio-political changes. Less ethnographically productive than for informal practices<sup>29</sup>, here the drawing went directly to the representation of the identified library types, which were nevertheless illustrated with situations and occurrences documented during field visits. The typologies resulting from analysis were differentiated by the building type hosting the library branch, indicating specific patterns of informal operation and relating to users, beyond standardised institutional protocols. Moreover, the libraries' mapping developed more of its participative potential, opening up its process towards the collective. A series of participatory mapping workshops were organised in every of the twenty nine branches of the network<sup>30</sup> joined by readers and librarians alike. Marking neighbourhoods' points of interest from their perspective, participants' contributions were materialised on a draft map of the surrounding area. Major landmarks, everyday spots, but also an unexpectedly large contingent of educational, cultural and civic spaces were identified as important for the dwellers. Based on these coproduced drafts, a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Part of the research on public libraries was done within the project "The Map of Neighbourhood Libraries" which was initiated and coordinated by Alex Axinte, together with the associated researcher Alexandru Vârtej (anthropologist) which contributed in the fieldwork research, analysis and communication phases. The project was developed between December 2021 - September 2022.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Various materials, such as periodicals, photos, posters and leaflets from the archives of the Bucharest Metropolitan Library (BMB) and the Central University Library (BCU), completed by documents and legislation available online were consulted by Alex Axinte, partially in the framework of "The Map of Neighbourhood Libraries" project.

29 This feature was determined by the limited visits which could be made to all branches of the network spread all over

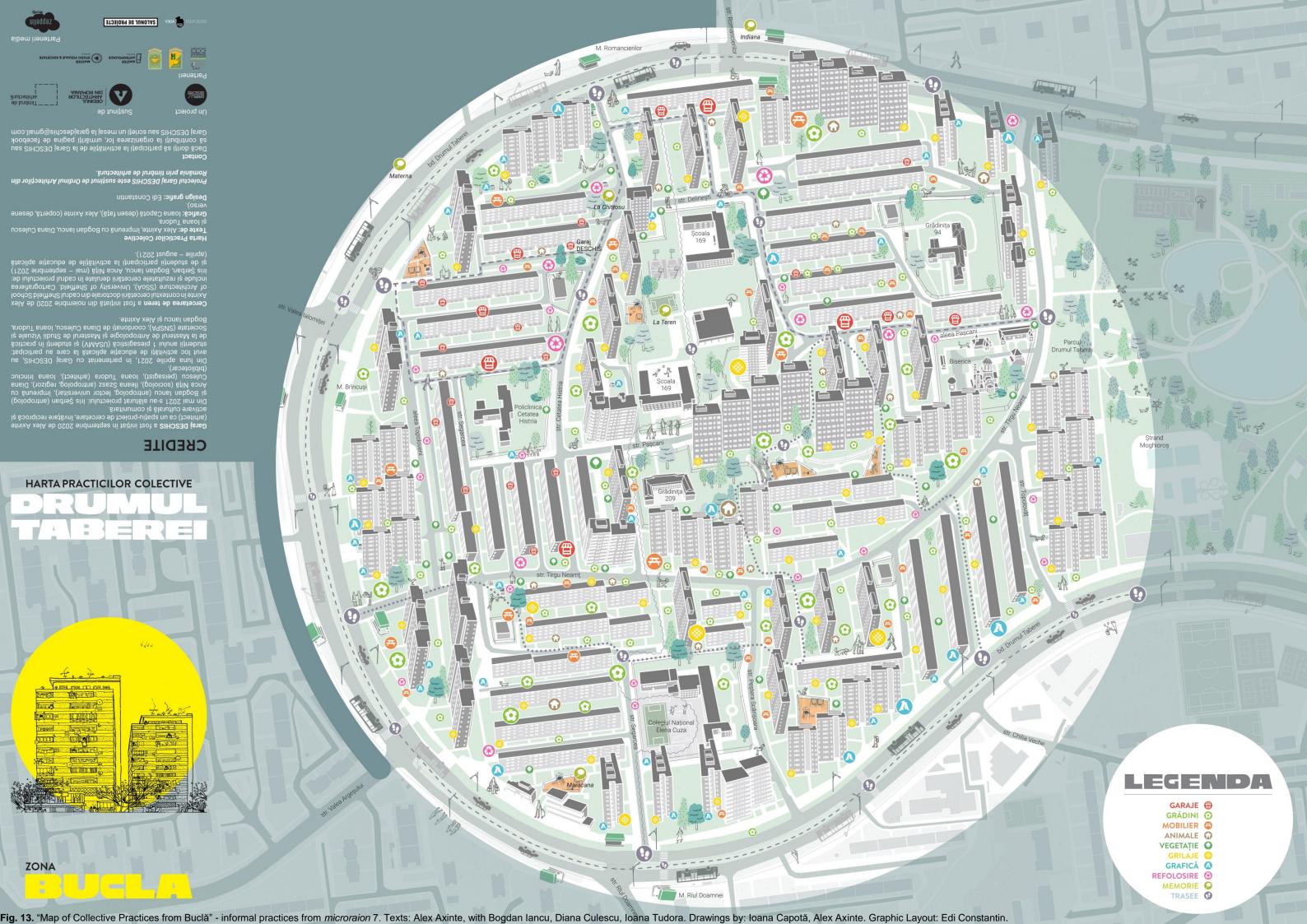
the city.

This participative mapping workshops usually consisted in a one day event organised by the researchers in all the branches of the network consisting in displaying an A1 format map of the area and engaging in discussion with library users about the landmarks of the area, followed by their writing on the map. The workshops were organised by Alex Axinte, with the help of Alexandru Vârtej and in some branches with the support of librarians which were collecting for several days proposals from the users. The workshops took place in the framework of "The Map of Neighbourhood Libraries" project.

map of the city made of neighbourhoods seen from the library door was redrawn<sup>31</sup>, containing all the landmarks marked in each workshop. Thus, "The Map of Neighbourhood Libraries of Bucharest" contained the existing library, as well as the traces of other closed branches or cancelled alternative programs, which were placed on this net woven from civic equipment and community spaces. The mapping artefact – a folded printed A2 map – worked as a communication tool, available in every library branch for consultation, aiming to contextualise a rather institutionalised local perception of libraries by valuing the informal practices historically developed by its users (Fig.15,16). Additionally to the spatial evidences, such as blank spaces on the city map with districts not covered by branches, or the concentration of cultural functions in the city centre, the mapping highlighted public libraries as part of a fragile ecosystem of complementary spaces, which includes not only schools, museums or theatres, but also food markets, parks or sports fields. The unexpected resurfacing of the latter ones in all participatory mapping sessions, testifies for the establishment of a compensatory practice facing the disappearance of community spaces. Especially in the collective housing neighbourhoods, the role of these spaces, including public libraries, becomes critical, as they are becoming implicit community centres and social infrastructure for a large number of residents. Beyond supporting their cause, communicating their community value and connecting them with dwelling rather than cultural and educational infrastructure, mapping allowed the research to bring evidence which indicated that the activation of latent commoning practices can occur also around institutionalized spaces, such as public libraries. The research products aimed to go beyond the goals of this thesis, consolidating an overall ethos of supporting and expanding public programs currently undertreat. Narratives such as the libraries map aim both for reclaiming the collective values carried by the libraries, while offering concrete directions for public policy interventions. Moreover, participatory design and tactical urbanism interventions in existing branches completes and expands the storytelling and advocacy actions.

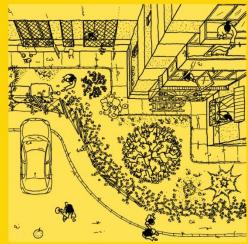
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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> The landmarks map was redrawn by Ioana Capotă, while the libraries' typologies were drawn by Alex Axinte in the framework of "The Map of Neighbourhood Libraries" project.



### **UTOPIE și CARTIER**

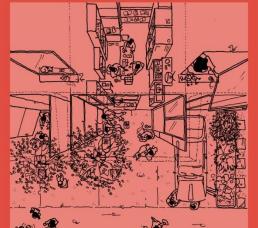
na cuprinsă de întoarcerea bulevardului principal și de lim vest a parcului. Cu doar cîteva blocuri adăugate de îndesi illor '80 și '90, zona este astăzi destul de apropiată de proiet jial. Cu apartamente bine împărțite, bucla are o densitat cuirii relativ scăzută, cu spații plantate generos, cu școl ădinițe amplasate central și servicii (comerciale, transpo nplasate perimetral. Bucla este o zonă "liniștită și verde".



### **GRILAJE**

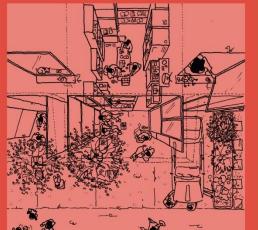
Grilaiele sînt confecții metalice montate pe exteriorul geamurilor de către locatarii de la parter. Rude apropiate ale balcoanelor închise, grilajele materializează disconfortul față de lipsa de intimitate și riscul de spargeri. Unele ajung să funcționeze și ca mici spații de depozitare. Cu rădăcini în practicile de dinainte de 1990, grilajele cresc pe filiera industrială, de unde materiale, unelte, mesteri, cunostinte si elemente de design s-au răspîndit în tot orașul. Realizate din metal sudat (ţeavă rectangulară, sau armături cu striuri sau fără), vopsite în diferite culori, grilajele reinterpretează inițial modelul "original" de la parapetele balcoanelor sau scărilor de bloc, dezvoltîndu-se ulterior stilistic și funcțional. Chiar și după înlocuirea ferestrelor cu termopane, în valurile succesive de reabilitări termice, unele grilaje supraviețuiesc, sînt recondiționate și reinstalate pe fațade

Regăsim cîteva exemple de grilaje și în buclă: grilaje frumoase (cu modele geometrice, solare sau florale), grilaje mini-cămări (depozitare oale, sticle și borcane), grilaje-adăpost (acces și observatie pisici, jardiniere, rufe). Transformarea functională de la panou de protecție decorativ la anexă gospodărească are loc prin agățarea de fațadă a unor "cutii". În lipsa balcoanelor de la parter, aici îsi fac loc atît nevoi gospodăresti, cît și de identitate, dînd o "față" casei. Desconsiderate uneori ca "gratii", grilajele de la parter funcționează însă pe post de membrane vernaculare post-industriale unde s-au acumulat tactici colective legate de îndulcirea relației dintre locuire, stradă și grădină.



### **GARAJE**

conflict, tocmai datorită proximității cu locuintele.



GRAFICA

n anii '60-'70 au fost construite în București blocuri de locui prefabricate de înălțime joasă (P+5) cu garaje la parter. Garajele erau atașate apartamentelor proprietate personală. Dincolo de adăpostirea autoturismelor, garajele rezolvau și lipsa de intimitate a locuirii la parter si functionau ca spatii extrem de și 54 de garaje. La numărul redus de autoturisme din epocă, garajele au devenit un fel de "camere suplimentare" pentru joacă sau hobby: la garaj "imaginația putea să zboare oricît" După 1990 garajele au intrat în circuitul economic ca spați comerciale și pe piața imobiliară ca spații tranzacționabile. Aproximativ 15% din blocurile din buclă au garaje la parter. Aici regăsim cîteva tipologii: garaje deschise (comerciale) ce sanitare sau croitorie, cizmărie, frizerie ori cabinete veterinare, optică medicală; *garaje între-deschise* (cu circuit închis) folosite prietenii, pregătire elevi; și *garaje închis*e (de folosință privată) utilizate ca extinderi domestice ale apartamentelor de deasupra. Refuncționalizarea interior-exterior a garajelor le-a transforma pe alocuri în adevărate spații de socializare de proximitate Refuncționalizarea lor este însă uneori și sursă de potențial

De la constructia cartierului, utilizarea spatiilor publice de către

locuitori sau administratie a lăsat urme, printre care si o serie de semne produse în organizarea jocurilor copiilor sau marcaje teritoriale domestice, ori tehnice. În ultimii ani însă, scrisul și

desenatul pe oraș au explodat, trecînd de la rezultante ale unor activități, la activități în sine. Orașul a devenit între timp un

"suport" pentru diverse texte și îmagini ieșite din zona tiparului și audio-vizualului ajungînd la scara orașului. Afișe, panouri ecrane și mesh-uri gigantice domină conversația publică prin mesaje "oficiale": publicitare sau electorale. În acest context,

comunicare, de socializare si de îmblînzire a spatiilor. Invazive

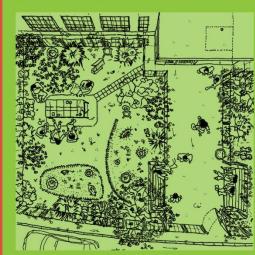
uneori, aceste practici grafice pot fi citite însă ca instrumente de

domesticire a spațiilor, expresie a nevoii tuturor locuitorilor de acces la orașul suport, în căutare de identitate, de apartenentă

și de voce, contribuind la producția unui spațiu public incluziv.

## GRADINI

Grădinăritul la bloc constă în plantarea de către locatari de vegetație (flori și pomi) pe domeniul public adiacent. Amenajarea urmăreste înfrumusetarea spațiului, relaxarea și socializarea, iar rezultatul depinde și de resursele financiare ale grădinarilor. Încurajat înainte de 1989, grădinăritul beneficia de acces la teren și se baza pe cunoștințele locuitorilor proveniți din mediul rural. Grădinile dintre blocuri sau de pe terenuri cu loturi individuale erau parțial productive (legume, fructe). La grădină era "ca o mică comunitate", percepută și ca "un spațiu de libertate". După scăderea fenomenului post '90, grădinăritul la bloc renaște, în parte și ca răspuns la diminuarea spațiilor verzi din oraș În buclă regăsim cîteva tipologii: *grădina vitrină* (cu decorații, mobilier și elemnte de upcycling), *grădina la taclale* (cu bănci și umbrar) sau grădina cu flori (puternic plantată). O apariție recentă care s-a si permanentizat o reprezintă grădina de pandemie: o joacă sau a șomajului tehnic. Grădinarii sînt locuitorii ieșiți la pensie si mai nou diversi adulti pasionati de plante, mesterit si ecologie. Grădinile de azi se bazează pe moștenirea grădinilo din anii '70-'80, folosind resurse contemporane, ca internetul și magazinele de bricolaj. Amenajările sînt rezultatul unor proiecte individuale, sau inițiativa mai multor vecini ce ges împreună resursele comune (teren, apă, unelte, răsaduri). Grija pentru grădina blocului propune relații mai etice față de mediul construit, față de vecini și față de comunitate.



## MEMORIE



Rapiditatea cu care au fost date în folosintă blocurile din cartier nu a fost la fel de mare și în cazul amenajărilor spațiilor publice. Profitînd de accesul la teren și resurse, locuitori mai "gospodari" au împrumutat din practicile rurale și au actionat împuterniciți de cunoștințe industriale. Bănci, mese, umbrare, chioșcuri sau locuri de joacă au domesticit spațiile din preajma noilor blocuri. Realizate din materiale recuperate tot din cartier, aceste amenajări au devenit parte din geografia locului, iar practica refolosirii s-a extins, diversificat și permanentizat după 1990. Regăsim astăzi în buclă cîteva exemple de refolosiri: creative (realizarea de mobilier urban sau decorații de grădină din elemente recuperate), civice (amenajarea unor zone de tranzit ca spatii publice sau comune, ca accesul sau grădina blocului) diversi). În pandemie au luat avînt decorațiile de grădină. realizate din elemente recuperate (mobilier, obiecte ieșite din uz, paleți) bricolate în proiectul personalizării grădinilor. La sustenabilitatea zonei o contributie importantă o au colectorii" ce sortează și recuperează materiale reciclabile din tom Unii dintre aceștia contribuie și la realizarea unor lucrări pe lîngă bloc, ca săpatul grădinilor. În lipsa unor puncte de colectare si

MOBILIER

Cartierul este acel teritoriu din oraș pe care locuitorii din proximitate îl construiesc în fiecare zi prin traiectorii și locuri pe care le folosesc împreună. În acest proces de "domesticire colectivă, reperele funcționează ca niște "puncte de sprijin' necesare pentru orientarea în spațiu și timp a comunităților. n funcție de generație sau zonă, unele repere supraviețuiesc altele coexistă, se transformă sau dispar complet, lăsînd locul unora noi. Nu puțini dintre locuitorii cartierului folosesc și astăzi denumiri locale ce indică situații dispărute, fie la nivel simbolic sau chiar fizic, cum sînt Moghioroș sau Tricodava.

Înainte de 1989, majoritatea spațiilor dintre blocuri erau

amenajate minimal: circulații (auto și pietonale), parcaje,

spații verzi (generice), platforme edilitare (ghene, bătătoare).

În contextul delegării formale către locatari a "îngrijirii s

populației de spații publice de proximitate, au apărut diverse structuri informale. Folosind materiale, cunostințe și practici

recuperate din comunitate și reciclate din industrie, locatar "s-au descurcat" și au completat din funcțiunile lipsă prin proiecte neîntrerupte de bricolaj colectiv. După 1990

acestea devin "construcții ilegale", asociate cu probleme de

proximitate, utilizare improprie ori teritorializare excesivă, unele fiind evacuate de autorități fără nici un fel de negociere. Altele s-au adaptat și au supraviețuit, regăsind astăzi în buclă

cîteva tipologii: spaţii de socializare (băncuțe sub umbrare de viță la intrarea în bloc, mese și bănci în foișoare de grădină),

adăposturi de animale (cu blană sau pene), amenajări prin grădina blocului (garduri, jardiniere, pergole, mobilier de joacă). Aici, generații diferite "ies la aer": se întîlnesc, schimbă o vorbă

dau o tablă sau privesc strada. Expresii de refolosire creativă

a resurselor limitate, aceste amenajări materializează nevoja

devenită acută în pandemie de spații de interacțiune socială de proximitate, ilustrînd dorința și capacitatea locuitorilor de a participa și de a contribui la modelarea mediului construit, dar și

amenajării" curților de bloc, dar și ca răspuns a

Dintre reperele istorice, în lungul buclei regăsim încă în uz Materna – după numele fostului magazin de copii de la parterul blocului curb sau mai rar Indiana - după fosta cofetărie "cu aborator" de la intersecția cu Romancierilor. În interiorul bucle avem *Maracana*, "sau ce a mai rămas din el"- un loc de joacă botezat după numele unui stadion mitic. Şi tot prin buclă mai olutește amintirea cu aromă optzecistă-nouăzecistă de *La Teren* arena cu zgură a marilor meciuri inter-cartiere la care venea "tot cartierul" să facă galerie, iar echipele aveau echipamente rsonalizate și nume cu răsunet (Portocala Mecanică). To n buclă mai e pomenit și demolatul La Chitrosu - un chioși fierbinte al anilor '90. Această scurtă colecție de repere se vrea de patrimoniu către cartiere, spații, subjecte, perioade și grupur

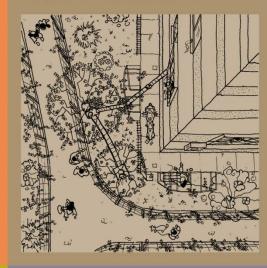


### ANIMALE

## Calitatea de "locuitor" include și alte specii în afara oamenilor:

mamifere, păsări sau insecte, toate aflate într-o relație de interdependentă cu mediul construit. Cu diferite particularități în funcție de perioadele istorice, cartierul a găzduit dintotdeauna locuitori diverși, unii dintre ei într-o relație mai strînsă cu oamenii. De la "cuțodromul" oficial, pînă la amenajările de "cotețe" informale între blocuri, aceste relații de grijă, îngrijire și de beneficii reciproc avantajoase au produs în timp transformăr ale spatiului public si domestic.

Cîteva dintre aceste ipostaze le întîlnim și în buclă: puncte de hrănire (tăvițe cu bobițe și castroane cu apă pentru pisici, ori firimituri în hrănitori pentru păsări), adăposturi de vreme rea n grădină sau la scară (cutii și cotețe căptușite, căsuțe de păsări), portaluri intrare-ieșire pentru pisici aflate într-o "relație deschisă" cu domiciliul (scări, stinghii, sfori agățate de grilajele de la parter). Odată cu dispariția câinilor maidanezi, cartierul a fost cucerit de câini în lesă, pisici maidaneze și post-maidaneze și de mai multe păsări (cum sînt coțofenele care au început să conteste dominația vrăbiilor, porumbeilor sau guguștiucilor) Intensificată în pandemie, nevoia de grijă se manifestă printr-o vecinătate extinsă în cartier. Grija este practicată de cele mai diverse categorii de locuitori și se manifestă pe măsura posibilităților fiecăruia (de timp, resurse, cunoștințe) în funcție de capacitățile de organizare (individual sau colectiv) și în relație cu spațiul de proximitate (strada, grădina blocului)



## **VEGETATIE**

Dacă la început Drumul Taberei era "un deșert", acesta se transformă și ajunge un cartier "curat, frumos și verde". Renumele de "cartier verde" sau chiar de "Predealul Bucureștiului" supraviețuiește pînă astăzi îndesirilor succesive și reducerii constante a spațiilor verzi. Proiectat generos, cartierul a avut o densitate mai redusă a imobilelor de locuit față de alte cartiere și a acordat o atenție mai mare spațiilor plantate, vizibilă în amenajarea parculului cartierului și a bulevardului principal. Locuitorii au contribuit și ei la menținerea, întreținerea diversificarea si activarea spatiilor verzi.

n buclă regăsim cîteva tipuri de habitate verzi: parcuri și aliniamente (parcul cartierului, zone de promenadă amenajate și întreținute de administrație), *grădini de blo*c (spații plantate de locatari cu flori, arbuști și foarte rar legume), *pădurea dintre* blocuri (spații închise accesului în care vegetația se dezvoltă spontan, reprezentînd sursa principală de biodiversitate). Păstrarea și plantarea plantelor rămase orfane după evacuarea unei terase din cartier ilustrează, o dată în plus, importanța crucială a prezenței acestora în peisajul local. De remarcat este numărul semnificativ de pomi fructiferi, de la corcoduș, dud, măr, prun, cais, pînă la nuc, alun sau chiar smochin. O parte dintre acești arbori sînt sădiți chiar de către grădinarii de bloc, alții nmulțindu-se spontan. Mai puțin culeși astăzi, pomii fructiferi rămîn o resursă colectivă, accesibilă locuitorilor cartierului, dar și o sursă de potențial conflict datorită fructelor

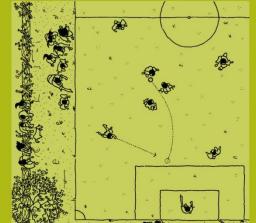
# PRACTICI COLECTIVE

Garaj DESCHIS În contextul mai larg, cercetarea presupune și prezența activă în buclă prin proiectul Garaj DESCHIS. Deschis la propriu la parterul unui bloc, într-un fost garaj, fost plafar, fostă croitorie, Garaj DESCHIS își propune să fie o "cameră suplimentară" pentru locuitorii din buclă și cercetătorii în acțiune. Cîteva din ideile de activități cu care am pornit la drum: schimb de carte, educație non-formală, cartografiere participativă, ateliere de auto-construcție, explorarea memoriei colective și a practicilor materiale, tirguri de schimb, expoziții, discuții, proiecții. Garajul este DESCHIS și funcționează ca un spațiu public, accesibil vecinilor din zonă, dar este și între-DESCHIS, funcționînd ca un spațiu semi-public, utilizat ca punct de lucru în cercetarea de teren și sală de clasă în educația aplicată.



### REFOLOSIRE

mîncare în anumite puncte de schimb informale. Aceste practici de schimb si ajutor reciproc reprezintă o expresie a convivialității locuirii în zonă și o resursă pentru comunitate



# vernisaj circular de-alungul buclei în căutarea graficii alternative; 4.Prin curtea școlii – un scurt-circuit Nord-Sud ce leagă spații

Proiectate după principiile "urbanismului liber", imobilele din

cartier sînt deservite de o retea de străzi secundare si alei pietonale curbe, generatoare de perspective dinamice printro-mare de verde, conferind cartierului o atmosferă de "stațiune estivală". Aici, vizitatorii, taximetriștii sau curierii se pierd mai

mereu pe aleile sinuoase în căutarea blocurilor depărtate de

stradă. Locuitorii se orientează după propriile repere, formîndu-

și trasee după destinațiile zilnice. Aceștia identifică adresele mai

degrabă ca "un pîlc" de imobile aparținînd aceluiași indicativ:

la "Pe-uri", "Te-uri" sau "D-uri". Unele dintre aceste indicative

reprezintă acronime păstrate din planurile de sistematizare care

indică tipologia imobilului de locuit - de exemplu "OD" provenind

Harta propune 4 trasee de explorare a buclei: 1.Strada interioară

– o legătură mediană Est-Vest punctată cu servicii de proximitate și spații de socializare; 2. Grădinile blocului – o plimbare prin

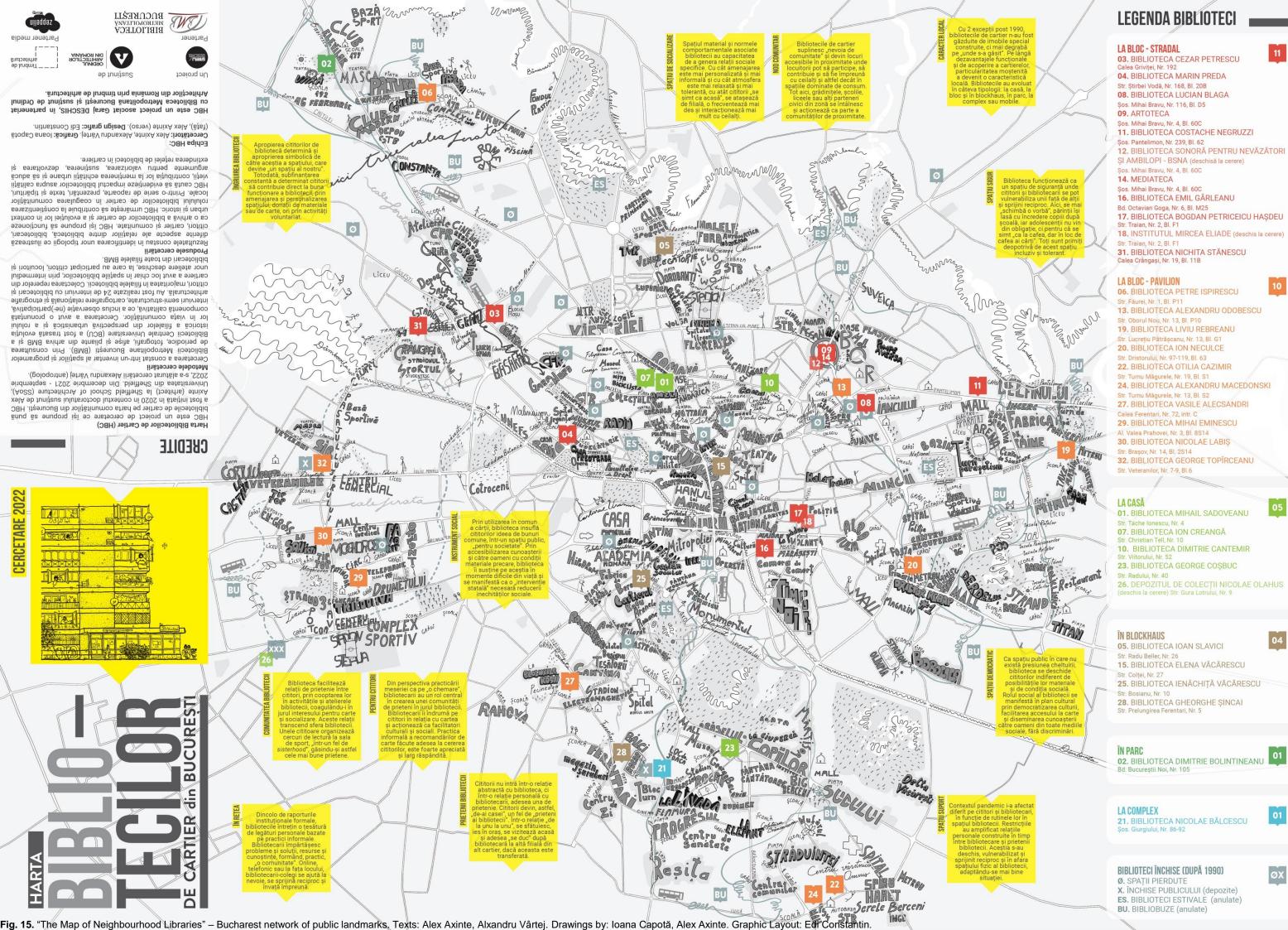
Sud, printre spațiile verzi îngrijite de locatari; 3. Arta la bloc - un

TRASEE

de la "Orientare Dublă".

de jocuri și joacă. Traseele de explorare propun vizit ocazionali, dar si locuitorilor mai vechi, o perspectivă nouă asupra zonei, prin care locuri, spații și situații produse de către locuitorii din buclă sînt valorificate ca o contribuție esențială la identitatea cartierului, functionînd ca resurse de potential pentru

Fig. 14. "Map of Collective Practices from Bucla" – typologies of informal practices. Texts: Alex Axinte, with Bogdan Iancu, Diana Culescu, Ioana Tudora. Drawings by: Alex Axinte. Graphic Layout: Edi Constantin.



CERCETARE 202

20 ION NECHI CE

21 NICOLAF BĂLCESCII

24. ALEXANDRU MACEDONSKI

25. IENĂCHITĂ VĂCĂRESCU

31. NICHITA STĂNESCU 📴

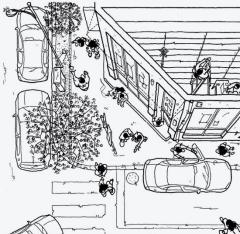
X. GHEORGHE LAZĂR

CENTRIII DE TINERET

26 DEPOZITIJI DE COLECTI NICOLAE OLAHUS

Pe lângă casele și vilele nationalizate care au găzduit bibliotec începând cu 1950, s-au deschis filiale și la parterul imobilelor de locuințe colective construite în perioada interbelică. Ridicate în zonele centrale de antreprenorii privati din epocă, aceste de vânzare sau închiriere. Imobilele de ne străzile principale sau din zonele cu vad erau prevăzute cu spații comerciale la parter. Prin naționalizarea imobilelor, aceste spații intră în circuitul

Deschise în foste cârciumi, baruri, birturi, magazine, prăvălii sau chiar în sedii de hănci, hibliotecile din blockhaus au beneficiat de mostenirea de spațiu-reper în cartier pe care l-au avut funcțiunile antérioare. Fiecare bibliotecă a dezvoltat astfel o personalitate specială în raport cu descendența, spațiul, strada, memoria s rețelele de vecinătate pe care le împărțea cu imobilul gazdă. Aici pivnița, intrarea secundară și scara de serviciu a servitorilor cotloanele, împreună cu locatarii "cei vechi" de deasupra și cu egendele urbane ce le învăluie, au contribuit la articularea unu caracter distinct al fiecărei biblioteci. Câteva dintre cele care au supraviețuit retrocedării imobilelor foștilor proprietari din anii 1990-2000 se găsesc astăzi pe străzi intens comerciale rămânând ca niste "oaze de liniste dintre bancă si farmacie" Bibliotecile din blockhaus-uri au o personalitate specifică asemănătoare bibliotecilor la casă sau vilă, dar conectate la c viată urbană trepidantă, similară cu bibliotecile de la bloc stradal.

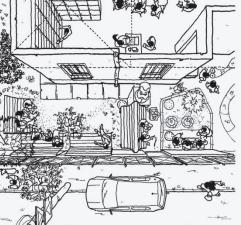




Începând cu 1949, dar mai ales odată cu reorganizarea legislativa

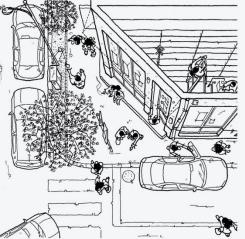
a bibliotecilor din 1951, un "val" de biblioteci publice se deschid în București, în special în cartierele periferice. Însă acestea nu erau instalate în construcții noi, dedicate. Urgența demersului i lipsa constantă a fondurilor Consiliilor Populare de raion a făcut ca bibliotecile să fie mereu găzduite în Case de Cultură în Cluburi Muncitorești, dar mai ales în imobile naționalizate. Îi 1962, în București funționau peste 50 de biblioteci "populare" majoritatea deschise în case cu curte.

Bibliotecile la casă erau de 2 tipuri, în funcție de caracterul zone pe care o deserveau: în case mai răsărite din mahalalele orașului (1 nivel, cu camere scunde, ce uneori includeau și o prăvălie sau cârciumă la stradă) sau în vile din zonele centrale (1-2 nivele cu camere înalte, organizate cu zone de primire, scară interioară și hol central). În ambele variante, casa beneficia de o curte plantată cu flori și pomi fructiferi, o adevărată "binecuvântare" pentru activitătile bibliotecii, dar care se cerea tot timpul îngrijită ăturată și udată. Biblioteca păstra un aer domestic, intim ș cald, furnizat si de încălzirea cu sobe, de araniarea camerelo dar și de poveștile caselor. După relocări și închideri, mai există și astăzi câteva biblioteci la casă, care, chiar și în circuitul public au rămas "case ale locului", ancorate în reteaua de vecinătate domestică. Aici, într-ajutorarea, schimbul, darul, privitul și vorba peste gard contribuie la mentinerea unei relatii personalizate cu cartierul "cam ca într-un sat"



### Biblioteca cu vad

comertului socialist, găzduind și biblioteci de cartier.

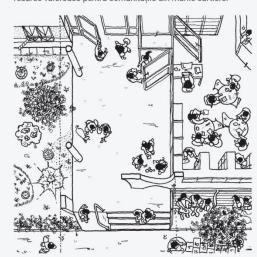








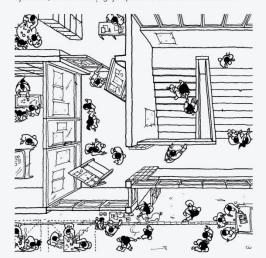
Se disting 2 tipuri de biblioteci la bloc: pavilion (în mijlocu comunității) – în blocuri de garsoniere cu locuințe la parter construiteîn anii 1960-1970, articulateîn microraioane, refolosind proiecte tip de hotel, unde recepția era o construcție exterioară transformată aici în "cameră de întruniri familiale", administrație magazin sau bibliotecă; și stradal (în zone cu vad) - în blocuri cu spații comerciale la parter din anii 1970-1980, similare cu blockhaus-urile interbelice, ce bordau marile bulevarde coridor Atât spațiul, cât și modul informal de funcționare le face să fie "de bloc", devenind parte din ecosistemul de practici spatiale și relații de vecinătate specifice vieții la bloc. La nevoie "sunați a interfon" de către bibliotecari, vecinii-cititori dezvoltă ur atasament fată de "biblioteca noastră", bazat pe împrumut schimb, ajutor și grijă. După retrocedările din anii 1990-2000, peste 65% din filialele rămase sunt la bloc, funcționând ca resurse valoroase pentru comunitătile din marile cartiere.



### Biblioteca cooperativă

Apartamentele si programele educationale aveau prioritate la construcție în cadrul noilor ansambluri. Din rațiuni economice, echipamentele comerciale, și mai ales cele socio-culturale, erau adesea reduse fată de plan, construite cu întârziere sau rămâneau doar pe hârtie. Când nevoia de spatii o impunea programele culturale erau "îmbinate" cu Complexul Comercial Astfel, se puteau deschide aici și biblioteci, însă doar la nivelul superior al Complexului, obținându-se "izolarea necesară" față de aglomeratia si circulatia intensă" a străzii comerciale.

Pe fondul lipsei de spații dedicate, au fost deschise bibliotec nu doar în Centrele Culturale, în Cluburile Muncitoresti sau la parterul blocurilor, ci si în Complexele Mestesugăresti Echipamente edilitare specifice ansamblurilor cu locuințe la parter construite în anii 1960-1970, construcții independente de 2 niveluri, amplasate în zone cu vad, aceste Complexe concentrau o serie de spații comerciale și servicii de proximitate. Mai degrabă ca o excepție, o filială este găzduită și astăzi într-un astfel de Complex, ce ilustrează simbioza creativă între diferite forme de organizare economică: cooperatiste, antreprenoriale si corporatiste. Aici, fragmentarea si privatizarea au determinat egradarea spațiilor comune, îngrijite informal de ultimii actori publici din Complex. Filiala beneficiază în continuare de avantaiul locului cu vad și de cultivarea relațiilor personalizate, dezvoltând un caracter particular, bazat pe mostenirea practicilor de întrajutorare, colaborare si grijă specifice cartierelor de blocuri.



## ÎN PARC

ZIII BIL

Parte din programul Bibliotecilor Mobile, primele Biblioteci Estivale se deschid în anii 1950 în parcurile din stațiunile de "cură și odihnă" de la munte și mare. Cum "cititul pe timp de vară" trebuia încuraiat, ideea e preluată și în orașe. În 1949 se deschid 5 "biblioteci volante" în ștrandurile din București pe perioada verii. Le urmează mai multe "biblioteci sezoniere" ce se deschid începând cu 1950-51 în "parcurile de cultură și odihnă", printre care Stalin, 8 Mai, 23 August, Libertății sau Cișmigiu Herăstrău, Tei, Național și Carol, după denumirile actuale).

În ciuda numeroaselor biblioteci nou deschise, spațiile mici, lipsa fondurilor, orașul în expansiune și urgența accesului la carte a unei populații în creștere, au determinat apariția unor biblioteci complementare. Astfel apar "Bibliotecile Mobile" ca programe asociate filialelor fixe: găzduite în spații publice ("Bibl Estivale" din parcuri) sau în instituții ("Coltul Rosu" din fabrici) sau chiar în spații private gestionate de către cititori voluntari

Unele dintre ele au fost mobile la propriu: Bibliobuzele, Autobuze de transport călători dotate cu rafturi, operate de un șofer și o bibliotecară, Bibliobuzele au funcționat între 1974 - 1992 pe 4 trasee ce deserveau zone cu filiale mici, putine sau deloc, mai ales în cartierele nou construite. Bibliobuzele plecau pe traseu si opreau după un orar săptămânal în statii prestabilite din zone reper. Aici "niciodată n-au fost probleme cu parcarea", însă nu era ușor pentru bibliotecarii care "iarna înghețau și vara se

coceau". În pofida caracterului temporar, în jurul statiilor s-a dezvoltat, similar cu filialele fixe, o rețea de "prieteni ai bibliotecii" alcătuită din cititori fideli, vecini săritori sau angajați din zonă pe care bibliotecara "îi stia ca pe propriile buzunare". În ultimii ani, programele BMB "Caravana Poveștilor" (2016-2017) ș Biblioteca la Firul Jerbii" (2021-2022), sustinute de Remorca de Cercetare și Activare (RCA) realizată de studioBASAR, au reluat parțial practica bibliotecilor temporare deschise în parcuri, la

intersectia între Bibliobuze și Bibliotecile Estivale.

("Bibliotecile de Ćasă" la domiciliu).

n parcul Herăstrău au activat bibliotecile A și B, deservite de câte un bibliotecar, găzduite în pavilioane alcătuite dintr-o structură usoară, deschise doar pe perioada verii si aprovizionate cu carte din aceleași depozite ca și Bibliobuzele. Pavilioanele aveau o terasă acoperită generoasă ce funcționa ca o "sală de lectură fără ziduri", foarte căutată în zilele calde și în timpul sesiunilor de examene. În urma gestiunii dificile și a politicilor de austeritate de după 1990, Bibliotecile Estivale se închid, constructiile lor fiind transformate în terase și restaurante. Nu doar bibliotecile temporare au fost niște puncte de atracție în parcurile orașului, ci si filiale de sine stătătoare, găzduite de construcții permanente Supranumită "biblioteca din parc", una dintre aceste filiale mai există și astăzi. Aidoma fostelor biblioteci estivale, filiala beneficiază de contextul generos al parcului public si întretine legături personalizate cu "permanenții" din cartier, dezvotând ur caracter distinct similar cu o bibliotecă de casă





22. OTILIA CAZIMIR 👺 👺

Ø. CAMIL PETRESCU

A GEORGE CĂLINESCII

### 3.2.4. Live Projects

Numerous developments worldwide attests for a paradigm shift towards a more civically engaged university (Watson et al., 2013; Ostrander, 2004). Such transformations are in fact reclaiming the university's foundational civic role through a renewed "scholarship of engagement" (Boyer, 1996, in Barker, 2004). Renouncing the academic distance from the real world. transgressing disciplines, approaching critical issues in society and especially involving those affected by them, the 'civic university' aims to produce and share knowledge with and for the public. Among the direct applications of the university's 'civic turn' is the development in the past years of Live Projects as a pedagogy by practice method (Harriss & Widder, 2014; Butterworth et al., 2013). By adopting a participatory position, the students are going 'out there' to collaborate with communities on the ground. Unlike the abstract exercises used at school, students have to creatively engage with the provocations of a real context and respond in real time. They are 'live' in the sense that they are going beyond disengaged research, becoming propositional, aiming for an applied end result.

Keeping several similar core characteristics, the method was adopted and evolved in various local contexts. Seeking for the recovery of the public dimension in the local architectural practice, studioBASAR initiated a series Public Space Workshops<sup>32</sup> where 'citizen students' were engaging hands on through tactical urbanism in the ad-hoc production of public spaces. The experience from these workshops was later crystallized into the City School applied education programme, which was grounded in Bucharest context. Place-based, research-driven and especially aiming for a hands-on spatial transformation, City School<sup>33</sup> worked as an interdisciplinary laboratory.<sup>34</sup> In the context of the critical situation of public libraries, the project involved tutors and participants from multiple disciplines, together with users, librarians and neighbours. As the library became a classroom and an informal community centre, the project went beyond producing spatial transformation and constructed situated, embodied and actionable knowledge. By involving multiple stakeholders into problem solving fieldwork research, City School enacted a pedagogical version of an Action Research (AR) project. In the same time, it enriched the students' learning experiences, skilling them up into participatory practices, and above all, the program achieved the coproducing of knowledge which carried a transformative potential for diverse participants (Axinte, 2018).

As a continuation of these developments and aiming to open up the research not just for the collective, like district's residents or library users, but also towards other researchers, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Started since 2011, the workshops took place in various local, regional and international contexts, developed in diverse collaborations after invitation from artistic or educational partners, more here: http://www.studiobasar.ro/?p=4963&lang=en

City School (2015-2017) was coordinated by studioBASAR, including initiators: Alex Axinte, Cristi Borcan, Tudor Elian,

and tutors: Daniela Calciu, Bogdan Iancu, Anca Creţu, Diana Culescu, Ana-Dora Matei, Alecs Vasiliu.

34 The project included tutors and students from architecture, landscape design and sociology. Project's partners included Bucharest Metropolitan Library (BMB), Bucharest City hall Sector 6, University of Architecture and Urbanism "Ion Mincu", Bucharest (UAUIM), National School of Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest (SNSPA), University of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, Bucharest (USAMV) and tenant associations.

Garage School<sup>35</sup> applied education program was initiated in the framework of the OPEN Garage fieldwork research phase.<sup>36</sup> Partnering with several educational institutions<sup>37</sup> the programme offered to the participating students a novel experience in the local context.<sup>38</sup> Understood as a form of shared knowledge, the methods used in the current research were applied under guidance by the participating students. Taking research' themes and fieldwork as a starting point, students engaged in fieldwork qualitative research of the Bucla from Drumul Taberei district. From walking, non-participant and participant observation, to interviewing and mapping, proposing and communication, the methods used were multi-disciplinary, creatively applied and adapted on the spot (Fig.17).



Fig. 17. Fieldwork research in Buclă with students from Master of Anthropology and Master of Visual Studies and Society (SNSPA). Tutors: Bogdan lancu and Alex Axinte. Photo by the current author.

 $<sup>^{35}</sup>$  The program was active in 2021 and 2022 and was initiated and coordinated by Alex Axinte, together with a team of

tutors, including Diana Culescu, Bogdan lancu and Ioana Tudora.

36 OPEN Garage project was initiated in 2020 by Alex Axinte as part of his Ph.D. fieldwork. In 2021, after receiving a grant from the Romanian Order of Architects, the research activities and team were expanded to include: Bogdan lancu (anthropologist), Iris Serban (anthropologist), Anca Nită (sociologist), Ileana Szasz (director), Diana Culescu (landscape designer), Ioana Tudora (architect), Ioana Irinciuc (librarian).

Project's educational partners included Faculty of Political Sciences, National School of Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest (SNSPA), Faculty of Landscape Design, University of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, Bucharest (USAMV).

Fieldwork experiences, other than summer schools or independent initiatives are still quite rare the formal educational local institutions, still practicing a pedagogical model abstracted and distanced from the world.

Compared to the previous precedents, the team composition slipped back to disciplinary bounded groups working independently.<sup>39</sup> Also, by lacking a spatial transformation objective allowed the research to develop following dynamics encountered along the way. The students of landscape design<sup>40</sup> and of sociology<sup>41</sup> focused on informal collective practices developed by the district residents. The results of their research joined the public communication of project, such as the exhibition, or the online channels, contributing to the support and valuing research practices into the public discourse. Perhaps difficult to measure in terms of impact, but nevertheless valuable, the fieldwork actually meant multiple social interactions among the students and area's residents. Visited, inquired, researched or just talked to, the residents involved in the daily care of the in between spaces, such were the informal gardeners disregarded in the official discourse, felt valued and supported in their endeavour. Thus, the applied education program evidenced the role of informal practices, communicated publicly their value and supported while researching them (Fig.18). Nevertheless, excepting some cultural and professional actors, local authorities didn't showed understanding and recognition for the students' results and proposals, continuing to manage the informal practices in a top-down approach, rather acting against them, under the paradigm of "civilization".42

In addition to inquiring informal practices, the research phase of neighbourhood libraries also had an applied education component, as an extension of "The Map of Neighbourhood Libraries of Bucharest" project. 43 Developed in partnership with Live. UAUIM, one of the few recently initiated local applied education programs,44 the workshop went beyond participants' engaging with the field and practising research methods, and assumed also spatial transformation goal, as a reference to the City School model. As a synthesis of previous experiences, the programme adapted to the research subject, namely neighbourhood public libraries. If for the informal practices, the applied education chooses to support their cause and rather intervene in the public discourse with evidences, arguments and narratives, in the case of the libraries that are always in difficult situations, we chose to intervene spatially. The participating students from Architecture went within a few weeks' time from field research, to participatory design, into becoming fully propositional, up until they intervene hands-on and transformed the nearby library

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> As an independent project just partnering with institutional educational bodies, combined with limitations and uncertainties brought by the pandemic period, it was very difficult to harmonize the program of different participant, so we decided to organize them separately.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> For two consecutive years of 1st year students from the Faculty of Landscape Design, University of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, Bucharest (USAMV) participated in the project, having the research topic and area as their studio project.

For one summer, students from the MA level at the Faculty of Political Sciences, National School of Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest (SNSPA) participated in the project, having the research topic and area as their fieldwork research.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Although representatives of local administration of Sector 6 were invited several times to attend students' final presentations, no further discussions followed, or any adoption of some of the research conclusions and suggestions regarding the informal practices of using, transforming and managing in between spaces in Drumul Taberei district.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> The applied education program was hosted by a library branch investigated during the previous research phase. <sup>44</sup> This is an applied education format developed since within the Faculty of Architecture, University of Architecture of Architecture and Urbanism "Ion Mincu", Bucharest (UAUIM).

garden (Fig.19,20). As the library was located on the ground floor of a collective apartment building<sup>45</sup> and the surrounding green space was partially taken care of by tenants and librarians, the intervention overlapped with previous research from the Garage School over ephemeral and informal practices. Moreover, at the end of the action, the team's composition became multidisciplinary, when students from Landscape Design worked side by side with those from architecture, together with readers and librarians in completing the garden's arrangement. 46 Hence, in addition to the pedagogical impact, the action enacted a spatialized manifesto for making visible the cause of public libraries. Triggering solidarity, benefited from donations, volunteer and collective support, the workshop signalled the library's importance to the local community, as well as the potential of the in between green spaces to act as connecting devices between readers, librarians and neighbours. However, the small intervention wasn't followed by more infrastructural support from public administration needed to make the area more accessible and wasn't picked up as a model for intervention among the green spaces of the community, showing the still marginal visibility and long-term limitation of such hands-on projects in the local context.

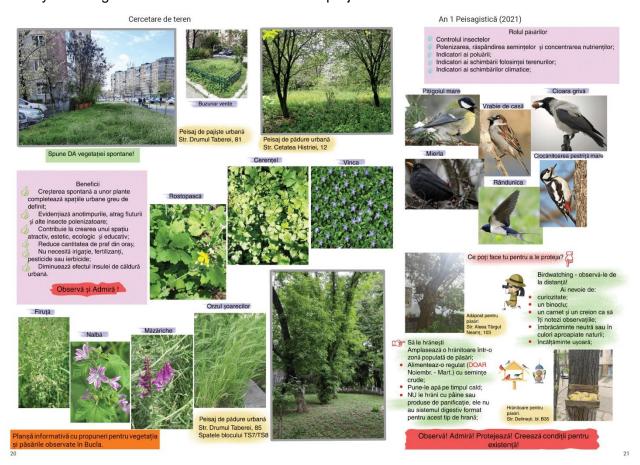


Fig. 18. Analysis for the fieldwork research project of students from Year 1 Landscape Design (USAMV). Tutors: Ioana Tudora, Diana Culescu and Alex Axinte. Project by: Mariana David.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> The "Alexandru Odobescu" branch of Bucharest Metropolitan Library (BMB).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> We received material donations (plants, soil, stones) and voluntary help to arrange the garden from the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students from the Faculty of Landscape Design, University of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, Bucharest (USAMV).



**Fig. 19.** Intervention phase of the live project involving Year 3 students from Architecture (UAUIM) with the contribution of Year 2 students from Landscape Design (USAMV), in the framework of Live.UAUIM program. Tutors: Alex Axinte, together with Vera Dobrescu. "Alexandru Odobescu" Library, Bucharest. Photo by the current author.



**Fig. 20.** The garden of the library where the residents added a new bench after the project was completed, "Alexandru Odobescu" Library, Bucharest, (2022). Photo by the current author.

### 3.2.5. OPEN Garage

Perhaps less obvious, the OPEN Garage was an essential support for the inquiry, and as such became a research method. Besides its project side, which turned the fieldwork more towards an action research process and created the context for the research team and topics' expansion, while allowing the educational or the communication components to grow, it was the space itself which carried methodological agency. In the context of the abandonment of the Inter/LAB fieldwork, going by the garage in the early stages functioned as a transition period until the articulation of a new fieldwork, which came in the form of the OPEN Garage project (see Tools). During this in between time and space of watching and listening, sketching and drafting, the everyday life as a garage user offered a valuable authentic perspective from within, which orientated the future approach to fieldwork, the choice of methods and the design of programming. The garage functioned as an entry point for the researcher into the fieldwork, but also as a welcoming space for the community into the project. This informal use of the garage didn't disappear once the fieldwork research and public activities took off, as the garage became The Garage. The two stances began to feed each other and form a hybrid between practice and life. The Garage with its many uses – research lab, classroom, community centre, the book exchange, the exhibitions or other activities, working and living space – was plugged into the neighbourhood's relational network, blending in the local practices and everyday spatial protocols. Using the Garage allowed the multiplication of designer's role and agency which could expand into designer as librarian, as neighbour or as researcher. "Alex, the neighbour" scribbled on a piece of paper from a corner shop seller came after a while as a certification of a long desired acceptance in the local network. Through the Garage, I developed more acquaintances in the area, relationships based on spontaneous daily interactions, gifts and food exchange, mutual help or even inclusion through casual gossip. However, the public nature of the activities by the garage was perceived as a threat by some neighbours. Using traditional local tactics, such as throwing water from their window or threatening to file an official complaint for noise, they eventually evidenced the limits for the activities by the Garage and tempered the feeling of acceptance, illustrating also the ever present conflicting side of local neighbourly relations. Thus, the Garage became a relational device, which allowed for a situated understanding of the latent commoning practices, embodied and practiced through using the space.

From a different perspective, the Garage contributed in anchoring the research in the surrounding area by spatializing the relation to other local informal practices, thus further supporting the participative research. The Garage worked also as an elicitation component for other research methods, creating a research context and constructing opportunities for ethnography, mapping or live projects. The organised activities by the Garage or in the nearby public spaces allowed the researchers to encounter participants and join situations to which they wouldn't otherwise access. "I also have a garage in the area" was a useful conversation starter with the local residents inquired throughout the research, which decentred me as the researcher –

participant power positioning into a more neighbourly one. The opening of the Garage towards the community, hosting the library, the workshops or the exhibitions, welcomed in users which also contributed to the on-going research. "I've just dropped by to say hello!" was a recurring line by the Garage regulars, who were not coming especially for the book exchange, the exhibitions or other activities, but sometimes just for chatting and socialisation. These casual users, occasional guests or next door neighbours, created a social space around the Garage which contributed to a more diffuse research practice. Beyond the methodological distinctions and limitations of classical methods, mixed with everyday life and spanning over a longer period, the Garage as elicitation generated a tacit understanding and intuitive reporting for the researched topics.

The repurposing and activation of the Garage differs from what is usually defined as "temporary urbanism", which seeks to revitalise through design and activate underused spaces. For the OPEN Garage, the design worked less at the spatial level, but rather aimed to revitalise the relationship among people, places and stories. At the same time, there are a number of current developments, like Urban Living Lab (ULL) (Rizzo et al., 2021) which potentially could work as a retroactive reference to OPEN Garage. However, the context in which the Garage was initiated required a longer period of accommodation and consolidation of its position on the community' map of the area. External difficulties, such as the pandemic which affected its programing and even daily use, or internal weaknesses, such as lacking a long-term team for rotating administrative responsibilities, completed by its reduced spatial dimensions, proximity issues and lacking consolidated civic partners, prevented the project from evolving towards a "living lab" type of space, that could initiate and maintained a civic life in the area and in the district. The Garage remained a space for anchoring the fieldwork research, for hosting basic community functions, in the same time dedicated to the local memory and promoting applied education.

While researching the area and using the space, the vision of the Garage being a potential prototype for a "small-but-many" micro-equipment has diminished along the way. This conclusion is also partially related to the garage's quite small dimensions of the interior space and to its close proximity with the dwellings for hosting too intensive community activities. However, the Garage counted as a situation when local latent commons were evidenced and their activation was achieved through a combination between informal spatial practice, cultural and educational activation, all entangled with a way of life. This was the main lesson, not about the particular situation of transforming a garage into a community equipment, but about the necessary conditions, approaches, steps, tools and ingredients for triggering the activation of local commoning. Thus, by resisting the temptation of over-institutionalization and scalability which could rather drive away existing latent commons, the lessons learned by the Garage also point to the direction of accepting the ephemeral existence of such endeavours in the local context. Like the informal gardens that are abandoned only to blossom again, like the garage shops that suddenly open and go bankrupt and reopen again elsewhere, like the animal shelters that decay and are renewed by different caretakers for different guests, also the OPEN Garage can become again the

CLOSED Garage. But, as the stories of the neighbourhood have shown, the disappearance of an ephemeral space doesn't mean that it disappeared without a trace and cannot flourish elsewhere, in a different form. These informal and ephemeral practices always found a way to adapt, to transform and to reinvent themselves to suit users' needs in the in between gaps of historical eras, built spaces, formal institutions and public policies. Lacking support from the public institutions, while having a low capacity to be appropriated and continued by other residents, the project stands as a research-driven spatialization of several intersecting conjunctures, situated in the local context. Thus, remaining somehow true to its foundational dwelling space dimension, The Garage can become the garage again, however producing in the meantime valuable lessons for future interventions in the context of collective housing.

## **TOOLS**

## **CHARTS**

A set of charts from a retroactive user manual for operating the research and the activation of spaces such as OPEN Garage.

# **OPEN Garage**

NEW&REUSED



Year: since 2020

**Context:** rented out former garage transformed into a store, during the PhD fieldwork.

**Specifications:** ground floor space, 5X3m size, 2.2m in height; concrete walls and ceiling, insulated windows and door, metallic gate; water with sink, sewage with toilet, electricity and heating.

**Operation:** base for fieldwork research; street observation point; classroom for children workshops and student live projects; library space; local gallery; space for the community; social infrastructure, chatting opportunity with nearby neighbours;

**Handling:** locking-unlocking the metal gate and the glass door, switch on/ off light and water; take in/ out the library accessories.

**Accessories:** mobile library book shelf; mobile bill-board; pop-up table and chairs;

**Caution:** indoor space too small for activities beyond 10 persons; outdoor space too close to neighbours' windows to host loud and crowded activities; potential conflict with cars parking in front;

**Maintenance:** it requires utilities bill (water and electricity); utilities repair if needed (sink, toilet); replacing consumable (bulbs, toilet paper, soap); weekly cleaning (indoor and outdoor).

**Recycle:** reused and transformed few times before, if rented out it can host a wide range of functions, from private space for hobby, storage, workout, to public spaces such as corner shops, small activities, or administrative space; due to its transformations, it can't host a car park anymore; the program developed during the fieldwork can be recycled, as it can be hosted by other ground floor spaces.

**Support:** for the Research Lab, Library, School, Gallery and Community Hub.

**Process:** initially used as a research base; slowly opening to public activities (education, exhibition); becoming a relational device between space operators and neighbours.

## The MOBILE SHELF

NEW



Year: 2021

**Context:** part of the Garage Library initiated during the PhD fieldwork.

**Specifications:** 4 plastic storage boxes bought from DIY store; tied together with a rope; completed by plastic dowels;

**Operation:** selecting some books from the main shelves inside the garage to be exhibited in the mobile shelf outside;

**Handling:** taking out the mobile shelf when opening the Garage; and taking it back in at the end of the day when closing it;

**Accessories:** mobile wooden board announcing the Library program and activities;

**Caution:** its position in front of the garage and underneath residents' windows exposed the shelf and the books to water leaks from individual heating during winter, or flower watering and air conditioning water drips during summer; also rain can damage the books and if exposed for longer time, sun affects them; if overloaded with books the shelf can be toppled by

kids trying to grab or climb on it;

**Maintenance:** tighten the rope of the mobile shelf from time to time; cleaning the boxes of dust, droppings; if damaged, the boxes can be easily replaced, extended, replicated;

**Recycle:** if the library will close, the shelf can be donated to the public libraries in the district; or it can be dismantled and the boxes used for storage;

**Support:** signals towards the street the existence of the Library inside the Garage; exhibits books to borrow:

**Process:** learning from other garages from the district that were transformed into corner shops or hosting small services which placed a signal in front of the garage; assembling a functional signal out of ready-made objects; the shelf is attracting passers-by which are otherwise more reluctant to open the garage door, so they first stop by the shelf and thus we can engage in a conversation and welcome them in;

### **TOOLS**

## The TRAVELLING WORKSHOP

NEW



Year: 2021

**Context:** part of the Garage Library initiated during the PhD fieldwork.

**Specifications:** 1 wooden pallet with 4 wheels; pulled out by a rope on the street; carrying 6 small plastic chairs; gardening tools and workshop materials;

**Operation:** transporting from the Garage materials needed for Gardening Workshops; installation near the gardens and setting up a base;

**Handling:** pulling the pallet on the street for a short distance from the Garage to the nearby garden; blocking the wheels and arranging the pallet as a table with chairs for the workshop;

**Accessories:** plastic chairs; plastic boxes for workshop materials;

**Caution:** 2 persons are needed to pull and guide the wheeling pallet on the streets; extra precautions needed when crossing or traveling on the public roads;

**Maintenance:** storing the pallet indoors; manoeuvring it into transport position might require 2 persons due to its weight;

**Recycle:** wheels can be dismantled and used for another structure; wooden pallets can be returned to transport circuits, or reused in various designs;

**Support:** for the Planting Workshops which took place in the proximity of the Garage and needed to transport plants, materials and tools as well as some support furniture for the creative part.

**Process:** learning from previous projects of place making how to quickly assembly a mobile pallet which is useful in short distances transportation and versatile enough to support also the activities.

## The POP-UP CLASSROOM

NEW



Year: 2021

**Context:** part of the Garage Library and Garage School initiated during the PhD fieldwork.

**Specifications:** 2 wooden boards produced for formwork; 4 foldable wooden supports; 12 plastic chairs; 1 wooden pallet on wheels;

**Operation:** transporting from the Garage the furniture and materials needed for Storytelling Workshops; installing it in the playground near the Garage and setting the classroom;

**Handling:** pulling the pallet on the street for a short distance from the Garage to the nearby playground; arranging the table and chairs for the activity;

**Accessories:** plastic chairs; plastic boxes for workshop materials;

**Caution:** 2 persons are needed to pull and guide the wheeling pallet on the streets; extra precautions needed when crossing or traveling on the public roads; wooden boards need to be fixed on the foldable supports as a precaution during the activity;

Maintenance: store the pallet, wooden boards and

foldable legs indoors; manoeuvring them into transport position may require 2 persons due to their weight;

**Recycle:** wheels can be dismantled and used to another structure; wooden pallets can be returned to transport circuits, or reused in various designs; wooden boards and foldable supports can be reused;

**Support:** for the Storytelling Workshops which took place in the proximity of the Garage and needed to transport the furniture and materials; useful as furniture for the Exhibition and School:

**Process:** learning from previous workshops organized inside and in front of the Garage by using quick to assemble available basic elements for different activities; also using the mobile pallet designed for Gardening Workshops for transportation;

### **TOOLS**

## The MEMORY INSTALLATIONS

NEW



Year: 2021

**Context:** part of the research by the Garage initiated during the PhD fieldwork.

**Specifications:** 2 wooden boards produced for formwork; 4 foldable wooden supports; a drawer retrieved from the street;

**Operation:** arranging several installations like "Working Desk" or the "Memory Drawer" inside the Garage, aiming to illustrate and communicate to the visitors the memory theme of the research;

**Handling:** the installations are available to the visitors when the Garage is opened; over time, the arrangement changes, depending on the evolving topic of their content;

**Accessories:** desk lamps; table cloth; cardboard boxes for support;

**Caution:** the interactive part of the exhibition requires increased protection in order not to damage the exposed content;

**Maintenance:** periodic cleaning; possibly replacing elements damaged by interaction with the public;

**Recycle:** after dismantling the exhibition, the wooden boards and foldable supports can be reused in other designs;

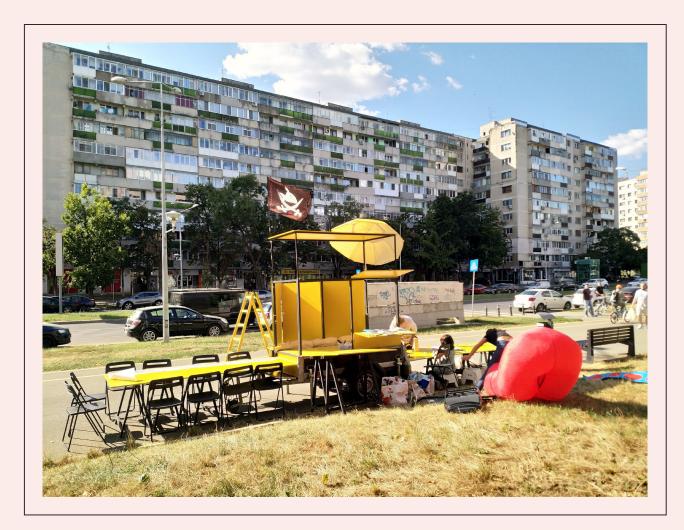
**Support:** the Garage Gallery exhibiting the communication phase of the research towards the local audience;

**Process:** an open ended experiment among the project's team to exhibit the products of the research through a spatial design which includes objects, images, drawings and quotes;

### **TOOLS**

## The TRAILER

REUSED



Year: since 2016

**Context:** produced by studioBASAR in the framework of the grant awarded project "City School".

**Specifications:** a car trailer extended with a customized structure of metal frame and wood boards; a box of 1X2m and 2m in height in closed position; 3X7.5m at the base and 2.5m in height in open position by extending structure and boards;

**Operation:** transforms into workshop tables for children and adults, a mini-bar, a cooking table, a DJ desk, exhibition boards and blackboards, bookshelves, a small stage and an outdoor cinema.

**Handling:** towed by any car with a hook; easy to maneuver on flat surfaces; assembly-disassembly requires 2 people and takes about 30 minutes.

Accessories: projector, folding screen, sound system and power generator; shade foil attached to the pavilion and supported by a folding stair; small chairs for children; folding chairs;

**Caution:** precautions when coupling and uncoupling the trailer to the car; 2 people needed when manoeu-

vring and installing; difficult and dangerous to handle and install it on slopes, as it has no built in brakes and just 4 mechanical support legs; parking between events can be problematic;

**Maintenance:** as a registered vehicle allowed to travel the public roads it needs insurance, periodic checks and tax payment; the wooden panels needs periodic cleaning and repaint; the metallic joints fixing are getting rusted and needs replacements; the protecting canvas gets damaged and needs to be patched;

**Recycle:** the whole structure can be dismantled, the structure can be reused for other designs and the trailer can be further used as a transport vehicle;

**Support:** pop-up events in public spaces; exporting the activities from the Garage to a wider audience;

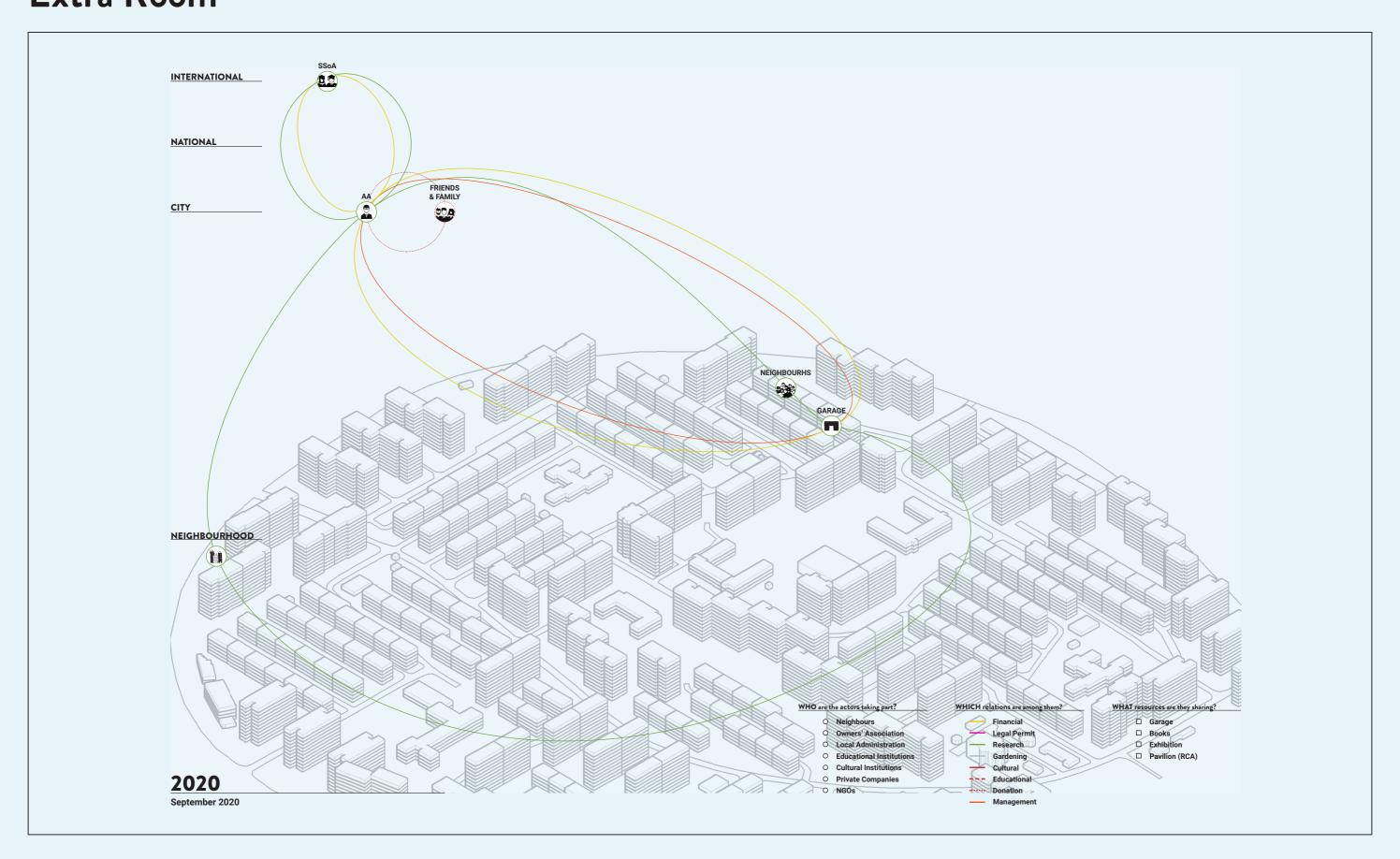
**Process:** the Trailer has been borrowed by public institutions, civic groups, cultural NGOs; it supported more than 60 events in public space (by 2023); it supported the OPEN Garage 2 days event "Come Out to the Trailer!", part of Street Delivery festival 2021.

## **PILOT**

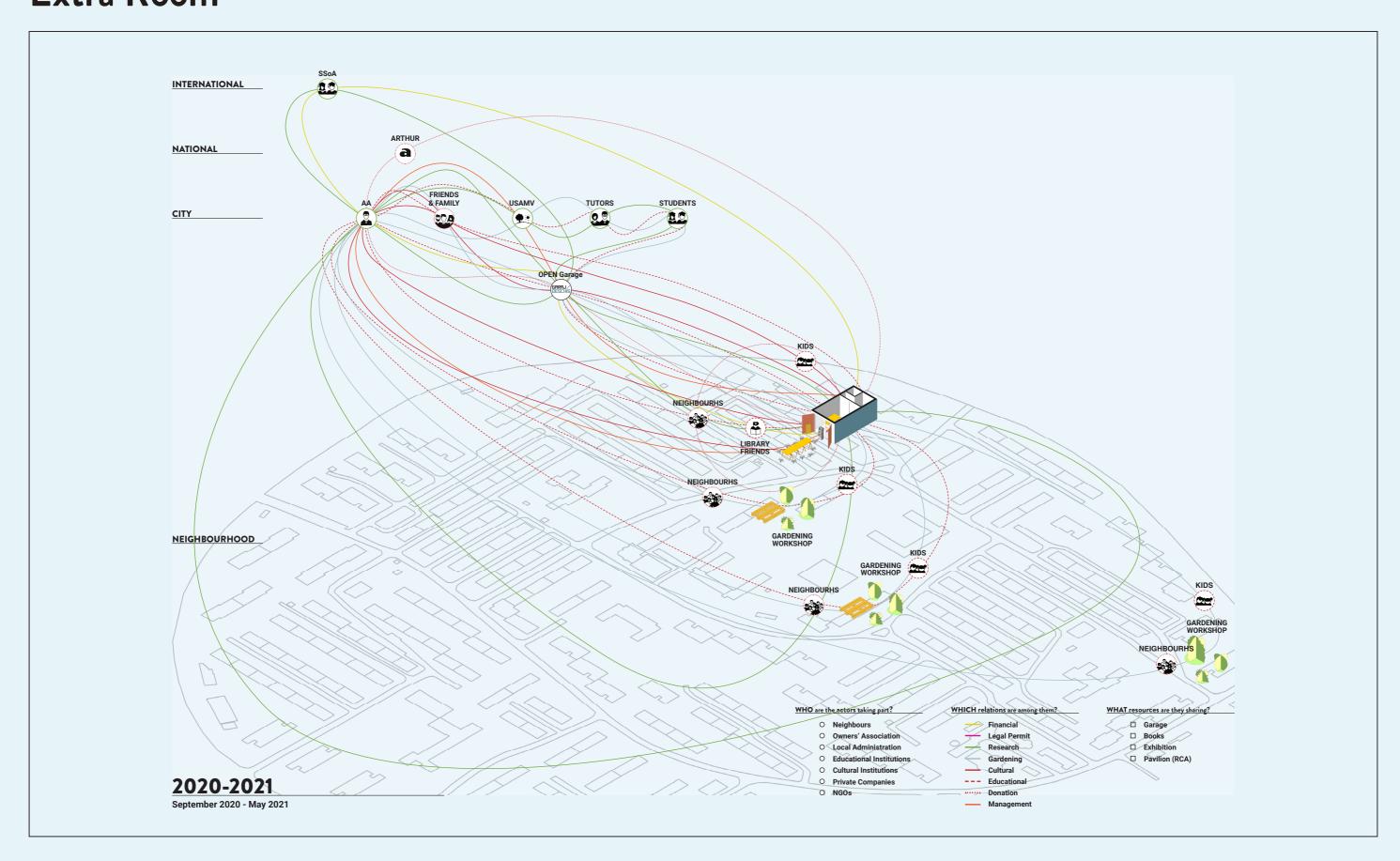
## **MAPPING**

Tracing the actions and activities using ANT perspective for evidencing OPEN Garage as a pilot for a community equipment.

## Extra Room

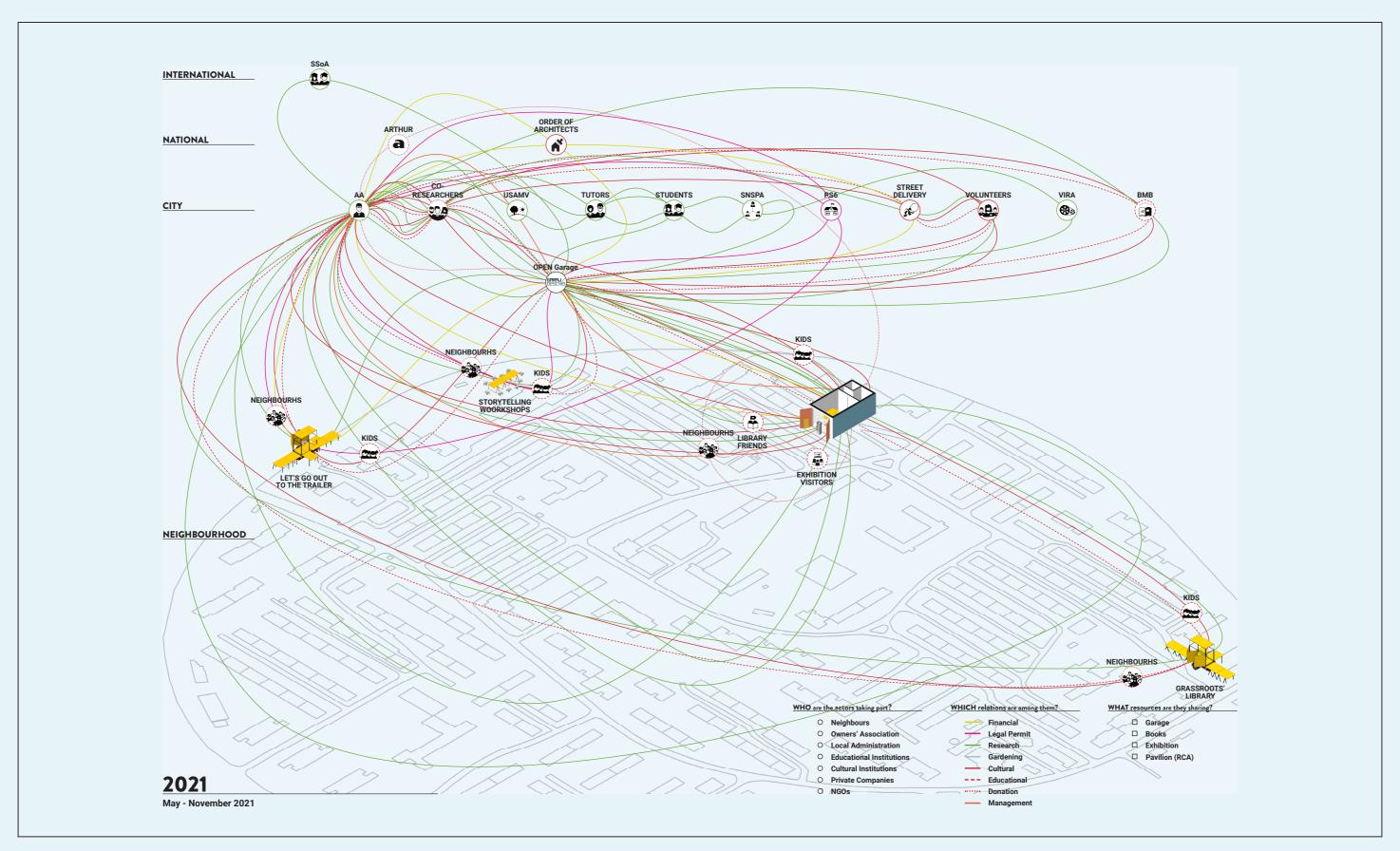


## Extra Room



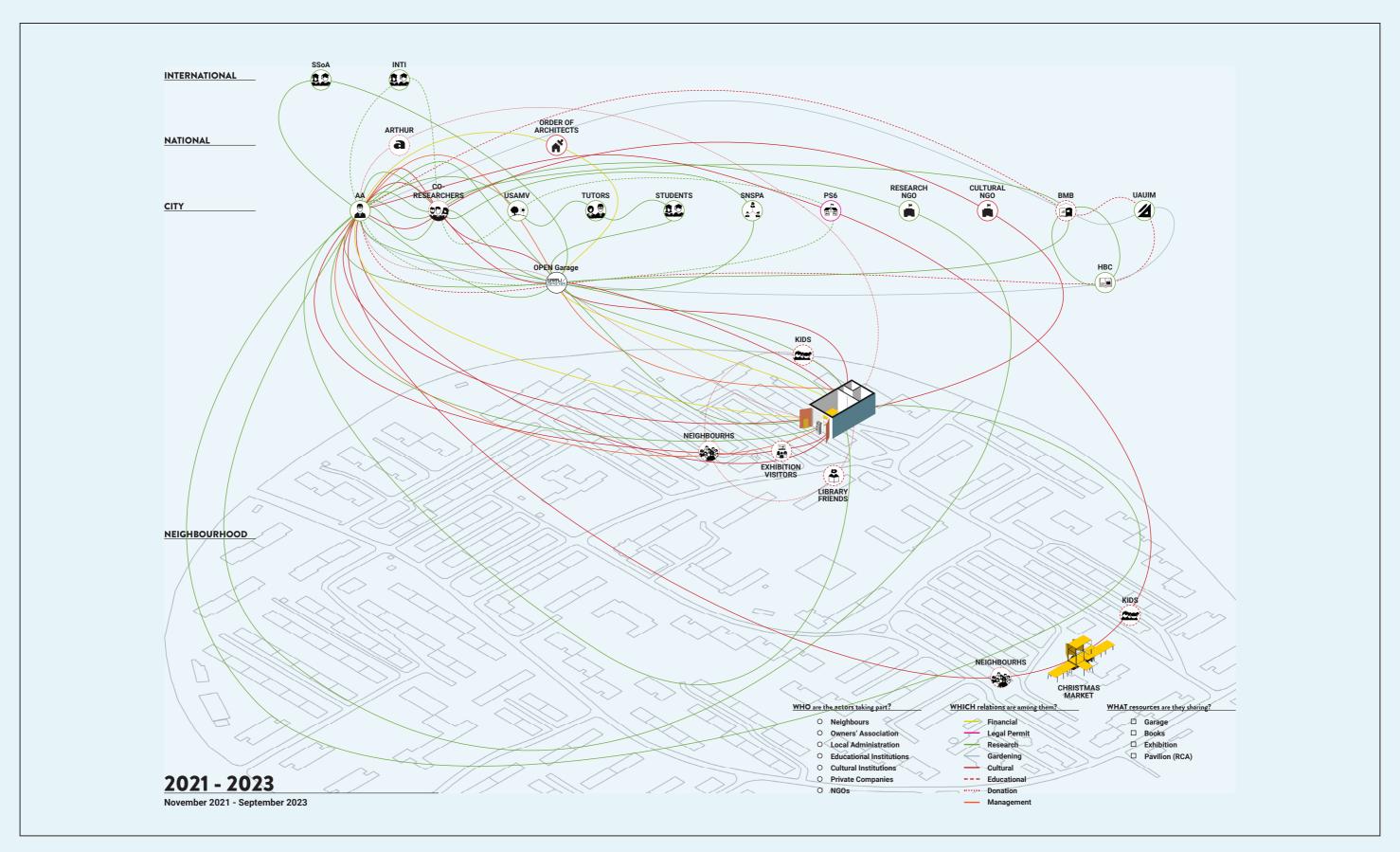
### OPEN GARAGE

## Extra Room



#### OPEN GARAGE

# Extra Room



#### 3.2.6. Archives

Completing the socio-anthropological and architectural methods, the research also had a historical component. Without being a central method, historical research had initially the role of illustrating the context in which the researched subjects were placed. However, due to the scarcity of historical data from the socialist period and facing the limitations of historical narratives of the anti-communist canon, as the documentation progressed it became more and more attractive, expanding in time and topics. The investigation didn't aimed to dig out new information and documents, but rather to identify and articulate existing secondary data, which was perhaps disparate, ignored or obsolete, in order to reconstruct alternative narratives to the current discourses around the failed socialism, this time from the perspective of informal practices. These incursions into the specific representations of the era also elicited my own memories and experiences, resourcing the story telling aspect of the research. Moreover, the historical documentation was useful sometimes in triggering participants' recollections, while supporting the research' communication narrative towards the community. But beyond its methodological side, it was after all also a way to join the practice of immaterial sharing, were tales from the socialist period are a commoning resource which connects through several generations. Especially for the residents of Drumul Taberei, storytelling is a practice they value as a way of belonging to the district, which is so strong that it actually works even if they don't live there since many years. Their stories about the neighbourhood become a living memory that they share with other storytellers neighbours.

#### Periodicals

Tracing the relation between the urban development, local communities and public libraries required a certain amount of data which could allow making further connections among them. If Bucharest' history is reflected in plenty of articles, studies, researches, documents and histories, for the historical evolution of its public libraries, there is little available data. Historical studies published on this topic don't refer specifically to the history of local libraries, but are rather treating them from a national perspective (Corbu, et al., 2003; Buluta, 1998, 2000). Aiming to fill this gap, I visited the archives of Bucharest Metropolitan Library (BMB) and Central University Library (BCU) looking at libraries' specific periodicals, such as *Călăuza Bibliotecarului* (1948-1965), *Revista Bibliotecilor* (1966-1973), *Îndrumătorul Cultural* (1974-1980), *Biblioteca* in *Cîntarea Romaniei* (1981-1989), *Bibliotecarul* (1990-1997).<sup>47</sup> The analyse of these materials produced several categories of topics, like dates related to some branches, specific library programs, specialized libraries, their current activities and the arrangement of its spaces (Fig.21). From this inquiry, a series of facts were confirmed or detailed, while others were rediscovered, adding written and visual information to their historical timeline. Moreover, the archival documentation prompted

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> "The Librarian's Guide" was a specialized publication, intended for librarianship, which had several names over time: Librarian's Guide (1948-1965), Library Magazine (1966-1973), Cultural Guide (1974-1980), The Library (in the Song of Romania) (1981-1989), The Librarian (1990-1997). Translated from Romanian by current author.

further research directions which were pursued by other methods, such as the interviews with the librarians. At the same time, the extensive immersion within library's specialized publications also functioned as an opportunity for tracing the connections between the library's destiny and larger political transformations of the society, as these have been reflected over time in the content, the ideological discourse, the structure, and even in the format and the physical support of the library's publications, highlighting the evolution of the libraries' role in the state's architecture over the recent decades.

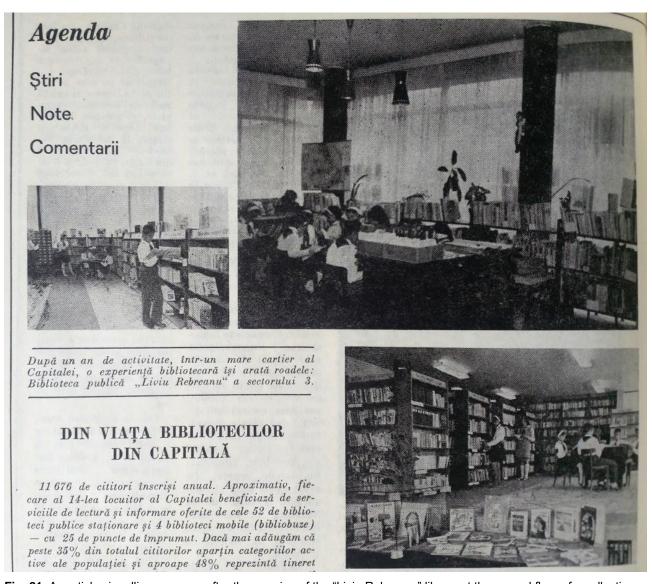


Fig. 21. An article signalling one year after the opening of the "Liviu Rebreanu" library at the ground floor of a collective housing apartment building from Sector 3, Bucharest. Biblioteca/ The Library, supplement of the magazine Îndrumătorul Cultural/Cultural Guide, from 1 march 1980. Scan by the current author.

By looking at the magazine intended for librarians, several periods can be distinguished. Starting with the ideologically driven push of 1950s to establish a public library system for the masses, growing up in the 1960s and 1970s into a more technocratic, specialized and scientific approach to consolidate libraries as public infrastructure and followed in the 1980s by an increase in nationalist propaganda against the backdrop of austerity measures. The austerity only accelerated during the capitalist 1990s and 2000s, when also censorship was finally lifted from library's collection. However, beyond the connection with grand historical narratives, the research engaged in reconstructing like a puzzle the history of local libraries also from the perspective of the city' evolution, evidencing their role in the life of the communities. By approaching libraries more than as a cultural and educational institution, the inquiry aimed to evidence the roots of informal practices emerging also around public libraries of today.



Fig. 22. Image with new apartment buildings where there are visible few illegally closed balconies. Arhitectura/ Architecture, 1-2/1980. Scan by the current author.

To a similar extent, inquiring about the informal practices among the collective housing neighbourhoods, the research resorted to archives for depicting the historical context in which they appeared and developed. To a lesser degree than in the case of public libraries, periodical publications specific to the architecture of the era were consulted, such as the Arhitectura magazine.<sup>48</sup> In the case of the architectural practice and production from the socialist period there are numerous studies and researches, which also used this publication as one of their main sources (Voinea, 2018; Tulbure, 2016; Stroe, 2015; Zahariade, 2011; Sandqvist & Zahariade, 2003). However, the topic of informal practices hardly appears at all in this specialized periodical of the time. Their absence is understandable, being in tune with the majority of specialists' perspective, who considered them as rather rural remnants of a way of life not suited for urban living that were ruining modernist buildings' aesthetics. However, sometimes their traces could be glimpsed in the images picturing the articles. Such is the case with the informal closing the apartments' balconies, which, even officially considered illegal and disapproved by the architects, it was such a wide spread informal answer to residents' unfulfilled needs of storage and thermic insulation, that it couldn't be completely avoided even in the official pictures presenting the new districts (Fig.22). Besides these few flashes of informality, the periodicals were used mainly as a documentary source for the texts, plans and images with the planning of the Drumul Taberei district, aiming not just to retrace its urban planning history once again, but to reconstruct it from the perspective of the development of the informal practices and community's crystallization. The data from these sources supported the research further, partially guiding the discussions with the designers and residents participating in the interviews.

Tracking the informal practices during the socialist era' newspapers were used in an additional stage of the field research<sup>49</sup> as they constituted a richer source of illustration than the professional periodicals. The articles offered an insight into the official discourse regarding certain practices that were back then formally supported and promoted by the state, such as urban gardening. The management' transfer of the green spaces from the state to the citizens was often illustrated in the local press, signalling their importance. Although defined in the legislation as dwellers' "obligation", the articles presented gardening as "patriotic work", involving regular residents acting collectively, out of "civic duty" and on a voluntary basis. However, these were actually the result of the deep economic crisis affecting Romania in the 1980s. Not directly addressed, the crisis was translated into measures and program of "self-organisation" for the "selfsupply" through the "recovery" of every available land for planting and feeding (Informatia Bucureștiului/ Bucharest Information, 1962,1963,1965,1973,1974,1985,1986; 'Scânteia', 1966,1978,1982) (Fig.23). References about specific urban gardens in Drumul Taberei, helped the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Arhitectura/ Architecture magazine was founded in 1906, renamed between 1952 – 1990 as Arhitectura/ Architecture R.P.R, returning afterwards to the original name.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Following the invitation of "Iscoada", an editorial platform for antropology and social sciences, an additional stage of fieldwork took place between September - October 2022, undertaken in Buclă area by Alex Axinte, Carmen Rafanell, Laura-Maria Ilie and Bogdan lancu, looking at the post-pandemic evolution of informal gardening and the residents' practices of care for the stray animals.

research to better document and locate them in the connection with data from the interviews with the residents. In the same time, it allowed to sketch their institutional context and the mechanisms which supported them during socialism, as there are no recent studies and research over this topic. By their institutionalization during the socialist period, the local gardening legacy was firmly established within collective housing context. But, as testimonies showed, their formalization was sometimes hacked by the dwellers, which used them more as opportunities for socialization, DIY or leisure, than for economic compensation. However, there were still collective experiences sharing a collective infrastructure in the proximity of living. This ambivalence to hijack institutions and official protocols, but somewhat discreetly, without a direct confrontation, while at the same time keeping them alive through everyday habits and ways of living, constitutes a specific inheritance that particularizes the local urban gardens in the context of the this global phenomenon.



Fig. 23. An article that illustrates the arrangement of the spaces between the new blocs made by the residents through voluntary work. Informația Bucureștiului/ Bucharest Information, 1965. Retrieved from Arcanum archive: https://www.arcanum.com/en/

#### **Embodied Archives**

Somehow seduced by the archival research's promise to (re)discover rather obscured materials which could gain a renewed significance in the context of my research, I expanded my interest in archives and consulted the "Special Collections" fund at the Bucharest Metropolitan Library (BMB), containing photos, posters, events' programs and leaflets saved throughout the years by the local branches. Incomplete and extremely thin, this internal archive was compensated by information gathered from informal discussions with librarians, some even during the numerous visits to their archive of periodicals. I realised that in fact, these oral histories about the evolution of one branch or another were the archive I was looking for. Even more, I learned that such oral histories were partially the basis of the only BMB internal document which, still as an incomplete draft, attempts to give on overview about the historical evolution of the local branches (Gabureac, 2020). Transmitted from generation to generation, from one retiring librarian to another, these historical stories sometimes were lacking the accuracy of years, of city addresses or were unclear

about the decision-making mechanisms behind it. However, they were saving small but significant histories, portraits of real librarians and library users, thus giving valuable accounts about their everyday life which mirrored and translated more complex and bigger phenomenon. For example, I was told the story of the relocation of a branch in the 1980s from an old an improper house to the ground floor of a newly built apartment bloc, which took place following the librarian's direct intervention to the mayor at that time, which was a fellow countryman of hers. Without being confirmed or documented elsewhere, the episode illustrates the myth spread during that era, when sometimes such bold interventions at the highest level of political decision makers of the day could quickly unlock the extremely slow and sightless bureaucratic processes. Evidencing a more relational side of what is perceived today as a highly rigid and centralized planning system before 1989, the story represents a special category of meaningful memories shared among the librarians' community. As some gained the force of myths or legends, they are nevertheless illustrating the vocational practice of a librarian concerned and involved in the well-being of their readers, acting for their branches, beyond their job description, compensating institutional agency with informal practices, regardless of continuous hardships and underfinancing which traversed historical eras. Confirming, denying or opening new perspectives over the libraries' evolution in the local urban context, accessing this informal institutional memory as if an archive supported the research' drive to identify the sources of local latent commoning and trace the mechanisms of its articulation around public libraries.

As in the case of public libraries, the regional Institut de Proiectare/ Design Institutes archives are extremely thin, if not in some cases completely vanished. This situation is the consequence of the violent anti-communist institutional purges of the 1990s, coupled with the wave of privatisations and lack of funds which ended in the loss of a huge amount of institutional archives from the socialist period. As in the case of librarians, the discussions with architects constituted an opportunity to access an informal oral archive of the discipline, little illustrated in the professional history of the era which was written under the same dominant anti-communist paradigm. Thus, small incidents, disobedient informal practices, alternative relationships bypassing the official mechanisms were collected to be reconstructed in a future alternative chapter of the local practice during socialism. Such was an episode from the 1980s recollected by my father and his colleague, who after returning to the regional *Institut de Proiectare* with the project approved by the central body from the Ministry, erased in the meantime the balconies drawn in pencil and redrew them larger and presented it like this to the *Institut* management as the approved project. Through such informal tactics, they sought to increase the architectural qualities of the buildings determined by strict budgets and limited types of prefabricated constructions, but at the same time, to offer more generous spaces, larger balconies being an element highly appreciated by the new residents. In the context of the disappearance of the Institut de Proiectare archives together with their privatisation followed by their closure, these minor tales from the *Institut* become all the more valuable. They could articulate an alternative to the failed socialism canon of the past decades,

which represented the architects working before 1989 exclusively as a state functionary, lacking creativity, agency and initiative. Although recurrent in many recollections, they are minimized even by the architects themselves as marginal and unimportant. However, these stories are giving an insight into a relative obscured type of architecture practice of the time, one closer of what we call today 'hacking'. As the strict use of generous public resources was diverted from within the planning system, architects gained a collective agency by creatively mixing informal practices with professional tactics, while hijacking institutional mechanisms and acting for the public good. From this perspective, informal practices can no longer be strictly associated only with the residents, pointing to a more complex mechanism which resourced the latent commoning practices and their socialist legacy.

#### Situated Archives

In relation to these embodied archives in the form of stories and memories, the research also included photographs, which sometimes functioned as ways to elicit and anchor the recollections. The research consulted images from the socialist period, especially taken in Drumul Taberei district, which were found in documents, collections or books, but also in personal archives publicly available or shared during the fieldwork. The images from the pages of Arhitectura/ Architecture magazine were especially aesthetically staged, illustrating the discipline's mainstream perspective over the built environment and its use. Just as an extension of the technocratic language of planning, the photos were presenting the city as a real life model, focusing on the buildings and following the architectural composition, where the inhabitants were rather anonymous and abstract entourages, useful to give scale and animate the scene. To the same extent, the images from the newspapers or from the library periodicals of the era were also quite staged, but more from an ideological perspective, underlining the role of the press within the state architecture of the time. Even if they focused more on the inhabitants, those were rather posing formally in front of the camera, as the images were only illustrating the usually strong propagandistic message of the articles. These visual sources functioned within the research as means of identifying district' spatial landmarks and as a way of contextualise the participants' recollections in relation with larger historical periods.

Nonetheless, the research sought to access other visual representations, beyond those that supported the official, political or professional discourses. In the context of the population low access to the technical means of photography during the socialist period, the images taken by amateur photographs with the neighbourhood were quite rare. Moreover, few of those who had a photo camera, usually didn't used it to record everyday scenes from the district, preferring to capture on their quite precious films rather the holyday times, important landmarks or other special family moments. For example, I found some rare images with the district on a photo film from my family archive which had the first two or three shots with random images taken from the balcony. As it was customary not to use the first frames for good photos, due to the risk of overexposing

them when introducing the film into the camera, this tale illustrates the very rare appearance in photos of the time with scenes taken in the district. Yet, the research had access to a series of amateur photographs collected in a public collection. <sup>50</sup> Featuring everyday scenes around the district, some of them worked as elicitation tools and conversation triggers used in the research and activation phases of the OPEN Garage project. Some snapshots from this collection illustrating children's play functioned as proper research tools aiming to provoke residents' memories about their street games. Their testimonies written on the back of dozens of postcards featuring these photographs, were collected and further exhibited. Along with their exposure, I discovered that even if they initially came from private collections, many of the inhabitants identified with the situations, the places or the featured games as extremely familiar. Such common references about the everyday life in the district evidenced once more the existence of a collective experience of practices and memories shared among district's residents from various generations.

Additionally, during fieldwork, the district's documentation benefited from several frames borrowed by the interviewers or retrieved from my own family's archives. These images were picturing the inhabitants in different situations and locations than those from the previous, more formal or more curated sources and collections. The camera was focusing actually on people's lives, illustrating their stories and those of their families, friends and neighbours, over the background of Drumul Taberei district. Less mediated by grand narratives or staged by purposive illustrations, we see real people smiling back at us from their new apartments. In their good clothes, taken out when visiting their relatives, we see them posing in their airy balconies, or sitting at happy New Year's tables together with their good friends. We see them looking elsewhere, but perfectly aware of us, as they let themselves to be photographed doing their favourite things around the district, like casually walking along the boulevard or strolling through the generous park on a cold winter Sunday. We see them for a moment children again, weaving back from the bloc entrance's bench, feeling safe in someone's lap. Sometimes we can glimpse them even in their daily clothes, together with their next door playmates as they were gathered in a hurry in front of their bloc by a parent with few frames left on the camera. We see them proudly by their new family car, we see them dressed in clean uniforms for the first or last day of school nearby, we see them in their gardens, and we see them by their garages. We can close our eyes and we can see them as if in an archive made of looks, of gestures and of postures. We see them and so we begin to know them. From this embodied archive we can learn as much as from those where documents and data are kept. From here we can more intuitively learn and know about their families, friends and neighbours alike, about the relations between them, about the informal practices and in between spaces. We can try to reconstruct their life in the neighbourhood. To the same extent, the research collected images from personal archives which captured the working atmosphere in the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> During the field research I had access to a series of photographs from Drumul Taberei from 1973, from the Images Collection "Mihai Oroveanu", courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and *Salonul de Proiecte*. A selection of these images was also exhibited in the OPEN Garage exhibition and pop-up related events, used for contextualizing texts, videos and postcards produced during the communication phase of the project. More can be found at www.photopastfuture.ro

Institut de Proiectare or the everyday life in a public library branch. Brought together through a contextualised look and articulated both by grand narratives and minor histories, these images from public collections, magazines, newspapers, books, as well as those from family albums, completed each other and contributed to the assembly of a collage in which formal and informal practices are not so much distinct and abstract concepts, but become inherent parts of life again (see Stories Photographs). But not always the photographs' subject or the main featured action was the only focus. Quite often, I discovered in these photos fragments and traces of situations and activities that happen somewhere in the background, caught by chance in the frame by the peripheral view of the camera. I started looking for these partially random appearances without following a strict methodology, but acting rather as a collector of found pieces of a lost continent. By looking purposively at the margins I discovered another generous source of authentic illustrations that unintentionally entered the peripheral vision: the films from the socialist period.

#### Unintentional Archives

Watching these movies started as a game. Couple of years ago, I began watching cartoons from my childhood together with my two children. Hence not the mainstream cartoons which they could see every day, but those that circulated during the 1980s throughout the countries from the Eastern Bloc and which suddenly disappeared under the wave of Westernization since the 1990s. However, some of them are now available online. By looking at them together, I tried to build a world in which we have some shared references, narrowing the inevitable cultural gap that grows between us. Being intended for export, many of them had few dialogues and some still retain a universal air, so they worked for a while as a funny and exotic alternative. Encouraged by their response, we started to listen to radio plays and watch together Romanian films for children from the socialist period. The anti-communist blanket discourse of the transition period condemned these local productions as tools of ideological brainwashing. But for today's children, exposed only to the stories of global recipes, they appeared peculiar, different from what they are used to, but still somehow coming from a world that feels vaguely familiar and thus appealing. All those characters actually resembled and speak similar to the adults in their lives. They are moving about in places that they could sometimes recognize. And thus articulating a cultural space from which some traces are felt until today. Moreover, they worked as triggers for us, the parents, to share more stories from our childhood. Therefore, it allowed them to go beyond the films' message and content and have a glimpse into a world they could more intuitively began to know.

Inspired by this practice, I started to watch myself more movies from that period. So, the amused playing with exotic socialist cartoons turned into a personal immersion into my own childhood. This nostalgic journey started in the kitchen. Stirred by the replay of visual references which marked the childhood of several generations born before 1989, I indulged myself into this nostalgic stimulation. At the beginning, I wasn't focused necessarily on the films' subject, context or

actors, but I was rather aiming to re-enact moods, feelings or sensations from the past. And the films had the capacity to recreate an atmosphere, as gestures, expressions or dynamics were stored in these footages and could suddenly come back to life. They became both the trigger and the background soundtrack of my revisited memories. However, most of those screenings by the kitchen table were partial, taking place during the weekends' preparation of family meals. While peeling potatoes and watching these movies with the corner of my eye, I slowly began noticing things over time. As the research on informal practices from the context of collective housing districts was progressing, I found numerous illustrations of the researched topics in these films, otherwise difficult to trace with other methods, like inquiring official archives or browsing through professional periodicals. Thus, I started to collect them as short visual evidences of the interviewers' stories. Just as in the case of photographs, illustrations of practices of living among the collective housing districts were not necessarily occupying the centre of the screen, but there were rather found by the edges, part of the everyday landscape (Fig.22). Acknowledging that "the film, even the documentary, is itself a recreation" (Damian, 2003, p.20) in which the director always makes choices, this assumes also that some of the ingredients of this construction were authentic and that the film, especially the documentary, aims to "capture reality and give the "report" of the facts" (p.26). So, despite the aggressive anti-communist ideology which condemned the previous regime along with all its products, including movies, these scenes were not always stereotypically staged, as they sometimes captured unmediated moments of life. On the other hand, there are numerous testimonies of creators of the era which recall how they acted in a political sense and tricked the censorship system by introducing in their films all kinds of sopîrle, translated as 'lizards', in the form of dialogues or situations that contested the official ideological line. To bypass the censorship, they were usually not in an explicit manner, but rather nuanced, slippery like a lizard, carrying a double meaning. They were only winking to the audience over the censors' back. Thus, it is quite plausible that all kinds of illustrations of casual, informal practices around the bloc, found fleetingly in the films of the era and which didn't entirely match the official glorious representations and narratives about the new housing districts, actually have a real documentary value, resulting from some directors' credo and even from a veiled form of political disobedience. However, even when they were purposely constructed to serve the grand narrative of the official politics, they became today equally valuable as they are illustrating certain institutional mechanisms of the socialist society in general and of collective housing in particular, which could complement the historical research. Moreover, in the cultural products or in the mass-media of the era, there was quite a consistent body of what contemporary researchers now call 'criticism from the left' (Hîncu, 2024). In books, films, newspapers or TV reports, real problems faced by the population often appeared in the foreground. Even if such procedures were part of the ideological discourse that sought to illustrate the vigilance of the system in the face of shortcomings and project an image of a stat in total control, nevertheless, the criticism was direct, the problems were real, the responsibility was explicit articulated without any allusions and nuances (but still, carefully not

aiming to higher party level). Due to the post-1990 anti-communist discourse which seek to legitimate only a 'critique from the right' enacted by dissidents and opponents to the system, this perspective was discredited altogether as 'only' propaganda.

Overall as an important form of popular culture, socialist movies both reflected and shaped the collective imaginary of their time. 51 So, I started watching dozens of such movies available online evolving methodologically from the kitchen table to the desk research and using print screen as a tool for saving a selection of relevant moments. I watched especially those movies dealing with issues related to the urban context and the housing districts of the time. I became so passionate and expanded my gaze also to documentary movies. Eager to see more than the scarcely publicly available material, I ended up watching some of them by the Arhiva Naţională de Film/ Naţional Movie Archive (ANF). I was so absorbed by this that I even designed an elicitation interviewing method by using prints from these movies for the memory research phase, which eventually was cancelled along with the Inter/LAB initial fieldwork phase. However, the subsequent research benefited from a quite generous source of visual references that were useful to correlate information obtained with other methods, or to gain new insights. The identification of several scenes filmed in Drumul Taberei district contributed to fix some spatial landmarks and helped recreate an atmosphere until then only evoked by research participants interviews. Thus, more or less curated indoor scenes from the *Institut de Proiectare*, public libraries or construction sites, were completed with more authentic and even documentary footage taken among the newly built districts. Here, informal gardens by the bloc, neighbours repairing their cars by the garages, children playing in the street or football in the school yard, watched by their parents from informally closed balconies or seating on DIY benches by the *blocs*' entrances, appeared casually in the sets. Intentionally or not, the exposure of these spatial manifestations of informal practices however testifies for their widespread as a natural part of a generally accepted way of life in these districts. Adopted also by such official representations like the film production, it contributed even more in establishing them among the collective imaginary depicting the practice of living specific to these neighbourhoods. At the same time, the basic collection of relevant movie scenes functioned as references for the texts and stories of this thesis, especially useful in the context of the lack of the informal practices' exposure in other representations from the era. Overall, watching those films offered me another entry point into the shared story of the collective living, which works for some residents both as a trigger and as an immaterial resource for commoning. I was also attempting perhaps to grasp the collectivist ethos of the time and to see what has been left today, what traces can still be found, if not completely erased, of commoning narratives and practices.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> However, they cannot be perceived unitary, as their positioning related to the political line evolved, from more relaxed and tolerant during the more technocratic socialism of 1960-1970s, to tightening censorship during the nationalistic version of communism during the 1980s.



**Fig. 24.** Scene with the residents moving into their new apartments. *Brigada Diverse/ The miscellaneous brigade (1970)*, directed by Mircea Drăgan. Photo courtesy of *Arhiva Națională de Film/ National Movie Archive (ANF)*.

## PHOTO ALBUM

A collection of various instances gathered along the research, that are more illustrating its ethos, rather than to inform.



Figure 1.



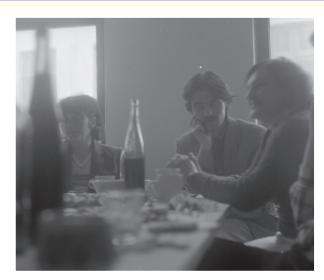


Figure 2. Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.	



Figure 6.





Figure 7. Figure 8.



Figure 9.





Figure 10. Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.



Figure15.



Figure 16.



Figure 17.



Figure 18.



Figure 19.

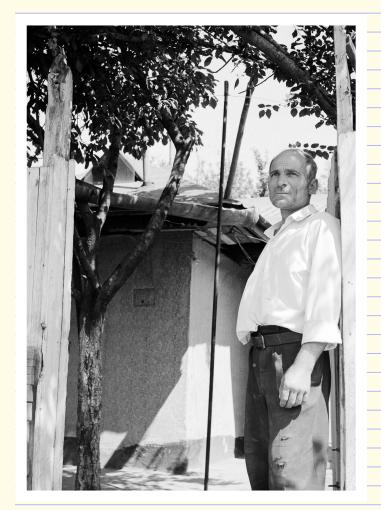




Figure 22.

Figure 20.



Figure 21.



Figure 23. Figure 24.



Figure 25.

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Figure 27.



Figure 28.



Figure 29.



Figure 30.



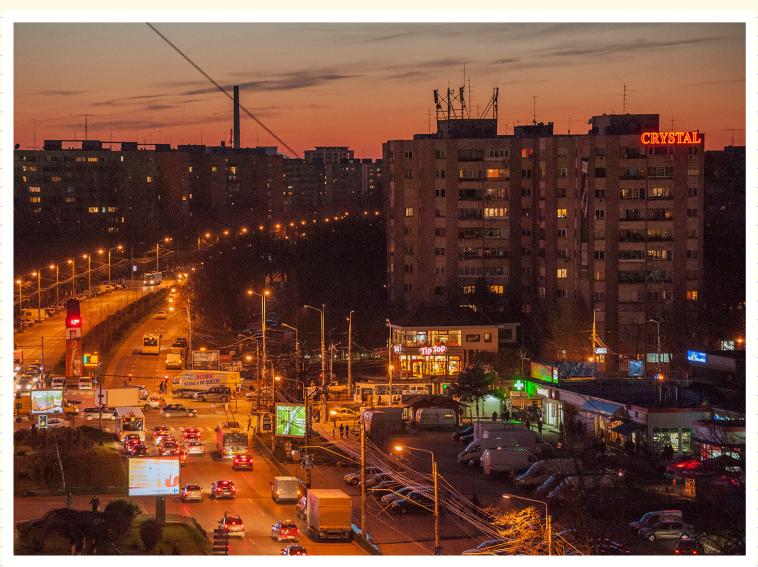
Figure 31.



Figure 32.



Figure 33.



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	current author.
	re 7,8,9,10,11,12,13,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,
	<b>5,26.</b> From the "Mihai Oroveanu" Collection of
	ges, courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and Salonul de
	ecte.
	re 29. Special Collection of images, courtesy of
	oteca Metropolitană București (BMB).
	re 30,31. Dorin Sima, courtesy of the author.
	re 32,33. Anca Niţă, courtesy of the author.
Figu	re 34. Dan Dinescu, courtesy of the author.

#### Chapter 4. Fieldwork

Researching and living in Buclă

#### 4.1. Drumul Taberei district: Infrastructure for Living Together

Collective Housing – growing on an empty field

From a birds' eye view, Bucharest might look like a giant pizza. City slices are cut by access roads towards surrounding destinations. Outside the central, denser core, the city consolidated and expanded along these diverting arteries, leaving the areas in between them underdeveloped. In the West of the city, for a long time, military barracks, along with their facilities, training grounds and airfields, completed by agricultural land, kept a large area free of urban development. Where it "used to be an empty field" a first housing complex was built starting with 1954, along the Drumul Taberei road<sup>52</sup>, across the General Staff of Land Forces, mainly for its personal. After the end of World War 2, Bucharest entered a stage of reconstruction, not necessarily caused by limited war destructions, but driven by the socialist ethos of urban justice. Following the unsuccessful interwar program which failed to deliver the much needed housing to the depleted and numerous working classes (Voinea, 2018) public housing was an important topic for the socialist state. Under pressure of legitimization by delivering the promised emancipation of the workers, the state was seeking to solve the rolling housing problem, aggravated by a growing population. As the 1950 nationalization of the private housing stock of the landlords and bourgeoisie wasn't enough to address the need (Chelcea, 2018), the state started a major program of building collective housing districts. At first, given the post-war economic crisis, but also due to buildings' dependence on critical but "invisible works" such as utilities, which requires longer planning and execution, the program had a slow start.

The cvartal - nesting shared green courtyards (1952 - 1960)

Like in all countries of the Soviet bloc, "realism-socialist" was imposed after the war as the official style of the new regimes. Beyond its monumental aesthetics and classical references, it came along with concerns about collective housing, prefabrication, construction mechanization and design 'typization', which were previously rather marginal in the local professional scene (Maxim, 2017). Introduced by the 1952 master plan for Bucharest, the *cvartal* was a specific model for approaching housing. Imported from the Soviet practice<sup>53</sup>, it designated a coherent city *bloc* with specific features, such as multilevel apartment buildings, organised around a central green space, excluding car traffic outside its edges, while placing some commercial facilities along its peripheral fronts. Probably the biggest disruption in the local practice of dwelling was the central place given to a shared green space, in opposition to the interwar' ideal of living in Bucharest, which was the

<sup>52</sup> Drumul Taberei means "The Camp Road", as the military camp.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> The *cvartal* has its origin in the American "neighborhood unit", being widely applied in Europe as well (Maxim, 2017; Stroe, 2015).

private family house with a garden plot (Voinea, 2018; Maxim, 2017). Beyond the official narratives, slogans and abstract norms, these new shared spaces triggered collective experiences, offering a chance for residents "to construct a first and essential circle of sociability within the larger, more abstract political collective of the state" (Maxim, 2017, p. 160).

The "Ho Chi Minh" cvarta<sup>64</sup> from Drumul Taberei road developed along these lines. starting construction in 1954, being an illustrative case study for the specific evolutions that will mark the whole district in the following decades. By seeking to create "an architecture suitable for housing, close to people, warm and lacking formality, with simple architectural elements, taken from the Romanian architecture" (Oculescu, 1958, p.25), the authors are already signalling halfway into the *cvartal* construction a change of plan, such as the divorce from realist-socialism<sup>55</sup> style towards an "unnamed modernism" (Zahariade, 2011). The adjustment on the go also nods to traditional references, a recurring theme which will return in force to haunt local architects in the following decades (Tulbure, 2016). The forever postponed construction of the planned community spaces, like a kindergarten and a nursery, illustrates a gap that will grow into an almost the rule between planners' intentions and achievements on the ground. Yet, these setbacks from the original master plan will paradoxically turn into opportunities for care, as dwellers will adopt the leftover spaces and turn them into green and social infrastructures. This caring aspect will develop into a significant practice of living in the district. Nevertheless, the shared public space other than traditional streets and sidewalks introduced since 1950s as an almost absolute premiere in Bucharest context will became the key feature of the collective housing project up until 1989. By the peripheral placement of the buildings, the cvartal's "large courtyards" could nest "green spaces, fountains, greenhouses, playgrounds, sport fields, recreation spaces and garden kiosks" (Oculescu, 1958, p.24). As one inhabitant (E.E.) born and raised in the area recollects being among the many kids who were "out all day" in the nearby park, playing, exploring, having fun together, organizing soccer games by themselves, or even with the help of adults, like setting temporary ice hockey fields. Close ties developed between neighbours who took turns taking care of their children, collectively maintaining the green areas and managing the buildings and nearby spaces: "we were like a big family. (...) if one could do something, the other compensated by doing something else" (E.E., resident). The built environment had a major contribution in prompting the emergence of a community based on spatial proximity, shared resources and mutual help. Disregarded by public and professional narratives, due to its link to the Soviet top-down imposing (Maxim, 2017), the cvartal was a major step forward for the local architectural practice towards an integrated approach in planning not just for individuals and their families, but for urban communities (Fig.25).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> It consisted of 1500 apartments built in three stages (Oculescu, 1958). In the first stage between 1954-1956, 7 buildings were constructed, in the second between 1956-1957 there were 5 more and the third which would have completed the *cvartal* was never finished (Dumitrescu, 2024)

completed the *cvartal* was never finished (Dumitrescu, 2024)

55 Hruschiev speech from 1954 didn't had an immediate impact in Romanian context, as the destalinization coming from Moscow was threatening the legitimacy of local rulers. Thus a more cautious approach meant also a transitional departure from realist-socialism (Stroe, 2015).



Fig. 25. View from the cvartal's inner courtyard, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2023). Photo by the current author.

The microraion - landscaping the collective green (1960 - 1974)

Still as Soviet reference, the concept of microraion is drafted on the local urban planners' drawing boards to gradually replace the cvartal. Based on the theory of "neighbourhood unit" (Stroe, 2015) and carrying a scientific approach, the microraion express the intensified efforts for a more scaled up and integrated urban planning, increased density in the context of strict "economicity", typified apartment buildings and especially the provision of socio-cultural infrastructure (Stroe, 2015). Further along the Drumul Taberei road, a new housing ensemble starts in 1961<sup>56</sup>. Its construction marks the birth of the Drumul Taberei cartier, understood as "district" or "neighbourhood". Distinct to the recently built cvartal, the new ensemble consist only of apartment blocs, but is announced as a part from a future microraion that will be "equipped with all the necessary social buildings" (Hornstein, 1961, p.21). The small ensemble illustrates a moment of transition, between the former closed courtyards of the cvartal towards the airy composition of the future microraion. Low height, still grid determined bars are completed by green spaces hosting public facilities, such playgrounds. The realist-socialist aesthetics or references to traditional architecture are abandoned in favour of the modernistic, international style language. This expression matches the first local applications of "reusable projects", designed by the Institut Proiect Bucureşti (IPB), which included prefabricated elements in the construction.

An initial master plan for the future housing neighbourhood was designed in 1960<sup>57</sup> by a collective of fresh graduating architects. Looking towards "Western models", especially to French *grands ensambles* (Cupers, 2010), one architect from the *Institut* collective remembers receiving a

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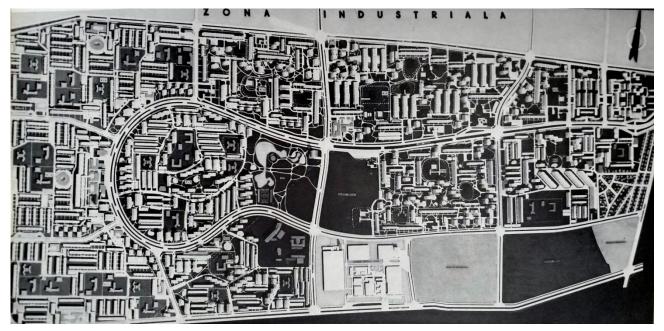
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> It consisted of 17 buildings with 800 apartments for about 3800 residents (Hornstein, 1961).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> It was initially planned for about 100.000 residents (Hornstein, 1961).

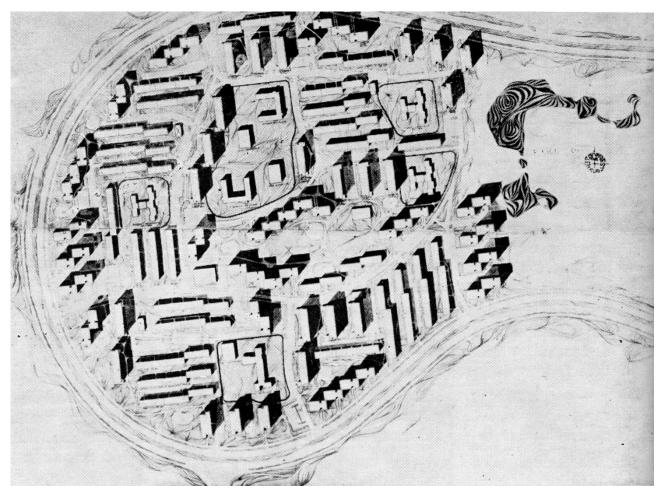
brief that "no one wanted to", as it dealt with a huge land, lined up close to a long road (Odobescu & Bird, 2018). In the family memoirs of the other author, it was kept that:

"they actually worked quite relaxed, because they haven't thought for a second that it would get done. It was almost like a theoretical exercise, but at work, and they began to think according to the good principles of the modernist city: with large *blocs* floating in greenery, with *microraions*, (...) with each thing in its place. The cars had their place, so did the famous *Buclă* (The Loop), which in the first part of the project was a square, with the big park placed in the middle, the neighbourhood centre and so on." (T.H., architect)

However, after passing different stages of previews and solution' densification, the project gets approved and construction begins in 1963. The plan was structured around a wide, central boulevard which goes westwards from the initial cvartal, only to turn back after three kilometres making a loop and gathering around it ten planned microraions for 150.000 inhabitants (Colea, 1972) (Fig.26). Each microraion aimed to be autonomous. Its size was determined by the rays of vicinity around the schools and kindergartens planted in its middle (Fig.27). Dwelling density was further determined by educational capacity. Commercial spaces were gathered in independent buildings erected near the main boulevard and placed at every other intersection. These local equipments were completed by larger socio-cultural infrastructure addressing the neighbourhood level, such as the park with a public pool, a cinema, a theatre, a city hall and a hospital (Fig.28). Inside the microraion, as an organic but clearly defined "urban unit", freed by the major car traffic excluded to its outskirts, pedestrianized inhabitants shared schools, libraries, kindergartens, nurseries and dispensaries, enjoying green spaces, playgrounds or sports facilities in walking proximity (Fig.29). Avoiding grid repetition, buildings were articulated in landscape compositions, having variable heights and forms, with proper orientation. Moreover, escaping the private ownership of the land, the street network was deliberately designed as sinuous "to give beauty and character" (Nadrag & Hariton, 1972) to each zone. Its porous nature and intended functional autonomy, aimed to "make life inside the *microraion* one, single, uninterrupted experience" (Maxim, 2009, p. 20).



**Fig. 26.** Scale model of Drumul Taberei district, Arhitectura 1/1972, courtesy of Union of Architects in Romania (UAR). Scan by the current author.



**Fig. 27.** Plan of *microraion* 7, known as the *Buclă*, Drumul Taberei district, Arhitectura 1/1970. Scan by the current author.



**Fig. 28.** Socio-cultural equipment along the main boulevard, Cinema "Favorit" from Drumul Taberei district, Bucharest (1973). From the "Mihai Oroveanu" Collection of Images, courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and *Salonul de Proiecte*.

Inhabitants appreciate until today the airy, green and quiet character of the *microraions*, experiencing it "less like an urban area, but more like a resort" (N.L., resident). Destined as the main place for social interaction, the green spaces surrounding the buildings were designed more as a uniform, collective landscape, somewhere in between the cvartal semi-private, domestic inner courtyards and a public park. These spatial and functional features determined over time the development of specific local practices, as more inhabitants identifying as a favourite ritual going out for a walk together with family or friends, either on the wide Buclă boulevard, or by exploring the alleys in between the blocs. In the same time, sharing public infrastructure allowed for social relations to emerge between tenants, proving microraion capacity "to function as a tool of social integration and abolition of class divisions" (Maxim, 2009, p. 21). As children were living in the same bloc, going to the same school and playing in the same places, in time, such everyday practices allowed for emerging conviviality, towards community crystallization, as a resident (B.O.) growing up in the district testifies: "there were very few moments when I went out in the neighbourhood and I didn't see any familiar faces" (Fig.30). The generous planning, with spacious apartments and increased buildings' quality, together with the well-designed commercial and cultural neighbourhood centres, its numerous education facilities, completed by the lavish green

spaces and the highly appreciated major public park, placed Drumul Taberei area as one of the most desired address in the city.



**Fig. 29.** Educational equipment was placed in the middle of the *microrarions*, Drumul Taberei district, Bucharest (1973). From the "Mihai Oroveanu" Collection of Images, courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and *Salonul de Proiecte*.

Starting with 1966<sup>58</sup>, the dwellers were able to buy their apartments and could choose their district. Those who could afford it were not being conditioned by the factory's repartition system. Less dependent on a major industrial platform to serve compared with other massive housing districts in the city, Drumul Taberei became a sought for destination also for other professionals than factory workers, like clerks, teachers, doctors, engineers and various specialists. It even had a more cosmopolitan air, as after 1973 a group of Chilean socialist refugees were housed by the Romanian authorities in one of the collective housing from the district (Odobescu & Bird, 2018). Building on the first *cvartal* destined for military personal, local narratives carry the distinction as "different" among other, more typical working class districts. This differentiation translates into an intellectual, middle-class and 'civilized' area. Also, the neighbourhood is perceived by dwellers especially as a "green" place, which means abundant vegetation, bigger distances between buildings, all in all, offering a higher quality of life. More than that, the apartments private ownership allowed extended families to live closer, as inhabitants

<sup>58</sup> Decree 445/1966 regarding the state's support of citizens from cities in the construction of privately owned homes, issued by the State Council of RPR.

started over time to "pull each other" into the neighbourhood. Forming networks based on kinship and vicinity, Drumul Taberei evolved somewhat more stable against the risks of fragmentation, evidenced in other neighbourhoods. Thus, initial residents maintained and transmitted further a collective narrative of a neighbourhood that has grown as a community, contributing to the developing of a strong attachment, a sense of identity and belonging. As one resident (J.T.) testifies at the beginning of our walk from her *bloc*: "I grew up with, it's important to begin this way, and I continue to have it, and I will have it until I will grow old, the pride of being from Drumul Taberei". However, such feelings of belonging and pride evolved sometimes towards exclusivist narratives, against adjacent districts and outsiders, intensified especially in the following decades, marked by *densification*, which brought more construction sites of new buildings, hosting waves of new comers, thus increasing the pressure on shared resources, amounting to a general degradation of collective life.



**Fig. 30.** Playing in the streets of the *microraion*, Drumul Taberei district, Bucharest (1973). From the "Mihai Oroveanu" Collection of Images, courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and *Salonul de Proiecte*.

The densification – intensifying the in between spaces (1974 – 1989)

Although, the district was well received by inhabitants and the regime was using its success and modern appeal even in protocol visits<sup>59</sup> not all went according to the plan. The public housing' economic model favoured the construction of living units resulting in the diminishing, postponing and even cancelation of some socio-cultural facilities. In Drumul Taberei, the planned hospital and the neighbourhood centre, containing the town hall, the theatre and other commercial, social and cultural functions, were never built. Dwellers were rushed into their new apartments while not all the facilities were ready. Planting the green spaces, arranging the playgrounds, or installing the public furniture was left for later. As planners had little or no agency to influence the housing construction system which channelled its efforts on delivering a huge number of apartments in the shortest possible time, inhabitants step in. This was a generalised symptom of the systematisation process, becoming even a topic for the investigation journalism of the time. Through field reporting and undercover footage, the documentary film Noi unde de jucăm?/ Where are we playing? (1968), directed by Florica Holban, openly criticises the lack of playgrounds in the newly built collective housing neighbourhoods. To illustrate the pressing need, the inquiry presents the conflict between a group of parents, who informally set up a playground near their apartment building on a vacant lot which was destined to became a store's warehouse. Confronted, Bucharest' Vice-Chief Architect admits that the sistematizare aimed first to "give a face" to the city, favouring the areas on the main boulevards. In front of Drumul Taberei master plan, he promises dozens of playgrounds that will be realised also in the microraions' depth. This spatialized critique coming from the users wasn't isolated and manifested through informal gardening, DIY furniture, ad-hoc playgrounds or animal shelters. Such ephemeral and informal practices were embodying a first settlers' narrative, widespread among early inhabitants. Collaborative dwellers had to get hands-on and solve their everyday problems compensating for planning' shortcomings, thus making the district at home, while binding the community.

In fact, many of these spaces left pending by the hurried systematisation were temporarily transformed in the meantime by users to suit their needs, if they were not occupied instead by newly built apartment buildings. Following a recurring trend that accompanied the socialist housing program since its beginnings, "economicity" will become an "all-powerful" concept (Zahariade, 2011). Its climax will be, as usual, a top-down political direction transmitted by Nicolae Ceauşescu with the occasion of his 1971 speech in front of the architects: "in the new districts, the apartment buildings are sometimes scattered randomly, without coagulating towards precisely outlined streets and boulevards, in a clear urban line" (Ceauşescu, 1971, p.6). Even if premonitory as an early postmodern critique towards the modernistic urban planning, the strong underlining reasons were mostly economical, objecting to the *microraion's* waste of land and indicating the use of existing

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> With the occasion of visiting Romania by some heads of state and government, it was customary that local authorities organized visits showing the achievements of the socialist system, including industrial objectives or residential areas. Drumul Taberei district was among their favourite destinations, being visited by Fidel Castro or Mikhail Gorbachev. <sup>60</sup> Translated by the current author.

utilities networks for building new apartments (Zahariade, 2011). Such "indications were stronger than the law" as one planner (B.R.) recalls that "the race towards densification" had started. Projects under way were remade according to the new guiding. The *Legea Sistematizării/ Sistematization Law* (1974)<sup>61</sup> and *Legea Străzilor/ Streets Law* (1975)<sup>62</sup> catched up with the top-down informal directives and firmly established the demise of the airy *microraion* in favour of more "compact" housing ensembles, marking the comeback of the street made of "cohesive fronts". The change of track in urban planning affected also Drumul Taberei development. 'Economicity' was applied through the densification of the *microraions* still on the planners' drawing boards, but also by adding new constructions into already built districts, either inside its wide, open spaces, or by creating "fence-type architecture" on its edges (Fig.31). Coinciding with the start of an economic crisis that will become bitter during the 1980s affecting the new constructions' quality, this hybrid attempt of re-*cvartalization* of the *microraion*s was received with mix feelings by architects and dwellers alike.



**Fig. 31.** New buildings with commercial spaces by the ground floor were added by the edges of existing *microraions* creating corridor boulevards. *Buclă*, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2022). Print screen from the video *Episodul - 1 Utopia locuită*, Ileana Szasz (2022).

Especially early residents, who moved in since "the beginnings" and have already settled in, resented the densification as invasive. By blocking, occupying and taking from their spatial resources, the new constructions were perceived as "ruining" inhabitants' beloved neighbourhood,

<sup>61</sup> Law 58/1974 regarding the systematisation of the territory and urban and rural localities, issued by the Great National Assembly.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Law 37/1975 regarding the systematisation, design and construction of traffic arteries in urban and rural areas, issued by the Great National Assembly.

which lost some of its airy and green character. This phenomenon will later became one of the main sources of the conflict between dwellers over resources. Densification was also felt as an intrusion into the already established local practices and social networks developing around playgrounds, green spaces and informal gardens. While strolling along the curvy alleys of the district where he once lived, one resident recalls the construction of a new apartment building among the existing ones:

"The place where that *bloc* was built was our place, it was the children's meeting place, the place where we were making friends, where we socialized, where we played. As that place disappeared, so did the possibility of socializing." (N.L., resident)

Such testimonies underline the early residents' impression that the new comers "hadn't integrated very well" (N.L.) in the already formed communities. However, the densification managed to soften some functional imbalances inherent to microraion's concept, especially by completing the undersized and isolated commercial spaces, as the new apartment buildings with stores on the ground floor increased the streets' vitality and even became local landmarks in time. On the other hand, new comers were eager to fit in, quickly adopting local practices such as carrying for the green spaces, feeling at home in an already established district where they found "everything they need", referring especially to socio-cultural and green infrastructure. Nevertheless, the influx of inhabitants increased the pressure on neighbourhood shared infrastructure, such as transport, schools, or in between spaces. At the same time, the informal practices, developed by the early residents' domesticating the district' spaces, were coming at age. This was the case with community gardening, which became better organised, recognized and further supported by the socialist authorities. In addition to the laws which made residents responsible for maintaining green spaces in their proximity, further indications followed by legal measures encouraged the population to fructify the remaining un-occupied spaces bypassed by densification. As spatial resources became scarce, especially during the economic crisis and food shortages of the 1980s, their use intensified. Thus, the densification process changed once more along the way the district' planned course. The introduction of material and immaterial elements into existing constituted areas and altering the design of the later built microraions, disrupted existing practices, but nevertheless enhanced new ones. Densification triggered the evolution of the airy, more landscaping and less participative green of the *microraion*, towards a more intensified use of the available space in between the bloc. This meant also an intensification of the social landscape and informal practices. Such inflation of usage triggered also the emergence of competing processes over the shared spatial resources, enabling the conditions for an almost permanent state of conflict between diverse actors, which will become the dominant mark of the following decades.

The privatisation – fragmenting the shared spaces (post 1990)

Within days from the collapse of the dictatorial regime of Nicolae Ceausescu, the newly formed revolutionary institutions repeals in its first legislative act several laws<sup>63</sup>. Ranking high on its list was Legea Sistematizării/ Law of Systematisation. The whole system of public construction was dismantled. Some institutions, like Institut de Proiectare or Trust de Constructii will survive into the following years, but failing to adapt to the new context of liberalization will eventually disappear. The state driven program of public housing was halted and the state owned apartments were sold to their tenants starting with 1992<sup>64</sup>. As the first and the biggest privatisation in post-socialist Romania, the radical privatisation of public housing had a profound effect on the life in the collective housing districts. Moreover, the retrocession of the previously nationalised buildings<sup>65</sup> impacted the collective housing neighbourhoods too. Un-built land left over by systematisation and densification was retrocessed to the former owners and their descendants, resulting in a further, random and developer for profit led densification of the districts. Compared with other districts where demolitions of previous traditional tissue were needed, in Drumul Taberei there were no individual plots which potentially could be retrocessed, due to its inheritance as a military training ground and mostly agricultural land. Thus, the district manage to escaped to a great extent from the effects of nationalisation-retrocession process, keeping much of its socialist city character of the in between spaces. However, the privatisation of individual apartments included only the land under the building divided in equal shares among the owners. All the space in between the buildings was left as a generic public domain. There is no ownership or usage rights' differentiation between the green spaces around the bloc or other spaces further away. This feature became a cause for today's unclear roles between the public administration, which supposed to maintain and organize the whole space and the informal gardeners, who want to self-organize the space in their dwelling proximity.

With a private property rate already significantly higher<sup>66</sup>, the privatisation of the remaining apartments' stock rented by the state came in Drumul Taberei more as an acceleration of the ownership policies started by the end of 1960s. State retreat, which accompanied the property transfer, was also materialising in the public spaces. Informal practices developed in the past decades of socialism came in full light and took over the neighbourhood. Such was the limited access to consumer goods, one of the population's major frustrations during the 1980s, which came out from the shady, informal networking and exploded after the liberalization and deregulation of commercial activities during the early 1990s. The street became the scene where

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Decree-Law 1/1989 regarding the repeal of some laws, decrees and other normative acts, issued by The Council of The National Salvation Front.

Law 85/1992 regarding the sale of houses and premises with other uses built from state funds and from the funds of state economic or budgetary units, issued by Romanian Government.

65 Law 112/1995 for the regulation of the legal situation of some buildings intended for housing, passed into the

ownership of the state, issued by Parliament of Romania.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Due lack of detail of the latest public Census measurement tools is difficult to assess the exact number of "personal property" apartments in Drumul Taberei. However, fieldwork testimonies and researchers agree that the district has a significantly high rate of private ownership prior 1989, which wasn't a shared feature compared to other working class districts.

these sometime extreme phenomenon were spatialized. As illustrated in the film *Dragoste și apă* caldă/ Love and hot water<sup>67</sup> (1992), directed by Dan Mironescu, where Titi, one of the tenants of a partially still under construction housing district starts his own business by selling imported goods, like leggings, audio tapes, drinks, coffee and cigarettes, exhibited from a stall with an umbrella right in front of the apartments bloc's entrance. Such temporary commercial spaces enacted by newly 'privatised' residents, were common also in Drumul Taberei, as one dweller (N.E.) remembers her neighbour selling 'TEC soda' from a dispenser installation over the alley through the *bloc*'s garden. In a few years, this ad-hoc furniture will evolve towards closed, temporary constructions, placed on the generous sidewalks, or green spaces, known as kiosks. "After the Revolution, all the kiosks appeared, they were everywhere. And so like that, the entire sidewalk from one end to the other was full", remembers a former resident (N.E.) of the area walking along the wide boulevard. The under-sized existing commercial spaces, contributed to the spread of the kiosks, accelerating the microraions' densification by forming commercial avenues and street corners in the proximity of housing apartments (Staicu, 2013). Although kiosks were occupying previously shared spatial resources, these commercial spaces were working also as a much needed social infrastructure, becoming landmarks for the locals. In their early stages, these spaces were operated by the residents as family run business, being part of the neighbouring networks. However, the trade gradually became more professional, patrons and sellers were increasingly coming from outside the neighbourhood and personalized community relationships have partially decayed. Later, under the banner of legality, Traian Băsescu, Bucharest general mayor of the time, begins around 2000 their evictions from the public domain. To this day, inhabitants can still identify remains of the social infrastructure formed around these kiosks. After their demolitions, part of these social networks took refuge in and around the garages or ground floor apartments which were transformed in corner shops, small service spaces, such as shoemakers, tailors, or barbers. In a similar note, other informal practices emerging from the dismantling of the socialist city, undergo a period of flourishing and expansion, followed, starting with the end of the 1990s by their decline. However, some of these informal practices survived, adapted and reinvented themselves, as a manifestation of dwellers' needs, matched by their creative agency and capacity to act.

Other phenomenon which greatly influenced the district transformation was the decay and closure of the socio-cultural infrastructure and community spaces, the disappearance of local industry and the invasion of personal cars that will greatly contribute to the intensification of a conflicting state among local actors. The former industrial platforms located in neighbourhood vicinity were privatised, closed down after a while and finally demolished completely, only to be replaced by shopping malls and new, high density developer led housing complexes. Benefiting from a strategic position in the district, connected to a good transport network and coupled with the decay, the closure and even the partial demolish of the former socio-cultural neighbourhood centres allowed the replacing shopping mall to became the new heart of the district, one that is

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Translated from Romanian by the current author.

pumping for consume driven socialization<sup>68</sup>. In the same time, public spaces of proximity were flooded by the explosion of cars, as Bucharest reached staggering levels of car ownership, making it the "most congested city in EU" (lojă, 2022, p.129). Inheriting an extremely low provision of parking area from socialist planning<sup>69</sup>, the in between spaces among the apartment buildings were occupied by the increasing need for dwellers' parking spaces (Fig.32). Coupled with the post 1989 dominant narratives praising individualism, the pressure on spatial shared resources greatly escalated, thus triggering competition and conflict among residents. Densification became fragmentation and led to the privatisation of the public and community resources. Such radical transformations eventually triggered a civic awakening against it, as informally organised residents began defending their shared public infrastructure, such as the abandonment of the district's cinema or the transformation of the main park (Borcan, 2022). Despite spatial and social evolutions causing an increased disconnection among residents, traces of latent commoning survived. Practices of mutual help among neighbours, everyday conviviality of proximity, informal practices of care, or the shared attachment and pride of belonging to the neighbourhood, articulates a however fragile, thus more valuable, local model for collective living.



Fig. 32. Cars parked on the green spaces in between the buildings which have garages by the ground floor. Buclă, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> The only factory from socialist time built within Drumul Taberei was the medium size "Tricodava" who was completely demolished in 2014 to be replaced by a commercial centre and developer led new collective housing complex with a super-high density compared to the socialist apartment building around <sup>69</sup> The socialist urban planning norms considered 1 parking lot to 10 apartments.

Collective living – in time of pandemic

Without intending to do so from the beginning, the field research overlapped with the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic in Romania and recorded also the residents' post-pandemic reflections related to their life in the neighbourhood. Facing movement restrictions, combined with the disruption of social life triggered by the public health crisis, affected within different degrees everyday living practices of almost all inhabitants, as well as their perceptions and evaluations of public spaces. During the pandemic, a series of coping mechanisms were developed by different categories of dwellers, to fit their pressing needs. The interiors of the houses became a narrative infrastructure, as residents attempted to compensate for the lack of spaces and public functions specific to their urban life (Axinte, 2020). Among them, the balcony undergo a sudden functional revival, being invested with new uses aiming to support free time spending and even the practice of distanced socialisation among neighbours. From a storage space, the balcony regained its valuable role as an intermediary space between the private house and the public street, especially as a place in connection with the open air<sup>70</sup>. But the public spaces in the vicinity of the residence experienced perhaps the most significant transformation. Freed from car traffic, the nearby streets were gradually occupied by games and play of children and adults forced to limit their movements around the house, thus "radically adapting their routines to this unprecedented social laboratory" (lancu, 2020, p.138). As tactics for reducing the general anxiety, seeking for socialization and aiming to get out into the fresh air, chalk drawings on the asphalt, football, badminton, street volleyball, bike rides, rollers, scooters, all came back to life and reclaimed the residential streets.

In the context of the collective housing districts, these processes could take place freely, benefiting from the generous spaces among the buildings, but also from the quite fresh memories of the generations of adults' which were occupying during their childhood the spaces between the *blocs* through informal play. Compared to the traditional city, not only the road or the narrow sidewalks were appropriated for play and socialization, but in the areas planned during socialism the inhabitants had at their disposal a whole range of available spaces. From wide sidewalks transformed into playgrounds, to green spaces becoming informal gardens, to all kinds of intermediate spaces, such as the garages or the area near the carpet beaters emerged as informal playgrounds and meeting places among neighbours and friends (Fig.33). All of these informal uses amounted into a change at the scale of the neighbourhood, as one resident (J.T.) from Drumul Taberei acknowledged the transformation of her own relationship with the district, observed as well among her neighbours: "I really feel involvement and pleasure in the area". As the place where she grew up became since she was a teenager just a "dormitory neighbourhood", for her, the pandemic contributed to a change of mood and habits:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Although formally prohibited, but somewhat tolerated by the socialist state, the residents closed their balconies with improvised structures out of the need for storage space and for better insulation. Thus, balconies lost their designed recreational function and became service spaces. The phenomenon accelerated during post-socialism, affecting most of the existing balconies. But the pandemic has temporarily mitigated these trends.

"I feel like the pandemic has brought us a lot closer to what's going on [here] and we've started consuming more here and I really like it. I took a walk (...) on the *Buclă* and I think it's fabulous, I think the boulevard is very cool with enormous sidewalks, the sidewalks were always big, but now I saw them, with kids playing on street, drawing, with their parents." (J.T., resident)

Such informal users' habits were not necessarily new, but rather rediscovered, adapted and transferred also to new generations, as the pandemic worked more to reactivate and accelerate these latent practices already existing in the collective memory of the dwellers. Thus, the pandemic changed for some residents their relationship with the neighbourhood, reconnecting them with the district spaces and engage them with specific local practices. Even diminished, some of these processes intensified by the pandemic continued after the end of the restrictions. Such was the rediscovered pleasure for informal gardening, or the use of other spaces than the standard playgrounds, such as the wide sidewalks of the main boulevard. Paradoxically, a moment of enforced social distancing and mobility restriction renewed and awakened the more or less collective use, appropriation and transformation of public spaces in the district.



**Fig. 33.** Carpet beater near the *bloc* transformed by the residents in a children swing during the closure of public parks and playgrounds in lockdown. Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

#### The Neighbourhood - a space based practice

The residents have become accustomed over time to use and interact among the generous spaces of the Drumul Taberei district. These habits led to the development of specific relationships among them based on the use of the surplus spaces. The relationships developed between some of the tenants become a local habit, an implicit and informal way of practising their belonging to the community. Therefore, the gardeners next to the bloc, the garage users, corner shop regulars, those who take care together of the street animals or even kids who go to school and play together in the same areas, users of public infrastructure of proximity such as libraries, may have developed stronger attachment for their district and their neighbours. Such spatially determined relationships of collaboration are not shared by everyone and those less involved in these activities don't feel the crystallization of a community in a similar way. There were different nuances and degrees of association also between spatially active residents, such as a resident (E.C.) observing her neighbours involvement in the collective transformation of the green spaces around the buildings: "Before, everyone was doing it, together with the neighbours from the bloc. But everyone also did their own part." Going further, another dweller (J.T.), however less involved in the spatial practices around the bloc, states that they "live together, but separately". From here, there is one more step towards conflict, which occurs when residents compete for the same resources, when the use of some spaces excludes and disturbs others, but especially when there is a lack of communication and negotiation between dwellers and between them and the administration. Forms of spatial manifestation of conflicts varies, from cars parking over sidewalks and invading pedestrian spaces, green areas and playgrounds, to gardens transformed into the back or front yard annexes of the ground floor apartments with excessive fencing and locks. Some small corner shops or gardening kiosks becoming conflict generators as regular meeting (and drinking) spots only for a small group of loud regulars. Resourcing the conflict are also the beautification evictions of the administration, followed by disobedient creative tactics of the dwellers that are seeking to personalize and mark their presence through DIY installations in the in between spaces of the district. Moreover, the current dominant narratives which encourage individualism and celebrate the entrepreneur contribute to the discredit of collaboration and solidarity between residents, which becomes a premise for misunderstandings and conflict.

However, elements preceding a community coagulating are present in less explicit manner within everyday aspects of living, such as mutual aid practiced through informal networks of solidarity. It's always good to "know someone" nearby in the district to turn to when in need. Bricklayers, plumbers, car mechanics, teachers, doctors, nannies, tailors, sellers or food producers are exchanging services and products, implicitly drafting a community of interests. Nonetheless, many of these relationships remain only at the mutualisation level. A resident indirectly involved in neighbourhood relations only through family members, observes:

"You help each other, but doing an exercise for a common good, that's the difference. I mean I need someone to help me and you come and help me and I help you in return. But if we have a

common problem, the garbage, the staircase, I don't know, whatever, the air quality, we don't do something together." (J.T.)

Several tenants from different generations testify about the benefits of belonging to these forms of networked relationships. Small exchanges, casual returned services and occasional gifts are customary ways of "keeping the connection" alive among members of the informal networks. Partially, this way of relating is determined by the nature of the space used collectively in their proximity. Moreover, it is completed also by a practice inherited from the first generations of dwellers, which developed and refined these relations in response to direct needs mirroring the historical evolution of the area. Remembering the before 1989 kindness of his neighbours to lend, offer help and open up, a dweller (D.J.) observes: "people were getting along; there was nothing to fight for between them", meaning that residents showed solidarity also because the use of collective resources for individual gains wasn't so intense. On a different note, a young resident (N.B.) accounts for the immaterial neighbourly practices which are inherited from previous generations as her neighbour confessed when she pays a visit: "how glad I am that you sit in our kitchen as I used to sit in your grandparents' kitchen ". The relations among residents from the same bloc could become quite close, as some of them were becoming good friends, celebrating birthdays or New Year's Eve together. Not infrequently they were even becoming relatives, by baptizing their kids or marrying each other, turning the close neighbourly connections into a true family. Although sometimes intrusive and unwanted, the living proximity contributed to the formation and maintenance of relationships among residents living side by side, as a tenant (J.T.) rather regrets the moment when her neighbours decoupled from the collective utilities network as "there is no one to knock on your pipes any longer and the connection between the apartments has been broken"71. Largely dependent on the use of spatial resources, maintained through local relational habits and reinforced by belonging to informal networks that seldom become explicit, neighbourly practices occur through habitual, everyday actions and activities, as the neighbourhood becomes neighbourhooding.

At the same time, the urban context and the historical evolution of its management left its marks on the nature of relations among dwellers. As the rules changed over the course of several decades, sometimes dramatically, going from one extreme to another, they have made the residents involved in informal practices more resilient, but also more cautious. Such is the case with the community gardening, encouraged and even formally supported before 1989, only to be discouraged and in some places prohibited and evicted in the following decades. Their status became unclear, changing with every new administration. By practising all those 'discreet spaces', like the rather short lived productive gardens on plots allowed over the district's edges, or the more enduring decorative gardens tolerated by the *bloc*, or the half-opened garage spaces sometimes informally transformed and used within the grey area of legality, taught their users to detect potential conflicts and develop specific coping tactics. One resident (N.T.) who arranged by herself

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Some dwellers use to draw attention when their neighbours are exceeding the noise level, by hammering on the heat pipes that cross from one apartment to another.

the abandoned green space in front of her window confessed: "my experience tells me that it's best to be soft in your approach because otherwise you stir things up. And I say that a personal example is best." Through practice and her own example, she managed to transform the place, to get accepted by the neighbours and even to inspire the nearby tenants. Such examples are illustrating a wide spread feature among informal spatial practices which are carrying a tacit character, where the management and negotiation takes place rather through spatial use and not necessarily through open debates and formally agreed rules. With few more visible exceptions where the users' self-organisation is explicitly assumed, most of the informal practices remain rather discreet. Avoiding potential frontal risks, they are stubborn but however creative practices of relating and belonging. Through them, some inhabitants manifest and maintain their attachment to the neighbourhood, practising the connection with the previous generations of dwellers, thus activating in the same time the memory of the place. Moreover, although sometimes individually driven, informality is accepted and recognized as a shared practice forming a "community of practice" (Wenger, 2002).

# Hackingt he Project

#### INSTITUT DE PROIECTARE

The facades were their favourites. They could work for days on the design of the balconies and entrances, on the railings, the parapets and the flower pots. Since they entered the Institut in 1983, this was the first project in which they no longer made just the estimates for the buildings, but they were dealing with real design. "Guys, can you open that window, will you? You smoked until you can cut the cloud with a knife!" On the back legs of the chair she explains some numbers to the superior, while the rest of the girls are drawing lying on their stomach over the drawing board. He is doing the entourages, writing the big titles, filling the windows with black ink and drawing the people. They are strolling around aimlessly in their loose clothing, looking up, talking in the street, walking their dog. They are like in a story of their own. Next, he makes the trees with their forked branches and he's finally tracing the cars with their big headlights and half hidden wheels. They give him such pleasure. Music overflows from the radio, phone's ringing, everyone chatters. The big tables are filled with coffee cups, lots of drawing tools, while glossy posters are hanging all over the walls. They need to finish earlier today, there is someone's birthday celebration and the packages with pâtés, salés, almonds and cookies are waiting for them.

This could be a day like any other in one of socialist Romania's regional Institut de Proiectare, or Design Institutes. Since early 1950s until 1989, the architectural profession was 'nationalized' and every architect had to become a state employer in an Institut. Urban planning and architectural design were subordinated to the politically led economic and social development of the country. The state controlled everything with a "strong hand" through a complex system of planning institutions, which were "directing" from the centre the industrial development through Planuri Cincinale as Five Years State Plans. In the same time, specialized central institutions were establishing the "rules of the game" consisting of construction norms and regulations, drafting also the "typified projects" in accordance with the capacities of the construction industry. Schools, kindergartens, dispensaries or apartment buildings had to be replicated "as such" in every city. The local administrations as branches of the party-state system had to implement and report back no matter what the fulfilment of their part of the plan. They operated through the locally subordinated Trust de Construcții, as Construction Trusts, and regional Institut de Proiectare. Norms and indicators of economicitate as economicity were drafted from above and in combination with the urban sistematizare as systematization plans, resulted in strictly and limited allocated budgets. Moreover, every design proposal resulted from these constrains should go back to the centre through a difficult approval system, up until to the country's leader. The system tended to be closed and aimed to be flawless.

However, there were specific evolutions and variations of the architectural practice over the decades. Such evolutions were always a consequence of major shifts of political tectonic plates. There were also differences among architects, depending on their proximity to political power, field of work and status in society. Produced in the state' Institut de Proiectare, mass housing was, along with industrial development, Romania's major construction program. To match such task, these regional *Institut* where enrolling towards the 1980s the majority of architects (if not working in Design Institutes, architects would have still be working in another planning department of a state company). The unprecedented access to resources, such as public land, the industrialization of construction, or top-down political decision, "freed" the architects from the limitations and uncertainties of a profit-led liberal market. Along with engineers, economists and many other specialists, architects could work at full capacity for the public good employed in these *Institut* which became the embodiment of the early modernists' dream of the "collaborative team". Not just staggering quantity, but also an unprecedented quality of collective housing was achieved in Romania through these *Institut*, especially between 1960s and 1970s, unparalleled in any other historical period.

Towing the urban and architectural design to the industrialization process meant a strict standardization, typified projects and limited predesigned apartments' typologies. The collective memory of the profession holds bitter-sweet memories about the practice "in the Institut". Looking back, the architects felt trapped in a system they could have little agency to influence. With a cigarette in his hand, an architect (R.D.) working back then, confessed to me across the drawing board of his own studio: "The architect was a kind of tiriplic [a small nobody], a kind of... nothing. One who had to put on the ground the products of the construction industry." Rarely addressed up front, or just hinted in the specialized press, the tension was boiling within the profession. It was so spread among the architects, as sometimes it resurfaced in the cultural products, like in the novel based movie Stop cadru la masă/ Snapshot around the family table (1980), directed by Ada Pistiner. Here, the main character, the architect Filip, gets refused by the director of the Institut to participate in an international urban planning competition on the

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grounds that in the past years he had worked "only for typified-projects". The refusal hints to his lack of recent and creative experience in urban design. Due to the highly predetermined housing typologies, this refuse of creativity was especially resented by the architects of the time. As another architect active during the period looks back:

"The regimentation was terrible and you felt like a kind of clerk who had some creative impulses, but were very much kept in check. Like those who would be incarcerated, but had to design prisons, that was the pattern" (C.C., architect). These creative impulses were often channelled into projects' representation, like model making, rendering facades or drawing entourages, but also made their way beyond working duties. Architects developed their graphic skills, producing various works of graphic design, such logos, adverts, or comic strips and caricatures. Even more, the Institut have become a true informal market for the production and distribution of crafted goods, such as jewellery, knitwear or greeting cards, which rounded off the architects' incomes, especially in the period of economic crisis and general scarcity of 1980s.

From the bus window the history of the last years in the Institut was unfolding before his eyes. Since 1975 the race for densification was on, with more typified projects and smaller budgets. And with lots of corridor avenues, which were bordering the edges of the earlier housing districts. From the station he walks for a while to their home along the almost finished street fronts still chatting with a colleague. Their windows faced an inner courtyard formed behind one of this newly built boulevard. Down there, the children were playing football near the heating plant, while few guys were again repairing something on a car. The second floor neighbour was up to his elbow in the pickle jar they kept on the balcony, while the ground floor madam was working her flowers in the garden she just fenced. The street stores had the warehouses towards the courtyard and their employees were just arranging the wooden packages as they were expecting merchandise to arrive, making an infernal noise. The courtyard functioned as an echo chamber, so every shout of kids' play, the backgammon dices, the rhythmic beats of the carpet, small chatter by the entrance, bits of radio music or a spoon hitting the plate would spin around and bounce from the bloc' walls into every home in a mixture of sounds and noises shared by all. "Come on, I won't heat your soup again!" He took a quick glance before throwing away the cigarette and dropping a well-practiced spit making sure that no one sees him.

Besides the generalized narrative frustration, professional boredom and lack of horizon, there are several accounts from architects addressing their need for creativity within the housing program itself. Partly disregarded even by themselves as marginal and with limited impact on the big picture, they nevertheless lights up an alternative way of the pursuit for creative freedom: hacking. From a rather precarious position in the housing chain of production, some architects were acting like hackers from within. By opportunistically identifying the loopholes in the system, they were using their design skills, developing tactics and engaging in informal transactions with the main actors. However, such approaches were not solitary initiatives, being possible only within the design collectives and with the tacit support of mid-management. Not only aiming to satisfy their professional ego and creative needs, this struggle was driven by a genuine desire to improve dwellers' life. Such architects were engaged in a tacit micro-critique of the strict standardization, while actively trying to improve the built environment, through a bricolage beyond the assembly line of norms, laws, budgets and directives.

In their attempt "to do something" to get out of the typified patterns, the architects focused on the less prescribed sections of projects, like balconies, accesses or stairs, ramps and other public facilities around the building. From the edge of a boulevard in whose design he was involved during the 1980s, an architect tells:

"With the entrance to the bloc there, that's how I tricked them. I made a common covered entrance. What, you think they would have let me do it? But they didn't know. I put it in the project, and goodbye! And they had to execute it. And after they did it, when they calculate, that's it, no one knocks it down anymore" (H.F., retired architect).

Also the apartments' layout was hacked, increasing the squeezed normed surface of the rooms by "cheating" the dimensions on plans. Balconies were perhaps the most attractive space for trying some "tricks". A different shape, size or detailing could mean "something else" for the prescribed and dull image of the standardized *bloc*. Furthermore, by observing living practices and dwelling in these *blocs* themselves, the architects became more aware of the inhabitants' tactics for adapting buildings and nearby spaces to their current needs. Sometimes, the design hacks were aiming to support and ease these adaptations. Making possible further dwellers' hackings could be counted as traces of tacit participative design.

Overall, dealing with rather isolated aspects of the everyday, these hacking had a small impact on the inhabitants' collective life, largely determined

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by systematization decisions. Bigger issues like the under-sized, postponed or never built community buildings, abandoned public spaces and un-designed green areas were mostly out of architects' agency. After 1989, the systematization was quickly aborted, the whole state' driven construction system fall apart like a castle of cards in a few years. Growing up among the drawing boards of a regional *Institut de* Proiectare, I remember how the relaxed and friendly atmosphere slowly changed into sighs and heavyhearted discussions over a cigarette in the hallways. In few years, the Institut was getting empty and was rented out room by room. Building legislation was reduced dramatically and central institutions disappeared, while public housing construction program was halted. The architectural profession was liberalized as architects started individual practices in a free market. The privatized and diminished Institut continued to be active for a while. Later on, as a young architect, I experienced the radical deregulation of the constructions and witnessed the dismantling of the urban design for the public good. Struggling and failing to adapt and reinvent themself in the new neoliberal context, the *Institut* finally disappeared. They were soon to be regretted. At first sight, given the recollections of enduring strict control, lack of agency and suffocated creativity, the rather positive re-evaluation of the Institut de Proiectare' role could seem contradictory. However, faced with the complete collapse of public planning, replaced by a derogatory, privatized and profit-led urbanism, some aspects got revisited by the architects experiencing the before and after situation. The new housing districts built in the recent years are completely lacking any socio-cultural equipment, with scarce or no public and green spaces, being disconnected from public transport, while having densities unimagined even during the much reviled "densification" started in mid-1970s. Even apartments' layouts got smaller and less functional than before 1989. Today "a lot is missing", concludes one architect (C.C.) experiencing the change. He especially misses the Institut' lost capacity to mediate and integrate different actors, which acted as a "tool that allowed the control and management of urban planning provisions in a city", while in the same time being a very useful school of practice for young architects. Nowadays, hacking became generalized and even formally accepted, only to be practiced in the opposite direction, against the public good, rather than in its favour.

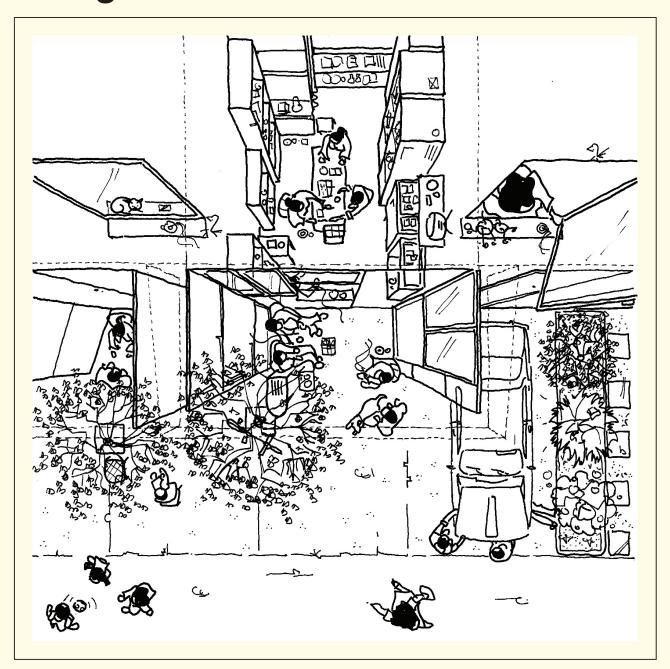
## DRAWINGS as SYNTHESIS

Typologies of practices synthesising the fieldwork tracings based on an illustrative case study, that are aiming to communicate the research findings.

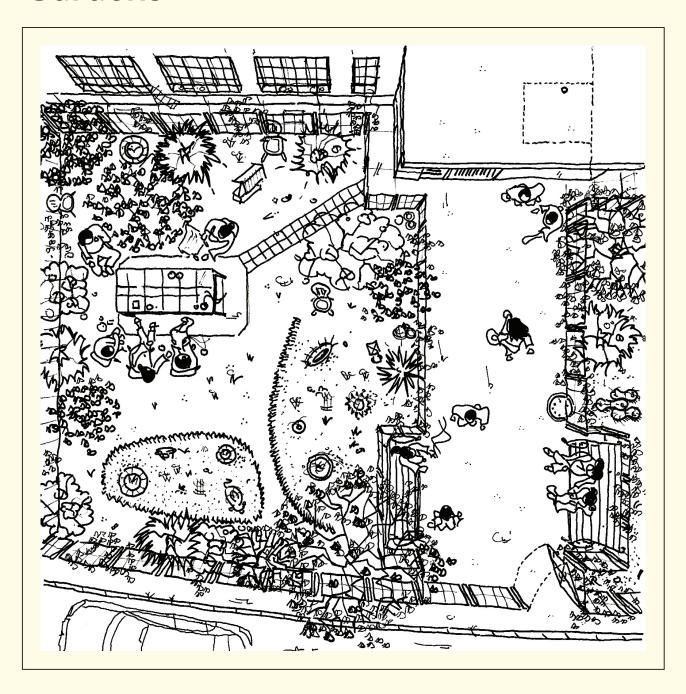
Bucla



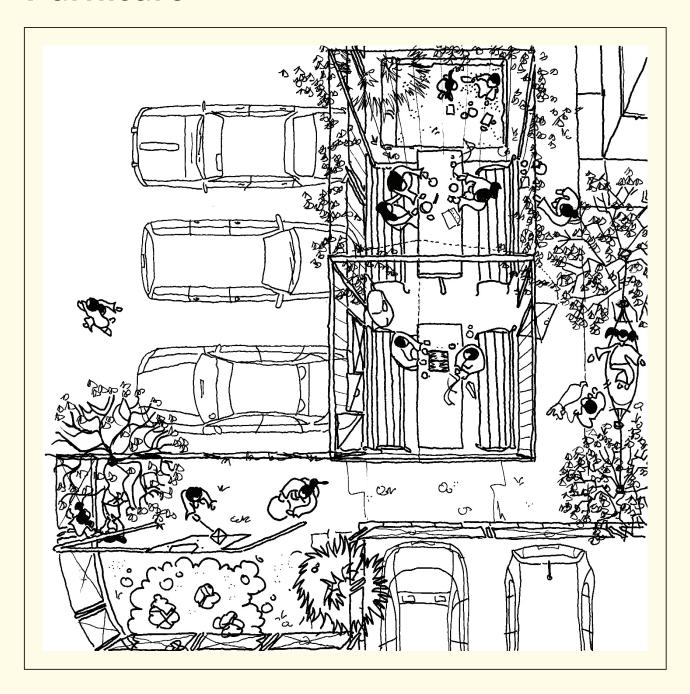
# Garages



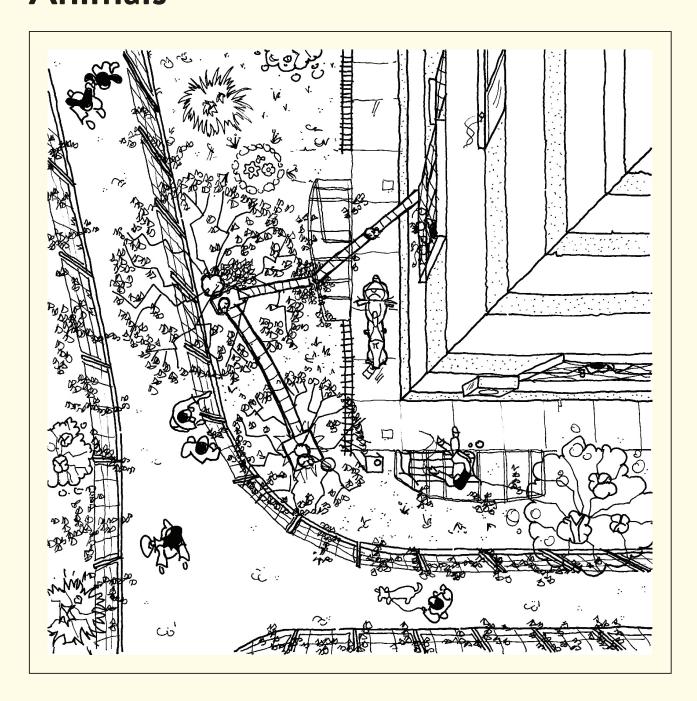
# Gardens



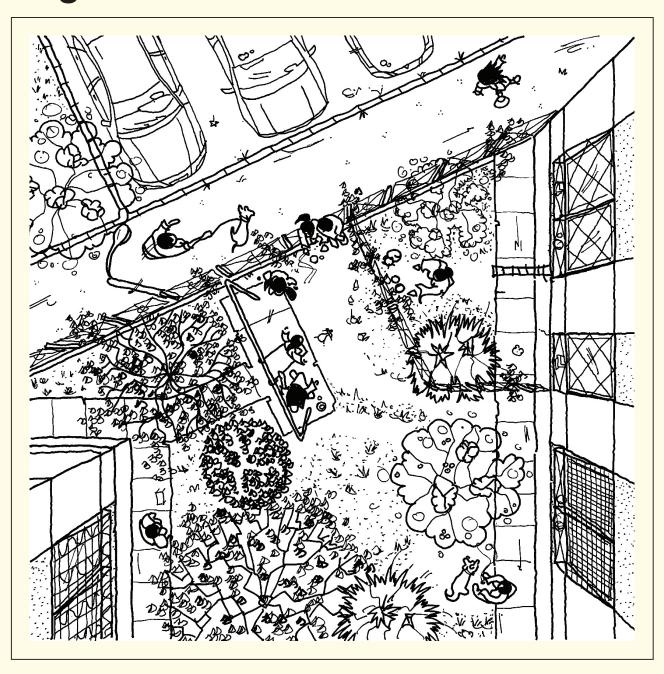
## **Furniture**



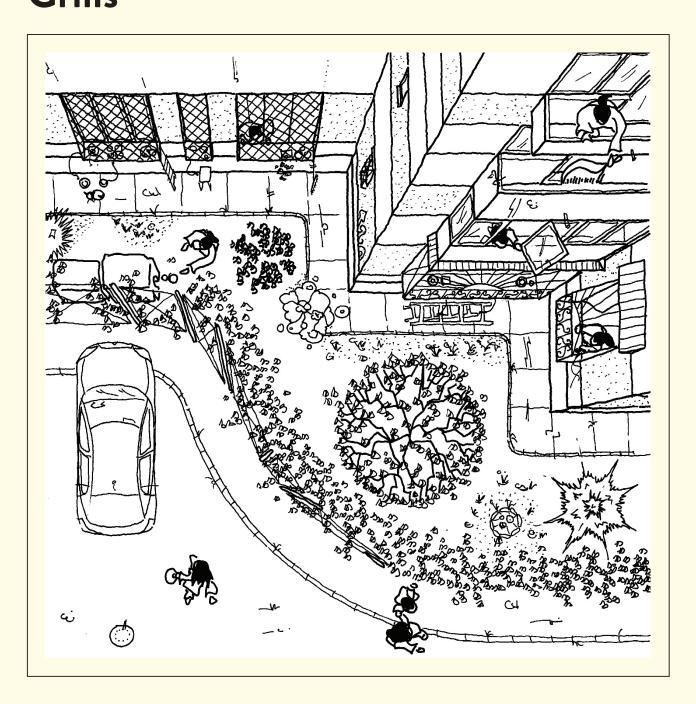
## Animals



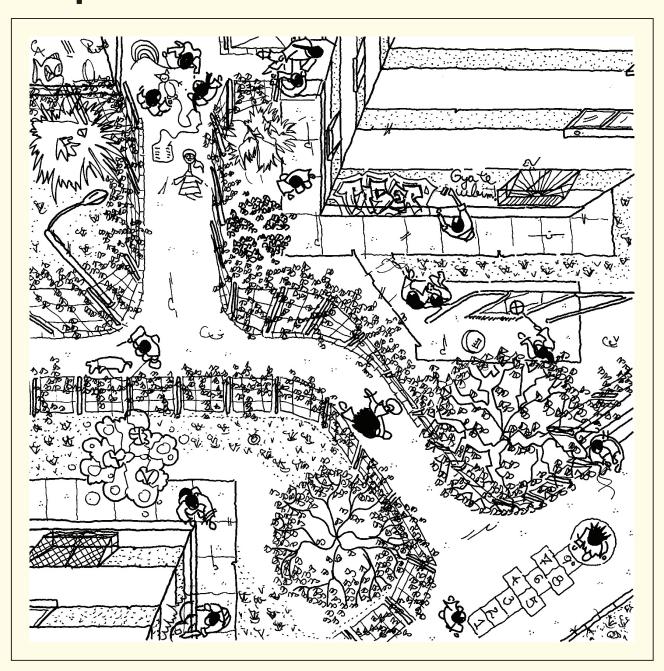
# Vegetation



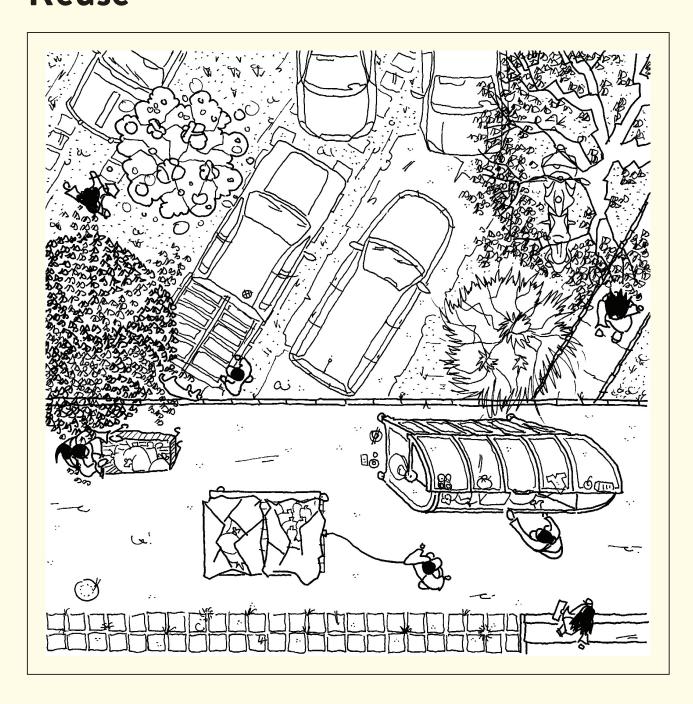
Grills



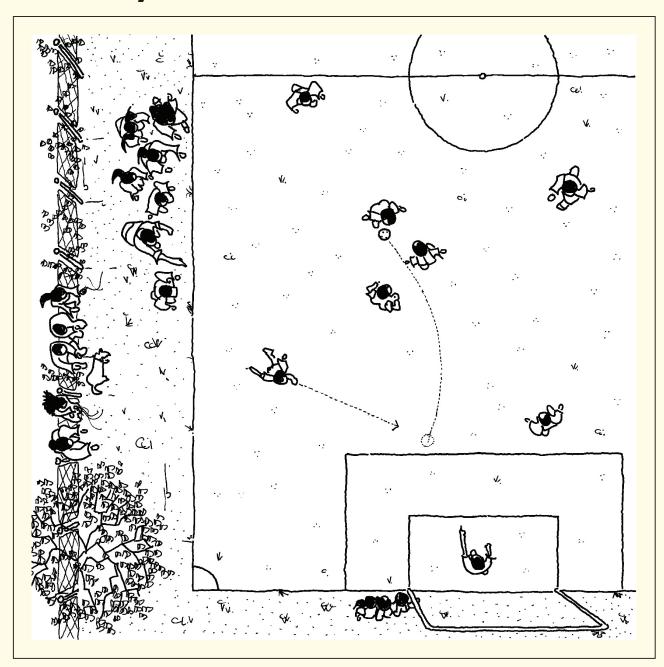
# Graphics



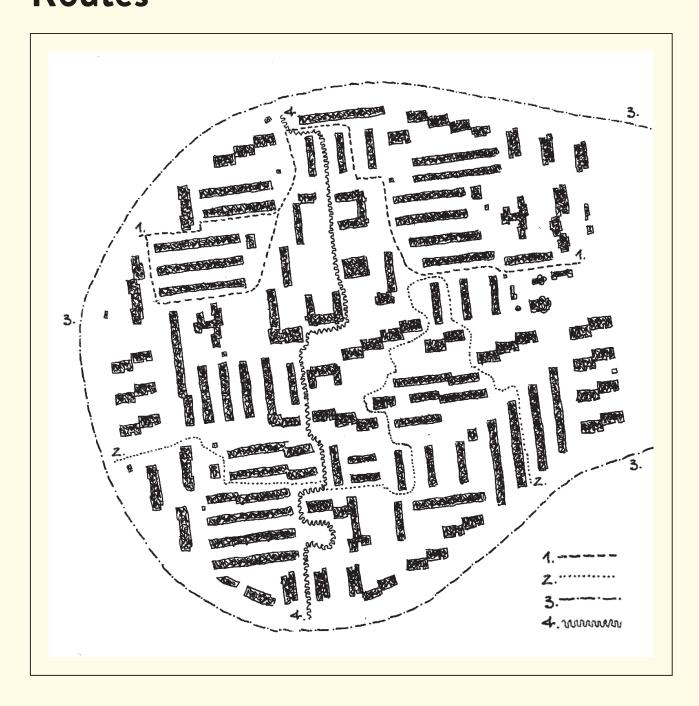
Reuse



# Memory



Routes



### 4.2. Gardens: Courtyards by the *Bloc*

City of gardens - from mahala to microraion, from the (individual) house to the (collective) bloc Inheriting the ban since the Ottoman rule of 16<sup>th</sup> century to erect defensive walls. Bucharest grew into the surrounding vast plains as a sprawling city with a low density. The first attempt to contain its expansion within clearer limits comes quite late and still in connection to fortification works. After the country's independence of 1878, a defensive infrastructure of forts and connecting roads was developed around the capital in several stages, up until 1914 (Scafes & Scafes, 2008). In the meantime, the city spread uncontrolled, radial along the road network, keeping within its borders large un-built areas. This softer tissue grew as an organic patchwork made of estates, or gardens, vineyards, orchards and maidane, understood as open, unfenced, empty fields, a local version of the public space. In the more densely populated areas of the inner city, known as mahala, a regional understanding for an urban quartier, or neighbourhood, the built infrastructure was still organised in a strong relation with the green courts. The "courtyard' life" was the dominant living paradigm, amounting to a specific pattern of local urbanisation (Tudora, 2009). In an interview from 1960, the well-known popular music singer Maria Tănase testifies: "I was born in Bucharest, in the old mahala of Cărămidarilor. The mahala where vegetables, fruit trees and flowers grow. In my father's apricot-scented garden"<sup>72</sup> (1960). The description from the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of an area close to the city centre, of what today is the Tineretului district, still defined by its greenery, can be applied to other areas around the urban core. In these mahalas, the most common local type of housing was the "wagon house", which meant a long construction of one level high, with the short side on the street limit, from where consecutive packs of rooms were added and accessed sideways from the courtyard. Usually, some of these added rooms were rented out, so it was a widespread situation that several families were living together. The courtyard, with which the house shared the plot, was thus a common space, used also as an outdoor living room and a social infrastructure for the tenants. Productive or aesthetic, for vegetables, with greens, or flowers, utilitarian, for drying clothes, or sheltering animals, as a connection with nature and a shared space for socializing, the green courtyards survived and evolved along differences among districts, users' needs and fashionable tastes of the time. Adapting to successive modernizations and hosting diverse functions, they became a structuring element of the local culture of living. Without being a larger village, but more a "transparent" urban tissue, understood "in the sense of intermediation, overlap and continuity" (Ghenciulescu, 2008, p.45), Bucharest has thus always been a city of gardens. This is where domestic life expanded, the relationship with the street was filtered, where social life unfolded and participation to the first circle of community took place. Up until the modern epoch of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but still making its way into contemporary imaginaries, the local urban culture was dominated by the living dream of the house with a garden (Voinea, 2018).

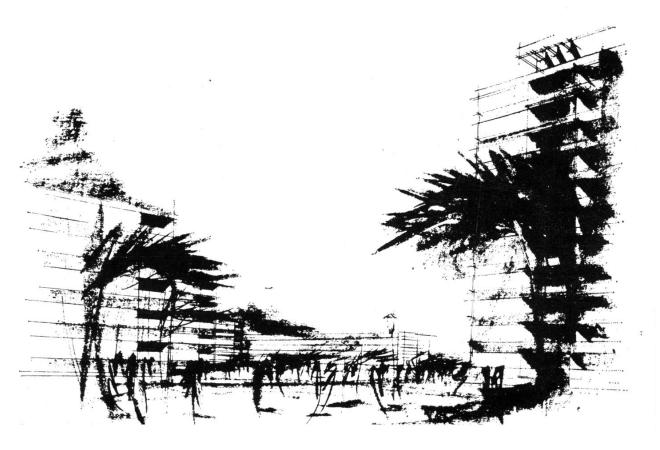
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Translated by the current author.



**Fig. 34.** Gardens by the *bloc* cared for by the dwellers and supported by the state, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (1984). Photo Dan Dinescu, courtesy of the author.

In the aftermath of the World War 2, together with the countries of Eastern Europe, Romania came under Soviet influence and adopted the communist doctrine. The accumulating needs of a growing population, supported by infusions of professional perspectives in urban planning and governed by top-down political decision triggered a radical change in the public housing policies. Breaking with the traditional model of a house with a garden, since the 1950s the state begins the construction of multilevel collective housing apartments, articulated in large districts, sometimes at the size of veritable new towns. For a huge part of the population, moving into these new districts was a major change of the way of life, recomposing their family and social relations. The relationship with the land and with nature in general, with the green spaces and in particular the traditional relation between the house, the family and the courtyard also changes, or at least it was intended to. In the film Serenadă pentru etajul XII/ Serenade for the XII floor (1976), directed by Carol Corfanta, the turner Firu, played by the beloved actor Toma Caragiu, happily and emotionally confesses to an imaginary neighbour, on the eve of moving from the small house of the mahala into the modern apartment in the newly built apartment bloc: "It starts tomorrow. Year one, first day. Hot water. Goodbye charcoal, goodbye squeaking". By emphasizing the superior living conditions, access to modern utilities and better furnishings of their new home, he might have added: Goodbye courtyard, goodbye garden! Especially since in several sequences the film presents the garden with rich vegetation that the turner's family leaves behind, as their former

house is scheduled for demolition. The new, socialist-modernist paradigm of collective living attempted to eliminate the domestically extension of the home into the green spaces of the proximity. However, the vegetable narratives didn't disappear together with the house by the *mahala* and flourished also among the new prefabricated *blocs*. In the beginning, the lush green was hosted either by the balconies, as it can be seen in the photographs or films from the era. When the balconies began to be closed and turned into pantries, the gardeners and their seedlings rooted into the generous spaces between the *blocs*, often left undeveloped by the rushed *sistematizare* (Fig.34).



**Fig. 35.** Drawings of *microraion* 7, known as the *Buclă*, Drumul Taberei district, *Arhitectura/ Architecture* 1/1970. Scan by the current author.

The Garden by the Bloc – the plan, the rules and the use

In the eye-level drawings published in *Arhitectura/ Architecture* magazine (Colea, 1970), the residential buildings of the new district appear as floating in a generic, anonymous, resort-like green (Fig.35). In professional handbooks, plans, diagrams and charts are indicating the plantings' scientific organisation of the green spaces of the newly built districts (Lăzărescu et al., 1977). Along these lines, specialized sections for "Green Spaces", organised inside the *Institut de Proiectare* were producing extensive and detailed landscape projects, which had to be approved by the party leadership, who liked "to poke their nose around" into the proposals. However, with the exception of district's central parks and major avenues of more prominent areas, the layout for the "gardens by the *blocs*" mostly remained on paper and was not realised anymore, as a landscape

architect (T.R.) of the time recalls. Needing many apartments quickly, some of the generously planned green spaces were left behind and became something like a burden for an overwhelmed administration. Therefore, their management was transferred to the residents. In the context of densification, the feasibility of large and designed green spaces is "reconsidered". The change of perspective was favouring their "merging" in a central park for each urban unit, rather than "disseminating" them among the buildings. In the same time, the plantation in the reduced in between spaces was assigned with just "hygienic and compositional" roles (Lăzărescu et al., 1977, p.85). Thus, even more, these in between spaces were rather abandoned. From the ground level, residents with a shovel in their hand took over and began planting fruit trees in the left over spaces, or start to arrange informal gardens in the blocs' proximity, with plants from the related courtyards or surrounding agricultural land. In the film *Omul care ne trebuie/ The man we need* (1979), directed by Manole Marcus, Vasile, the main character proudly shows to his superior how he planted a cherry tree in front of his *bloc*, hoping that in five, six years it will grow up to his window. By wondering if he will be able to eat cherries from it, he implies the request to be allowed to settle down in town, after finishing his seasonal duty on the construction site, keeping the apartment as well. Like the cherry tree, he and his family took roots here. Many of the early residents grew attached to the new districts, identifying trees that they have planted long ago as living proofs of their contribution to settling in the place (Fig.36).

This phenomenon was noticed by the planners, who, although resented their own lack of professional freedom, low flexibility and absence of customized solutions in the context of the strict typified construction system, were not seeing with good eyes the dwellers' freedom of informal adaptations. Spatialized in the balconies, this silent confrontation from the distance between the frustrated specialists and the disobedient residents was one of the seeds of the discourse of 'civilization' that hade consolidated in post-socialism, to which the experts have contributed greatly. As one sociologist working in an *Institut de Projectare*<sup>74</sup> of the time remembers that, facing the lack of resources and practical solutions, the planners had to dully accept dwellers' interventions which solved their current needs, "even if it was not on the most desirable or most indicated line" (E.B.). Towards the end of the 1980s, few singular professional voices were acknowledging the existence of the informal transformations of the green areas near the buildings, as a consequence of the crystallization of "neighbourly social relations" in the district (Caffé et al., 1987) which signalled "the real existence of the need for spaces for social communication and integration of the immediate proximity" and advocating for the existence of an "outdoor community space belonging (...) both to the house and to the "street" (to the collective space)" (p.124-125). Although marginal, with no real impact over the sistematizare process, or on the professional direction, these positions testifies on the magnitude of the informal practices' phenomenon, which rarely had a chance to resurface in professional concerns and debates before 1989.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Translated from Romanian by the current author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> The *Institutul de Proiectare Construcții Tipizate/ Design Institute for Typical Constructions (IPCT)* included a Laboratory of Sociological Studies that did research related to collective housing.

In the same time, referencing the socialist ethos of self-organised citizens carrying for their collective goods, but in fact overwhelmed by the monumental task to arrange and maintain such large green spaces, the state began to formalize and encourage the emerging self-organised practices. Thus, in the *Legea Străzilor/ Streets Law* (1975) it is mentioned that "the care and arrangement of inner courtyards, of green areas (...) is an obligation of every tenant." The residents kept mixed feelings about the rather quasi-compulsory character of these voluntary work actions, organised through the tenants associations. In contrast, others recollect them as events they enjoyed participating, occasions for socialization, as one *cvartal* dweller from Drumul Taberei remembers her childhood spent among the *bloc's* garden:

"The maintenance of the green areas was done by us, by everyone. And it wasn't something organised, everyone did it when they could and as a way to relax and it was also seen as an obligation towards the community you live in. It didn't come from anyone in particular. They often met because it was a nice way to spend time together. And we were also hanging around. We took advantage of them being there so that we can stay outside more." (E.E., resident)

Depending on historical evolution of the district, these gardens by the *bloc* adapted, transformed and survived, still reinventing themselves until today.



**Fig. 36.** Residents' volunteer actions of planting the green spaces in between the *blocs*, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (1973). From the "Mihai Oroveanu" Collection of Images, courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and *Salonul de Proiecte*.

Later on, implicitly accepting the growing food shortages, the *Legea Aprovizionării/ The Supply Law* (1980)<sup>75</sup> provided for the assignment of vacant land to institutions or citizens "for the purpose of growing vegetables, potatoes and other food crops". District' areas bypassed by the race for densification, either as 'discrete spaces' by the edges, meaning difficult parcels to build upon and placed in less obvious locations, or spaces left pending, still hoping for the construction of socio-cultural infrastructure, were parcelled out and given to the nearby residents or institutions' employers ('Informaţia Bucureştiului', 1962; 'Scânteia', 1966). Compared with the proximity gardens, these allotments gardens had a strong productive component of fruits and vegetables, triggering the development of more explicit communities of gardeners-neighbours, as one inhabitant recalls growing up among Drumul Taberei plot gardens:

"It was like a small community here, although we were living in different *blocs*. Everyone was sharing. (...) All day we were: "Where are you going? To the garden!" It was like a kind of courtyard by the *bloc*, it was our space of freedom, of play, of anything." (N.E., resident)

Bringing together not just people in need for food, but also genuinely passionate by gardening, they were enacting also a social space, that allowed interactions and exchanges different than the ones experienced in the prescribed spaces of the *microraion* (Fig.37). Hosting picnics, birthday celebrations or meals, acting as informal playgrounds, they were a place in constant negotiation, spaces of making and remaking, where dwellers could train their relational skills, engage in mutual help and self-organisation, a place where they could spatialize their care and forge their belonging to the community and the district. In the same time, their unclear retribution system, always nested by an institution with fuzzy rules, made them sometimes exclusivist areas, craved over by the fence as objects of desire by the less fortunate wishful gardeners, even resented as intrusive by other groups with different interests. Having difficulties in accessing resources, especially water supply, steadily occupied by socialist *densification* and its post-socialist aftermaths, like retrocession and development, shorten the life of these plot gardens. For example, from the few locations of allotments in Drumul Taberei district, some survived well into the 2000s, but none is still active today.

At the same time, the partial survival of the informal gardens by the *bloc* illustrates how in the span of few decades, the "courtyard" reappears, this time as an element unexpectedly associated with modern collective housing. The scientifically planned model of the socialist city, where industrial workers-neighbours were living in modern apartments surrounded by park-like greenery, was completed along the way into a DIY vision. Thus, the working class parcels up the surrounding park in need of vegetable supply, but also craving to socialise, contributing and participating into a more practiced, active green, not just an aesthetic, generic one. The circle closes and the ensembles seeded in the paradigm of the international style, grow as a local version, rooted in the relationship of the inhabitants with nature, with the land and with the community. The result is the *bloc* with a courtyard and a cultivated garden.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Law 13/1980 regarding the establishment, distribution and use of resources by county for supplying the population with meat, milk, vegetables and fruits, issued by The Great National Assembly.



**Fig. 37.** Garden plots cultivated by the residents and supported by the state on lands not yet built or by the edges of the district, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (1973). From the "Mihai Oroveanu" Collection of Images, courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and *Salonul de Proiecte*.

The messy Garden – adapted, contested, surviving

After the changes of the political regime in 1989, the phenomenon of informal gardening continued and stepped up the previous decades' trend, further encouraged by the general deregulation, radical privatisation and the accelerated state withdrawal. Gardens by the *bloc* flourished and expanded, while also steady losing their productive character in favour of more decorative needs, as a member of a collective of gardeners in the *Buclă* area of Drumul Taberei testifies sitting in their decorated garden:

"We don't grow vegetables in front of the *bloc*, because then we spoil everything. We do that at the countryside, in each backyard. Here it was just to please the eye, so it's pleasant when you pass by and when you enter the *bloc*." (E.R., resident gardener)

However, towards the 2000s, living culture transformations, accompanied by the hegemonic discourse of 'civilization' contributed to their decline. By framing the DIY vegetal universe around the bloc as invasive, uncivilized, illegal and by portraying it as a remnant of the "communist past", the informal arrangements became disregarded, discouraged, even sanctioned and formally prohibited in the past years, just to be replaced by administration' aestheticized lawns and beautification landscaping. Again, the historical process was reversed, the park like green was back and the participative, shared, but somehow messy green courtyard was out. The in between spaces have become once more claimed by the local administration, as they are one of the most at hand window shops for mayors' proving in front of citizens to be good gospodar, which stands as a local understanding for being 'good manager' around the house. The language of the official speech describes as 'illegal' the practices taking place on the public domain. In the same time, the gardeners refer as 'caring' for their nearby living areas. Furthermore, the administration' representatives sometimes qualifies the gardeners creative interventions as 'kitsch', which should be removed and replaced with the 'civilized' aesthetics of the generic green, excluding completely from their evaluation the social and community aspects of the informal gardens<sup>76</sup>. But these trends are not exclusive and some of these gardening practices survive, especially behind big avenues and out of sight. Sometimes, the residents' interventions were tolerated even by the administration teams on the ground called to remove them. Such were the situations where the informal gardeners implanted ivy solutions worked obviously better for the shady, sterile plots than the pretentious lawn proposed by the administration. Or, when the informal set-ups become local landmarks and were bypassed by the demolitions, also with the help of their exposure and local support raised by the gardeners on the social networks. Thus, tacitly accepted by the authorities and neighbours, informal gardening, although diminished and threatened, continued to be an alternative practice by the green space in between the buildings, an opportunity for socialization, participation and collaboration among the residents.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Also among the landscape and urban planning disciplines the experts' opinions varies, some considering them as forms of sustainability and social hubs, while others see them as chaotic, unaesthetic and forms of public domain privatization.

#### Pandemic Garden - the awakening

Over the background of their discouragement, lack of support and gradual decline, the COVID 19 pandemic came as a revelatory moment for the role and the capacity of the gardens by the *bloc* to support the living practices. As a consequence of limited mobility, restricted social interaction, closing down public spaces such as parks and playgrounds, anxious residents from the collective housing districts turned to the nearby spaces in their proximity and used them for their pressing needs. Sent in technical unemployment, or working from home without wasting time travelling, dwellers suddenly found themselves stuck in their homes, with more time on their hands. As some resorted to various hobbies, creative impulses, compulsive cleaning, or bread making, others got outside and started to work the left over space in front of their window, as one beginner gardener confessed to us:

"I needed to go outside. We started with simple things, on the other side of the building. With a little fence, stuff like that, a tree. And we started placing orders. My wife started telling me: *I want that kind of flower, that little tree.* She planted a fig tree. I have a fig tree out my window!" (K.D., resident gardener)

For some, gardening by the *bloc* was a recurring practice that intensified during the pandemic, used as a previously tested remedy for various needs. But for many others, it was their first. However, most of the beginners we talked to identify the gardens that were around the bloc 'back in the days' as an important reference for their current actions, as the creative gardener (K.D.) drawn more by the DIY decorations remembers how fascinated he was as a child by a wooden windmill built decades ago by an elderly gardener in the same microraion. The rediscovered garden and gardening practice was diversified and expanded through contemporary resources and globalized inspirations and became a refuge for dwellers. Parents of the home schooled children, missing their almost daily trips to the district park and socialization from the closed down playgrounds, started to set up informal play areas in the bloc's gardens, inspired by their own memories and experiences of playing by the bloc. The pandemic has revealed the practice of informal gardening from under a layer of discouragement, ignorance and obsolescence. Residents, active gardeners or just passers-by, acknowledge it as a familiar phenomenon, emerging from the memory of the neighbourhood, part of the local culture of living. Guided by various motivations, gardeners began to diversify beyond the classical figure of the ground floor retired lone gardener. Their needs for socialization in the pandemic context triggered to reach out and collaborate among themselves, turning planted areas more into social spaces, places for interaction and exchange. As the initiator and now a member of a self-organised collective of gardeners recollects the beginnings their collaboration:

"I didn't start with the idea that someone would help me. I relied only on my husband and in the end I had about two or three women who helped me and about two or three men who also helped with the digging." (E.R., resident gardener)

Accounting now for about 10% of the *bloc's* tenants which "participated both materially and with work", this garden represents one of the few examples of explicitly self-organised gardens in the

Bulcă area. Here, members meet regularly, decide and contribute, defend their garden if necessary, but in the same time have befriended each other, creating a social space, while spending time together in their garden. Around the table built by them in the garden, the neighbours-gardeners sit on the filled chairs they brought from upstairs, debate and take decisions about how to arrange the garden. Everyone's contributions are according to their possibilities, from operations necessary for maintenance (digging, cleaning), or by donating DIY objects from materials recovered and transformed with their own tools, to financial contributions needed for special equipment (such as pots, seedlings or a decorative water pump).

Therefore, residents of collective housing districts began to realise their fortunate access to open, green spaces of proximity inherent to the initial planning of the microraion. Compared to other residents of more traditional areas, they could expand during the lockdown only towards their private courtyards if they have one, but mostly to the repurposed balconies. Thus, the gardeners by the bloc were able to rediscover through practice on the ground the valuable green spaces of their district, from ecological, social and physical and mental health perspectives. The benefits and regained pleasure of gardening went beyond the awakening moment of the pandemic and continued afterwards. Boosted, expanding and confident, informal gardening entered in the postpandemic period on a collision trajectory with the renewed 'civilization' agenda of the local administration, who continue to pursue park-like uses and generic green aesthetics for the inbetween spaces. This evolutions lead to renewed conflicts, further fragmentation of the community and lack of explicit acceptance and support of informal gardening as a valuable answers to the multiple crisis of the city. Conflicts arise as a result of the habits and daily routines of using the space by various intersecting actors. Thus, gardeners and non-gardeners dispute the accessibility of the fenced green spaces, practiced as a defensive measure against cars, garbage, destruction or theft by the former and seen as privatization by the latter. In the same way, the local administration looks from an aesthetic perspective to the messy and 'kitsch' informal green arrangements, which their authors considers an expression of care and driven by the need of personalization, while some residents consider landmarks on the map of the district.

Gardening in Buclă – from showcase, to social and living space.

The field research was undertaken during these moments of pandemic resurrection and post-pandemic reflux, accounting for diverse developments, several gardens' typologies and diversified motivations among the gardeners. Despite the enduring stereotypes of dominant discourses centred on aesthetic incoherence, micro-communities of neighbour-gardeners grow among the gardens by the *bloc*. Composed of different generations, from the first residents, to those born and raised in the district, up to newcomers who take over the baton further and diversify their motivations and practices, the gardeners are still getting involved in a quiet maintenance of the in between green spaces. Their actions contribute to the configuration and preservation of a specific green practice that locals have developed and internalized over time. In the field research

in the *Buclă* area, from the Drumul Taberei district, several typologies of gardens were identified in the vicinity of apartment *blocs*. Yet, these are not distinct types that can be found as such on the ground, but rather aspects that intertwine within various case studies, each having different importance depending on the spatial configurations, actors involved and resources at hand.

The showcase garden is usually adjacent to the bloc's main entrance and arranged around several decorations which are exhibited towards the street, over the green background. Plants are rather complementary, and together with the decorative installations are aiming for aesthetical improving the area in front of the entrance. Several gardeners identified the decorative installations as the gardens' main trigger, as one of them testifies: "I started with a piglet made from a plastic can. From the bottles I saw the flowers. And then I saw the sun, I had to do it. Everything I did was by recycling objects, I reused them, gave them another life." (E.R.). With only rare precedents from the productive gardens of the 1980s, this garden of installations is rather a recent development. Boosted by the arrival of DIY stores, the creative gardeners are taking their inspiration from YouTube channels sharing practical tips, hacks and crafts. The decorations are relying on recyclable materials resulted from the global consumer society, such as packaging, consumables or left-overs, which became universal resources for a whole bricolage culture. With skilful adaptations and creative twists of colour, blackened wooden pallets, plastic bottles, worn-out tires, old furniture, buckets, boots, bikes or toys were transformed into beautiful, funny and useful objects in the garden. Also, by relying on such materials, the gardeners reduce the temptation of their installations' destruction and theft. Sometimes with a rustic touch, echoing suburban individual gardens' aesthetics, adaptable to seasoned decorations, like Christmas or Easter, they are both a workshop and a showcase space. The generous space of the garden by the bloc allows for the manifestation of inhabitants' need for creativity, becoming what Richard Sennett describes as the "narrative space" (1992). Customized and personalized, these spaces are distinct from both underused and leftover spaces in between the buildings, but also from the generic green promoted by the municipality. The potential of participation and contribution is recognized by other residents, amounting to one of the main source of motivation for DIY gardeners, as one of the more handyman gardener confessed to us: "The biggest joy with all this is the reaction of the passers-by. Adults, children, they're pleased this is happening" (K.D.). It's not only passive admiration and picture taking which motivate their creative caretakers, but the garden became a source of inspiration for others, as ideas, solutions and advice spreads, forming a network in the vicinity. Thus, the showcase garden becomes a landmark in the area, both spatially, in the context of repetitive constructions and blanket, top-down and non-participative design solutions for the green spaces, but also socially, triggering interaction and relationship among disconnected dwellers (Fig.38).



Fig. 38. Garden with decorations in Buclă area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2022). Photo by the current author.

Inheriting the practice of setting up benches by the *bloc's* entrance since the district's early days, the *chatting garden* develops around a meeting space, built in the green area near the *bloc*. Without substituting the benches in front of the *bloc*, which remains a kind of public furniture, the meeting place in the garden is rather a common space, used primary by those who also take care of the surrounding green, as illustrated by a member from the self-organised collective garden describing the use of meeting space:

"Everyone else who wants to join is welcome, it's no problem. It's just they don't dare to come in, when they know they haven't done anything and we were defied plenty of times. But it's available to everyone, whomever wants to come is free to do so." (E.R., resident gardener)

Compared with the *showcase* version, here, the plantation has a more important role, becoming more complex, diversified and requiring more attention and work from the gardeners. Recycled materials, DIY skills and professional tools are used to construct garden like furniture from wood and metal. Usually, they are shaped as tables and benches, placed by the shade, in order to enjoy the surrounding garden. The furniture is protected with paint and tables even covered with cerecloth. Sometimes, the structure evolves and receives a rain protection structure with a roof and side light walls. This becomes a piece of what Eric Klinenberg describes as "social infrastructure" (2020) in the vicinity of the apartment *bloc*, best suited for casual meetings, everyday chatting, popular games, such as backgammon or chess, and even hosting small celebrations, like children

birthday parties. These kiosks are in constant need of maintenance and repairs, requiring a more explicit self-organisation, shared resources, agreed rules and usage protocols among dwellers, as one resident explains the management of a garden kiosk inherited from the first generation of residents, faced with the constant threat of theft, looting and destructive use: "We put a lock on the door, and all the tenants have the key. And everyone in the building is welcome, so it's not owned by someone in particular" (J.C.). However, narrowing down access to a too small group of caretakers and privileged users can lead to abusive use, privatisation and exclusion. By occupying for a restricted use a presumably shared resource such as the green space among the buildings, these structures are being resented by other excluded tenants, who disagree and complain, thus becoming a target to the administration and ending in their demolition. On a different note, some of the users of this garden furniture are sometimes young parents who are adopting the space and practice, taking up their maintenance, while adapting it to their needs. Thus, improvised playgrounds, collectively built and managed, complete these meeting places, as one of the parents testify: "When we're at home and the kids aren't in the mood to go to the park, we stay here" (J.C.). Thus, the chatting and playing garden enacts a social space for the nearby dwellers, supporting the active use of the green spaces. Moreover, the infrastructure supporting socialization is triggering the explicit collaboration and self-organisation of dwellers, who take care of a shared resource, thus becoming from a group of proximity' residents a community of users (Fig.39).



Fig. 39. Garden with a kiosk for meetings in Buclă area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2022). Photo by the current author.

Despite various alternative versions of gardens by the *bloc*, it is still quite often encountered the more classical type of the living garden, where residents cultivate especially flowers, as well as fruit trees. As a relative of the more traditional garden practices and descending from the early gardens of the collective housing districts, the planted gardens aims to improve the living ambiance, signalling to others, neighbours and administration alike, that the space is taken care of by someone. Gardeners strive at first to arrange the place, sometimes even against unfavourable conditions and using their own resources. Some gardeners are recalling the difficult moments from the beginnings, when "the garden was unkempt and the soil was very dry, concretelike" (E.R.). From the historical perspective, today's gardens by the bloc lost almost completely their productive aspect, so much present during the 1980s. Rarely, some "exotic" vegetables grow lost among the garden, planted rather as a proof for the gardener's carrying performance, than as a source for consumption, as some gardeners confessed they avoid consuming products from the gardens, like tea leafs or fruits, being afraid of the heavy pollution in the city. Thus, although less economically resilient in returning consumable products, today's gardens are compensating in other ways the effort and care invested in them, contributing to the emotional balance, mental health and socializing needs of the gardeners. As the showcase garden is arranged to receive appreciation from the street, the *living garden* is quite often also the result of the lower floors' residents view from the house towards the street. Seeking to filter the sometimes the intrusive public gaze, or just in need set their eyes on a space that is neat and pleasant, some of these gardens are usually initiated by gardeners acting alone or working side by side with few others, but each on their small parcel. As one ground floor resident told us about her lonely struggle to revitalize a plot of land in front of her windows from a sterile space abandoned by everyone into a living landscape, despite initial lack of support, as "all the neighbours who know me told us: Don't bother anymore because everyone throws garbage and it will be the same again in no time! That was the help from the collective." (N.T.). Eventually, she tactically used her personal example to gradually and discreetly changing residents' practices, becoming an inspiration and a model for the community. Compared to other types, the living garden involves constant work, attention and care from the gardeners. It also requires specific skills and a wide range of resources, some involving costs, like seeds and tools, while others being more difficult to negotiate, like using the bloc's water to be shared with neighbours unwilling to participate in setting up the garden. In sum, the living garden is the place where residents' care for their living spaces in vicinity is best manifested. Sometimes, it becomes the spatialized expression of a performed diligence of few caretakers made visible to others. At the same time, the planted garden answers residents' need for care, giving a purpose, alleviating loneliness and providing opportunities for social interaction and collaboration (Fig.40).



**Fig. 40.** Garden planted and maintained by the residents in *Buclă* area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

Quite frequently, the green spaces around the *bloc* are also sheltering animals, becoming animals' gardens. The gardeners take care of these street animals along with their plants, built decorated sheds and feed them regularly. The relationship of Bucharest' inhabitants with the other non-humans city residents' is contained in the evolution of its green spaces. As the courtyard was always the place for animals, they entered people's home as pets relatively late and incomplete. Together with the construction of large collective housing districts starting with the 1950s, not only gardening practices, as well as seedlings or seeds, but also cats, dogs and birds moved in and among the new apartment blocs. The new tenants brought with them at first rather utilitarian relations with the 'courtyard animals'. There are numerous accounts of chickens raised in balconies and roosters singing in the morning among the blocs. Gradually, the functional relationship diluted, evolving towards a need for play, relaxation or entertainment of the new generations of children born and raised in the district "with the key around their neck". Rabbits, dogs, cats, parrots, fish or hamsters finally became pets and made their way into the apartments and into the hearts of families. They take on human qualities, bring joy and sadness, participate and contribute to important moments in people's lives. Animals become rather a kind of partners of their owners, to whom they offer mutual emotional support, share the same space and develop the same daily habits, actually turning into full-fledged members of the family.

But not all animals make it into the homes. Some of them continues a long tradition of abuse and neglect and carry on to live as street animals, or informally called *maidanezi*<sup>77</sup>, especially dogs. Widespread and sudden demolitions of traditional neighbourhoods during the 1980s are partially responsible for their rising numbers since today. Evicted with the people who domesticated and used them in the courtyards, disoriented and abandoned, chased, hit by cars and by fate, they begin to relocate by the collective housing districts, where they find food and shelter. Makeshift structures informally constructed began to appear near *blocs*' staircases. As with other urban processes ignited in the final period of socialism, the phenomenon of street dogs accelerates in the following decades. Their number soars, as they are officially baptized "community dogs" by an overwhelmed public administration. In the absence of sustained institutional policies tackling the magnitude of the phenomenon, the problems created by the excess of territorialisation and aggressive behaviour, leads to the "collection" of stray dogs from around the *blocs*, through practices often lacking ethical standards. The district thus remains rather at the mercy of the cats, who take it over, oscillating between the protective refuge of the apartments and the adventurous independence of the gardens.

During fieldwork research in the Buclă area, several types of animals' garden arise to illustrate the diverse relationship between residents and animals. Not so numerous, located in less visible places, usually in the blocs' backyard garden, there are some complex designs which subordinate the entire set-up and use of the garden. Such customized designs includes for example wooden shelters, connected with paths, platforms and toys for cats, or generously build and well protected nests for birds, like pigeons. These arrangements are usually taken care of by the residents living right next to them. More widespread are the *shelters* for bad weather, located within various types of gardens, or placed next to the entrance in the bloc. They are sometimes directly purchased from the pet stores, but usually improvised from insulated boxes, going beyond utilitarian purpose and carrying decorations and home-like expressions. In connection with them, there are numerous feeding points, placed in gardens' protected corners, or in the vicinity of the bloc. A whole range of plates, trays, bowls and canned food for cats, or crumbs and grains in bird feeders supplies the animals living in the area. A specific type of infrastructure for living in an apartment bloc is the entry-exit portal, built by the ground floor dwellers for their cats which are in an open relationship with their permanent residence. A diverse series of wooden cat ladders, poles, ropes and strings are hanging from ground floor windows towards the nearby gardens. Quite often, there are several residents carrying for the same animal, which are beginning to communicate and collaborate, sharing responsibilities and rotating roles related to food, shelter and health. Henceforth, the animals' gardens are turning spaces of proximity into support infrastructure also for non-humans beings, in a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship between

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> The term is a declination from *maidan* and refers to stray dogs of cats which don't have any owner and live on the city streets.

humans and animals, while articulating a neighbourly relation among tenants, through the collective care for the animals by the bloc (Fig.41).

These "practices of care" (Trogal, 2007) are transforming the spaces in the vicinity of the buildings for the use and to support humans and non-humans beings alike. The spatialized relationships that such practices entail are possible within the intermediary spaces of the informal gardens. Otherwise discouraged by the 'civilizational' discourse, where planting is framed as intrusive, decorating as kitschy or feeding the animals is messy and unhealthy, they however articulate a neighbourly relation among dwellers, through a shared practice of collective care for their nearby surroundings. Viewed through the lens of Bruno Latour's ANT (2005), these plants and animals are part of an extended non-human community of dwellers. Becoming *actants*, they possess the ability to generate collaborative relationships and solidarity between residents. Thus, the infrastructure produced while carrying, such as planted areas, decorations, improvised furniture, or shelters and feeders, is becoming a common resource that is collectively created, maintained, managed and shared by a group of concerned and involved caretakers.



Fig. 41. Garden with animal shelter in Buclă area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

The Fenced Garden vs. the Open Park

Along with kiosks or garages, fences are one of the most widespread, present and visible symptom of post-socialist city transformation of the public space. Like other phenomenon rooted in the late decades of socialism that only accelerated after 1989, such as closing down balconies with DIY metal structures, fencing practices manifested along with informal gardens set up by the bloc's residents in their proximity. As nowadays, its defensive motivations, sometimes hijacked by privatisation tendencies, were generating conflicts between residents and administration and among dwellers themselves, as one architect and dweller in the collective housing (D.B.) remembers the gardens by the bloc of the 1980s: "Not everyone understood to plant flowers, trees and the like, many people planted vegetables, onions or peppers. Not only did they cultivate them, they also fenced off the land! Well, then the conflict started". Over the other side of the fence, the gardeners were trying to protect their work and their invested resources against theft and looting. Also, another important trigger for setting up fences around informal gardens was the lack of intimacy for the ground floor residents, who intuitively enacted intermediary spaces, which were filtering the gaze from the street and discouraged unwelcomed trespassers under their windows. The pressing need and the widespread but imperfect dwellers' solutions didn't go unnoticed by some designers of the time, who were even calling for the integration of this intermediary spaces in the blocs' projects by: "connecting the ground floor apartments through terraces and stairs with small personal gardens, arranged around the buildings" (Caffé et al., 1987, p.125). However, such proposals were rather marginal and never implemented in the context of 'economicty', leaving the transitional space from the house to the street open for ad-hoc negotiations. Thus, the informal fencing continues to play a major defensive role.

Together with the radical privatisation of the 1990s, delimitation, separation and appropriation of the public space spread and scaled up. Dominant discourses of individual autonomy, entrepreneurship and private property overshadowed the collective ethos and shared resources, which became associated with the "communist past". The effect of such narratives materialized also in the form of fences. Without being promoted as an element of urban furniture itself, the fence articulated and structured the organisation of the in between spaces. Formal and informal practice, fencing became a material element signalling status and use of the spaces near the blocs, from domesticity and care, to intimacy and control, up to grabbing and closure. However, in the cases of informal gardens by the bloc maintained by a collective of gardeners, fences represent and materializes the controlled limits of the common good managed by a community, as Elinor Ostrom identifies the principle of "clearly defined boundaries" (2015, p.90) as an important element of the commons. Thus, sometimes, fences stand as the necessary demarcation between the public street and the common space of the shared garden. Belonging to an ecosystem of devices that pushes back uninvited guests, together with intercoms, or surveillance cameras, fences lose their green consistency and pleasant visual aspect widely spread during the socialist period and highly appreciated by residents. In their post-socialist version, fences turn to metal pols

and meshes, grow in height and began looking uninviting, strong and defensive. On the other hand, the explosion of personal cars and the race for parking spaces in the in between spaces of the district contributed to the increased necessity of fences designed to defend green spaces.

In a cyclical shift, the use of green spaces between the blocs is again in a moment of transformation. In the middle of this paradigm change, the most disputed element of urban furniture seems to be the fence itself. In the context where local administration of Drumul Taberei is promoting the idea that a 'civilized' green space is an 'open' green space, the fences are becoming a contentious topic again. In a twisted logic, the same administration is erecting high and unwelcoming cage-like fences around public parks and especially around playgrounds. Nevertheless the overall fence-less paradigm shift actually entails the return to the initial design intentions of the *microraion* park model in between the buildings, to the detriment of the informal proximity gardens that have grown in the past decades. Therefore, a whole campaign was initiated to remove the fences surrounding the green spaces. Those who resent such move are the gardeners themselves, who see the interventions as a destruction of their work and their efforts to maintain the gardens over time. For them, a fenceless garden is an invitation for pedestrian shortcuts, plants destruction, garbage thrown, flower and fruits theft and invasive car parking. From an admired garden from the street, they risk to become walkthrough spaces, relapsing to their previous residual status again. The removal of the fences provoked strong reactions, with many gardeners expressing dismay at these operations, some even refusing to continue to maintain their garden. These actions of removal were sometimes accompanied by the redesign of the gardens itself, which introduced mainly generic green lawns and flower species chosen by the administration's specialists. An irrigation system was buried after bulldozers dug deep trenches, ripping up trees' roots and pouring concrete for the foundations of low-rise perimeter parapets which replaced the medium-size metal mesh fences. Few gardens along the main boulevard in Drumul Taberei were destroyed in the process (Fig.42,43). Several gardeners have witnessed powerless their demolition. Many were emotionally affected, as one resident (D.D.) express her bitterness to us: "The gardens made by people were the most beautiful and original, [what is happening] now is an erasure of identity." Fences removal and partial demolition of informal gardens provoked strong reactions among neighbours, gardeners and residents alike. In the absence of a negotiated framework initiated by the administration, the process ended up dividing and fragmenting the community of dwellers even more. The top-down transformation discouraged the participation and contribution of the residents in the decisions making related to the layout of their spaces, excluding the gardeners themselves, perhaps the most active and involved group in carrying for the in between spaces among the residents. This outcome evidences the lack of a governance framework of these gardens, where interventions could have been negotiated among administration and gardeners.



**Fig. 43.** Actions by local administration in *Buclă* area of removing the fences and replacing existing gardens with rolls of irrigated lawn, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2022). Photo by the current author.



**Fig. 42.** In rare situations, negotiated solutions resulted, between the administration's beautification interventions and the gardeners who managed to save part of their garden. Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2022). Photo by the current author.

## Gardens by the Bloc

DRUMUL TABEREI

"Let's go to the garden! We have some digging to do", she rushes her husband just in from work to change from his good trousers and cross the street to the garden. When they moved in 1968 it was just wheat and corn fields around here. She was pregnant back then, coming home with her lap full of corn cobs, walking through the fields all the way from the park, where the bus' last stop was. More than ten years after they have a small plot here. Through some relations of family friends living nearby they've managed to get in touch with those guys from the district's water pumps that were giving away small parcels for people to plant. There were some "precious indications from above" not to waste so much land, better to cultivate it. Good idea, as the food markets are quite empty. But the truth is that she always missed her mother's garden before moving to the bloc. She missed the smell of burnt dry leaves in the autumn. She was eager to stay outside, being busy, with her hands in the ground and with her heart swelling when the plants' little heads were coming out. Others nearby got a plot too, now they befriended and help each other, they guard the place and have a chat now and then. Occasionally, they even organize discreet picnics with music and all. They take care of the plot, they fenced it and planted vegetables, potatoes, even cabbage. Their kids come here all day, play around, bring out a blanket and eat tomatoes right from the garden. He made a small wooden chest for the tools and a table with benches under the cherry tree. Sometimes there is nothing to be done, so they just sit there as the evening falls on the neighbourhood.

These gardens on a plot where popping up around the district in several places, especially during the 1980s. However, gardens by the bloc were more common and much earlier in place, since the construction of the first buildings. In between the buildings, some of the residents were arranging small gardens, planting trees and flowers. Especially during the food shortages, the productive aspect of the gardens was quite common. In every bloc there was someone willingly and capable to turn the unkempt surrounding spaces into a planted area. A sociologist (E.B.) active in the research of collective housing practices during the 1980s, estimated that around 10% from the tenants were involved in the maintenance of the bloc's garden. The gardeners were usually retired residents, especially living at ground floor apartments. Not everyone had the skills, the mood, and especially the time to spend on gardening, as for some categories of workers or commuters, free time was extremely scarce. But gardening became part of the life in the collective housing districts, casually illustrated even in the films of the time. Grabeste-te încet/ Hurry up slowly (1981), directed by Geo Saizescu, contains a series of comical situations involving the residents of a collective housing building. They occur in specific premises of the building, like the apartments' interior, the staircase or the main entrance. Besides them, the nearby garden has only brief exposures, but enough to glimpse that it contained flowers, fruit trees, as well as tomatoes, which were dug and watered by the elderly tenants, helped by the bloc's "cleaning lady". The garden was also the place where the dwellers dried up their clothes, sat on a bench in the shade, or had a chat. Working as a community space for the residents, the garden became a place where the private homes expanded, overlapped and diluted in negotiation, further making the transition towards the public street.

The gardeners were those with skills and access to specific resources, as many inhabitants who moved in the new apartment buildings still have connections with their family or relatives' 'old house with a courtyard'. Even if they have technical qualifications, or embarked on careers as clerks, while having access to a whole range of modern, urban infrastructure, some of them still needed and enjoyed gardening. Moving into the city from rural areas, or from smaller towns, but very often coming from the large mahalas of Bucharest, the new bloc dwellers didn't break away completely with the courtyard by the house. This was one of the most important sources of seeds, tools and knowledge, in a period before the arrival of specialized stores for DIY and gardening. Also, dwellers employed in green spaces management services, botanical gardens or forest administration, were another important resource for calls to action, connections, skills, tools and vegetal material. By maintaining part of their previous living habits or professional relations into the new living conditions, dwellers transformed the standardized spaces of the bloc into a hybrid situation, between the individual house with a garden plot and the collective multi-story apartment bloc within a green park.

Besides green skills inherited from previous housing experiences, the garden by the *bloc* also contains many elements coming via a factory culture. The workers-neighbours creativity and ingenuity was trained in the industrial workplaces before 1989 and materialized in various arrangements inside the apartments and around the *bloc*. Sitting by its shadow, one *Buclă* resident proudly explained to us how he built decades ago the informal kiosk from the garden. He pointed to the pavilion's strong metallic beams. They were reused handrails taken out from the illegally closed down balconies of the *bloc* as he assembled

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them together using the welding machine borrowed from the factory where he was manufacturing agricultural machines. From the perspective of the informal practices, the factories' closure during the 1990s was compensated by the arrival of DIY stores. Others than industrial trained residents could further improvise and repair objects and structures, from tables and benches, vine vaults, window grills, decorative fences, to more sophisticated gazebos, rocking chairs or animal shelters. The gardens by the bloc were hosting both the improvisation skills and its products.

Starting with the mid 1970s densification of the existing or the newly built microraions, different categories of dwellers began to collide over the use of the shrinking spatial resources. Growing up myself 'behind the bloc' in a densely built collective housing district, I haven't kept very pleasant memories about the informal gardens and their caretakers. From our self-organized soccer games the ball bounced sometimes into a small nearby garden, fenced off and over-protected. Annoyed, the ground floor gardener would go so far as to cut our ball with a knife if we were not guick enough to retrieve it. Similar memories had other children playing during that time among the increasingly contested spaces of the neighbourhoods. Referring to the sudden transformation of left-over spaces through the eyes of the child, an inhabitant of a collective housing district from Bucharest, confessed:

"After one winter, all the public space and the *maidan* completely disappeared and everything was replaced by small gardens with fences and alleys, which took our spot and, to me, the image of urban gardening is one of destruction, in fact, of the public space, with those plots, with their little fences." (T.H., architect).

What for the gardeners was an underused, derelict space in need for care, ready to be appropriated, domesticated and arranged, for the children was a resource for their creative play through exploration and ad-hoc self-organization. The perception of closed off places where gardeners and their families were "among themselves", was sometimes ignited by the image of defensive enclosures. As the result of protective measures, they were built mostly against destruction, theft and in general against the waste of gardeners' work. However, extreme privatization, excessive fencing and exclusivist practices were sometimes leading to conflicts among dwellers themselves and among them and the authorities. The risk of slipping of from the 'taking care' incentive towards 'taking a piece' for oneself attitude was present along the evolution of the gardens, manifesting even to this day. This phenomenon was inherent to the growing competition over spatial

resources and a constant uncertainty due to changing visions "from above" towards green spaces. There is a fragile equilibrium between community gardening and planting as occupancy, exclusion and marking one's territory. This dark side of gardening also owns its failure to the lack of an explicit framework of the gardens' organization to be implemented by the administration and less explicit nature of the negotiated spatial use among gardeners and residents in general.

"Come on, dig deeper, don't you know how to do it? Eh, the neighbours don't come out like they used to, now they look down on us." Wearing her house slippers, she takes the shovel, sticks it deep and turns the ground around the small tree. After they moved here in the 1970s, they also received a small lot from the factory where they were both working as young engineers. Here they were planting tomatoes, cabbage and vegetables. When the fall was coming, they were preparing tomato juice in their garage, jams or vegetables for soup. "So I couldn't sit!" She says that she always has to do something. Even when they were meeting friends to see a movie she was knitting sweaters. They don't have the garden by the lot anymore. The factory was demolished, replaced by a supermarket and a parking area. Now she takes care of the small green space in front of her windows. It's not going as she wishes, as she lacks better tools and bigger plants. She buys few seedlings from the market and sometime she gets some flowers in pots from the teachers of the nearby school on Mother's Day. Now the children are at their homes and they don't want her tomato juice anymore. But she buys tomatoes and still makes it. And she still goes out in the garden. "I do it because I like it. And I want to do it. But I do as little as I can."

Still, gardens and gardening proved to be a very efficient and intuitive tool for social integration in the context of collective housing districts. Here, sometimes the socio-cultural and green infrastructure was diminished, decaying, if not missing completely in some areas. Thus members of different social classes engaged hands on and worked side by side. United by the passion for gardening and by an ethos of care for a collective space, they enacted overlapping extensions of their individual homes. Residents from Drumul Taberei district remembers how different professional categories, from engineers, to workers, military officers, clerks and even to institutions' managers were connected by their passion and concern for plants, sharing a space and engage in self-organization. However, gardening could also be perceived as a rural reminiscence, disdained more

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often by the middle class residents and by those wanting to leave such "peasant" habits behind. This attitude anticipated the 'civilization' paradigm, that will became dominant since the 2000s, which devalued gardening in public discourse and contributed to diminish it on the ground.

However, gardens enact a spatialized horizontal extension into the surrounding green of the vertical assemblage of the collective living, still entailing a social mix, inherent to the public housing repartition policy. Thus, the garden by the bloc it's not one open space, similar to a public park, but rather a patchwork, as an accumulation of small, individual spaces and practices. The result is a collective garden structured by shared infrastructure, such as alleys, enclosures or benches, while bridged by social interactions, exchanges and collaborations. But, as in any living situations of proximity, not only collaboration is present, but also conflict. An inherent part of the everyday relations and as a form of daily negotiation, more or less explicit, however, conflict is always present. These complex neighbourly relationships of the collective housing have structured the geography of the gardens and its contents, shaped the materialization of its limits and crystalized the protocol of its uses.

#### 4.3. Garages: Extra Rooms

Garages in waiting – meanwhile cellars by the bloc

During the 1960s, Romania has gone through a period of economic growth and mild liberalization. The top-down modernization and urbanisation process through an enforced industrialization of a previously highly agrarian nation was gaining speed (Petrovici, 2017). An urbanised middle class was beginning to consolidate, increasing its financial possibilities and diversify its needs. Among them, the need for living comfort was one the most important. The socialist state overcome the ideological contradictions related to private property of public housing, or as it was called 'personal' ownership, and starting with 1966, residents could buy their new apartments from the state, through a system of state credits<sup>78</sup>. Around the same period, the types of layouts allowed by law to be used by planners for the collective living apartments multiplied and became more generous (Stroe, 2015; Zahariade, 2011). The apartments put up for sale were benefiting from an increased comfort, designed as slightly differentiated from the average typified projects. With higher quality finishes, having somewhat more generous surfaces and additional functions like storage spaces, they were highly sought for by the tenants who could afford them. Compared to the tiny pantries that most apartments had, the new storage facilities located in the building's mezzanine or basement constituted a huge difference for their owners. Among these extra functions, the garage for automobiles makes its debut as an architectural program associated with the collective housing apartment buildings. However, guite rare, garages were found in small numbers in several better off working-class districts, like Drumul Taberei, or in the more special blocs built in the centre intended for the elites. All the more, their limited availability made them highly coveted by the new residents. After a larger balcony, the garage was probably one of the most craved after facilities of an apartment bloc. Being in need to quickly collect funds from the population, the state speculated on its high desirability and sold the garages to the dwellers for a quite high price. Furthermore, their purchase required only cash and in one transaction, unlike the credit system spanning for several years as for the rest of the apartments. This formal decoupling of the garages from the apartments since early on will allow informal exchanges and sales among residents, a pattern that will evolve over time and contribute later to their alternative uses. However, at least in theory, the garages were destined to host the cars of the owners living in the apartments above.

Perhaps having a personal car was *the* dream project of the socialist emerging middle class, along with moving into a modern apartment *bloc*. If the address offered status for the residents, owning a personal car came with the bonus of traveling independently from the public transport, or "transport *în comun/collective*" as it was called. Although starting with the 1960s housing was becoming more accessible for large sections of the population, owning a "personal"

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Decree 445/1966 regarding the state's support of citizens from cities in the construction of privately owned homes, issued by the State Council of RPR.

car was still limited due to its scarcity and price and accessible only through a system of lists, which could entail several years of waiting for ones turn. Rather few personal cars were traveling on the city streets and were parked among the housing districts. Private cars density in the Eastern Bloc was placing Romania at the bottom of the ranking with a significant gap behind all the surrounding countries, including the USSR (Siegelbaum, 2011). Consequently, the parking norm used until 1989 by planners when designing residential districts was 1 parking space for 10 apartments. At the beginning, imported mainly from socialist countries, but also from the West, the cars were not too many, quite expensive and had the disadvantage of an unreliable system of few repair centres and scarce spare parts. In general, the lack of a maintenance system for the imported cars has made many countries in the region to turn over to domestic car production. Although, particularities of travelling with the personal car took local routes in each country, the overall process constituted an "astonishingly homogenous, socialist "automobility system" (Gatejel, in Siegelbaum, 2011, p.144). By "automobility", John Urry (2004) understands "a self-organizing autopoietic, nonlinear system that spreads world-wide, and includes cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies and many novel objects, technologies and signs" (p.27), introducing a more qualitative approach to car mobility. Speaking of a specific, "socialist automobility", Gatejel (2011) goes further and identifies a "common heritage" characterized by the "shortages, privileges, waiting lists, high prices, a certain type of sociability around the car, and the special role mechanics occupied in this system" (p.156).

In the socialist system, car ownership came as a package with its self-repair. This phenomenon was the consequence of a poorly developed car assistance system of services and gas stations in socialist countries by comparison with those in the West (Siegelbaum, 2011). But on the other hand, it illustrates the socialist state' rather symbolic policy in the context of top-down economy, to transfer towards the population a whole series of economic and civic activities, which involved the transformation of citizens into "productive consumers" (Casper & Rellensmann, 2021). Thus, repairing one's car was a familiar sight on the streets of Romanian cities, as automobiles came with full repair kits, while technical DIY literature was at hand. It was even depicted in the early films of the time, such as the documentary Reportaj de la Steagul Roşu/ Reporting from the Red Flag<sup>79</sup> (1956), directed by Alexandru Sîrbu. When inventorying how the workers, recently moved into a newly built collective housing district, relax during their day off, among picnics, hiking, barbecues, gardening, or watching football matches at the stadium, the car repair is also counted. "That's how it is when you have a car", comments the narrator, illustrating the "relaxing" activity as a consequence of ownership in a scene of a rather collective repair of a car by a group of neighbours, closely watched by few kids. Repairing the car was thus a publicly shared event of the street, attracting curios and informed participants which contributed with tools and advices (and few beers), triggering the emergence of a temporary, largely male social space, based on mechanical magnetism.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Translated by the current author.



**Fig. 44.** Automobiles imported or made in Romania parked in between the *blocs*, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (1973). From the "Mihai Oroveanu" Collection of Images, courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and *Salonul de Proiecte*.

The automobile carried a special fascination for Romanians. Starting with 1968, the first cars made in Romania came off the assembly line of the Automobile Plant in Pitesti. Dacia was assembled on Renault patents and intended to be "a car for the working man" (TVR, 2018). Still, their numbers were not very large compared to the demand at the national level and waiting lists have become a long and frustrating process for the buyers. Henceforth, the car remained an object of desire for most of the population throughout the socialist period, explaining perhaps the explosion of car ownership in the 1990s. Intended for the workers, Dacia ended up more of a product afforded by the emerging socialist middle class, which had started to manifest needs for non-essential comfort goods and an accumulation of income and resources superior to previous decades. A "socialist automobile" required sacrifices, patience and most of all, resources beyond average. Car ownership came also with higher status, as "not everyone" could aspire to drive one. Thus, many car owners were not workers, but intellectuals, doctors, engineers or officials from management level. Without having the technical skills necessary for its repair, and considering the reduced network of service stations, some of these owners were turning to the emerging informal networks of handyman. Mechanics in their free time or skilled factory workers were repairing cars through yards and garages. However, out of need, passion, or both, owning a car involved the

cultivation of technical skills for their drivers too. Even if they didn't know at first, the drivers arrived to learn something about mechanics following the constant adjustments, repairs and maintenance often required. Car repairing trained skills will contribute to the consolidation of informal practices in transforming the living spaces among the housing districts (Fig.44).

In this context, against the background of the continuous increase in the capacities of prefabrication and industrialization of buildings, apartment blocs with garages on the ground floor were constructed in Bucharest, however as a short episode and in small numbers. Garages enter the socialist "automobility" ecosystem as the spatial correspondence of the car repair culture who could finally take shelter from the sidewalks and alleys of the neighbourhoods. The collective repair of cars was thus formalized, receiving a specially designated and properly equipped space. Moreover, adjacent garages brought together residents concerned with similar things, which could more easily assemble in communities of interests<sup>80</sup>. As Drumul Taberei was one of the most generous districts from the perspective of resources used, with a high number of apartments destined for private ownership, where new types of buildings or innovative construction techniques were among first implemented, in the microraions built starting with 1970 several low height buildings with garages appeared as well. For example, approximately 15% of the collective housing buildings from microraion 7, or the Buclă, have garages on the ground floor. One standard building with 60 apartments has 54 garages at the ground floor<sup>81</sup>. Being rather "experimental" attempts, as a planner (R.D.) of the time recalls, the apartments' provision with garages "was an increase in comfort: whoever had a car also parked their car in, some didn't have a car, than they use it as a cellar." For most of the new tenants, purchasing the garage came first and the car later, if never at all. In between these moments, the garages were seen as a "luxury" for their owners who were living in the apartments above, where the storage spaces were chronically undersized, in the general context of 'economicity' and strict typified solutions.

Garage Street – rows of extra rooms for residents and community

From the urban perspective, the garages were also among planners' solutions regarding ground floor housing intimacy. Built in the logic of *microraion*, where every architectural program had its separate building, the commercial spaces were concentrated within few district centres (Rău & Mihuţă, 1969) leaving housing buildings with ground floor apartments placed in a opened park like green space, exposed to intrusive gaze, lack of privacy and insecurity. Various solutions were debated and proposed (Caffé et al., 1987) such as raising the ground floor level a few steps above the soil, or placing household annexes at the ground or half-basement level, which had the disadvantages of increasing costs and giving an utilitarian aspect to the street (p.126). However,

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Starting with the 1980s, prefabricated garages were placed among housing districts. During the 1990s, the phenomenon explodes and in some cases almost completely occupied the spaces in between the *blocs*. Like the garages on the ground floor of the *blocs*, they became narrative spaces for their owners, hosting informal practices and networks. Currently victims of the 'civilizing' fury of local administrations, the transformed garages together with informal gardens are demolished and evicted from housing districts.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The difference of six garages comes from the prefabrication system, as in their place are the six entrances of the *bloc*.

the garage solution was adopted for some buildings in the middle of *microraions*, while also giving a special attention to better finishes, such as exterior doors and vegetation arrangements in the spaces separating garages' access. Eventually, even for the planners, the garages were not primarily destined for parking cars, but it was hopped that such extra spaces will "answer the amplified needs for storage spaces" (Caffé et al., 1987, p.127), while freeing the apartments' balconies from the informal use as storage, which was leading to their undesired closure for protection. However, residents discovered their potential beyond storage space, as one garage owner describes them:

"Basically, it's a great way to escape the heat and stuffiness of the apartment. You go down there and kind of sit surrounded by nature. It matters; at least to me, it matters a lot. It's also planted, but you're also surrounded by nature and you talk to the person next door, stuff like that. (...) I find these spaces extremely versatile. There is a lot you can do in a garage like this, things you can't do in an apartment. In an apartment, if you have a bedroom, you have to sleep in it and that's all. Maybe you can have friends over. But in a garage, imagination is free to roam. This is beautiful." (D.T., former garage owner)

The garage allowed for a less prescribed use of the living space than the typified apartments, as residents began to spend time by the garage, working, arranging, repairing, each one using it as needed, while also having a chat, borrowing tools, helping each other (Fig.45).



Fig. 45. Alley of garages in Buclă area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

In the transition from buildings floating freely in the microraion's park to the corridor commercial street of the densification urbanism, areas of buildings with garages on the ground floor represented an intermediate stage. Without being commercial yet, the streets bordered by garages have developed a different vitality compared to those only with apartments on the ground floor. Garages' direct access from the road, the solved need for privacy and thus the lack of a buffer green space between the building and the street, but especially their alternative uses have animated the alleys. "Going by the garage" has become a local habit for dwellers, generating a space for social interaction and participation in community life. Perhaps confronted with inhabitants' informal adaptations and uses and exposed to some Western references critical towards the lack of flexibility and participation of modernist urban solutions, few local planners' voices were advocating for approaches alternative to the microraions functional segregation and more creative than the densification and edges' consolidation. By adopting the principle of "residential generators", they proposed the living functions' integration into "strips of collective use" which should provide services, commerce or leisure (Derer, 1985, 291). Such strategic approach also identified the need for introducing semi-autonomous spaces hosting various functions, attached to mono-functional residential buildings. Called "additional rooms" (Derer, 1985), they were proposed as a solution for increasing flats flexibility, addressing typified projects' lack of spaces for studying, hobbies or community use (p.310). Visionary for the local context, but with no impact on planning policies, such proposals were however implicitly enacted on the ground by the residents themselves by adapting the spaces through informal practices. In this ecosystem, ground floor garages basically functioned as surrogates of the never implemented additional rooms, providing for their individual owners' needs of functional flexibility. This perspective is confirmed by the garages' high appreciation rate, as one garage owner testifies: "It's a very good thing; it's like having an extra room of your apartment. It's very necessary, however you look at it" (D.B.). Also, garages' alternative uses contributed to materialize the strips of community spaces, thus hacking from bellow the functional segregated microraions, which lacked facilities, services and social interaction spaces in the dwellings' proximity.

#### Garages by the Bloc – bustling with functions

In the context of *densification* process started by mid 1970s and reinforced constructions' 'economicity', the layout solutions of apartment buildings with garages on the ground floor were abandoned<sup>82</sup>. From extra rooms of the squeezed apartments above, to spaces to escape to for their owners, up to sheltering the repair culture, growing into meeting and social spaces for the neighbours, garages confirmed their versatile vocation and became also spaces with value and commercial destiny (Fig.46). Inheriting the undersized and concentrated commercial spaces of the *microraions*, during the 1990s there was an explosion of proximity commerce. As an informal

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> The need for extra storage space didn't disappear and was spatialized into the prefabricated garages which have become a familiar presence of the district's inner courtyards, developing into a specific garage culture of living, shared by other countries from the Eastern Bloc.

continuation of the process of densification and consolidation of microraions' street, the residents new taste for entrepreneurial spirit transformed the in between spaces with an unprecedented speed and scale. Drumul Taberei residents remember that "as if by magic" the more trafficked streets and crowded intersections began to lost their airy, open aspects and solidify with commercial spaces, ad-hoc stalls, improvised kiosks and terraces extended over sidewalks and green areas. Trained in the alternative use of the garages in the last decades of socialism, residents with initiative took advantage of the legislative ambiguities and started to repurpose also the garages placed on the more circulated alleys in commercial spaces. With an inner surface area of 5 by 3 meters in plan and 2.4 metres in height, supplied with water, electricity and heating, garages were ideal spaces for the small commerce of the proximity. Moreover, these commercial spaces have decoupled from the collective payment system of the shared utilities, becoming completely independent. In the general context of the intensive repair, renovation and modification of the newly privatised apartments, the garages saw "improvements" too. Such transformation was required, especially if they were intended to be opened to the public, as their original interior was quite raw, with exposing prefabricated panels and pipes coming down from the apartments above. In front of the garages, a stripe as long as a parking space, flat or sloped, was arranged with small green spaces that defines and protects each access, softening a bit the rather utilitarian aspect given by the opaque wooden or metallic doors of the garages. However, many owners have poured concrete and widened the access lanes to the detriment of the green space. Outside canopies, floor tiles, plaster boarding, double-glazed windows and even toilets connected to the sewage system paved the way for some garages ready to host public functions. As they were registered separately from the apartments, they could be rented and sold on the real estate market.

The diversification of the garages' uses highly increased, always maintaining a "social bustle" around them, as a resident (J.T.) who grew up in the neighbourhood remembers. The newly opened small corner shops by the garage were plugging into the local network of neighbourhood relations. Here, selling "by the notebook" was a usual practice, as the seller-client was "a true relationship", highly personalized, marked by mutual help, supported by neighbourly proximity and fuelled by economic solidarity. Often, residents recalled such relations as even going towards friendship, including time spent together beyond the daily visits by the store. In the same time, the repair workshop practice developed since their construction, continued and expanded. There was always a half-open door on the alley with someone available to lend a tool, give a technical advice or stay for a chat. Used like this rather by men, they became social spaces marked by gender, where "boys meet over a beer", as one garage owner (H.E.) explains: "Some people drink in their garages, others tinker about. Someone drills a hole, screws a bolt, they're trying to do something, y'know? (...) There are people putting their grill out, grilling outside." But it's

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> It is a relation based on mutual trust entailing that the seller writes down the amount owed by the client in a notebook, which will be paid later by the client, usually with the monthly salary or pension.

not exclusively men who are hanging out by the garages, as various other users do it. Such are elderly couples catching a breath of air seating in front of their garage, or young families having friends by the garage transformed into a living room with a TV and all and even kids, using the area in their front as places for play, explore and meet with others.



Fig. 46. Various uses of garages in *Buclă* area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2022). Photo by the current author.

However, after an intensification of their alternative use that began in the 1990s, the activity by the garages seems to have decreased. Among the causes would be the explosion in the number of personal cars that filled the garages, the spaces in front of them and in general every alley of the district. Garages have become highly sought-after for buying or renting for car owners from any part of the neighbourhood, even from recently built real estate developments in the vicinity. Furthermore, over the background of usage' legal ambiguities, the close proximity to the apartments' windows in connection with an intensive and sometimes even abusive commercial or social use of garages, can sometimes lead to disputes among suspicious neighbours. With conflict looming behind half-closed doors and curtained windows, garage goers and upstairs residents are walking a thin line between conviviality and antagonism. Yet, garages are also working as a relational device, part of an ecosystem of informal practices of living together. Such as the valuable parking space in front of the garages becoming informal currency in the proximity economy of the mutual exchange, between residents with complementary needs. Garages are also supporting a social infrastructure of proximity, critical for some marginalized groups, such as "pensioners with small pensions" who suffer from loneliness, lack of resources, while missing accessible places nearby, as one elderly owner of a garage corner shop testifies: "Given the age, it's very convenient. I discuss, I watch, I accumulate. I see the good and the bad. It keeps your mind

awake" (D.B.). Going beyond storing objects, garages became spaces for harbouring skills excluded from elsewhere and places for exchanging goods and social interactions in the context of a chronic lack of community spaces in the district. As in the case of gardens by the *bloc*, many processes hosted around garages are also based on a value-based economy (Petrescu et al., 2021), rather than a purely monetary economy. Neighbourliness, exchange, friendship, affection, well-being, mutual help or solidarity has become values produced in the proximity. Such alternative economy sometimes co-opts other, more capitalist economic processes, into a "community economy" which is able to create "commoning value" (p.172).

#### The Pandemic Garage - reopened

In the context of the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic in Romania, especially during the lockdown periods, garages have proven their value for their owners. Like the informal gardens, garages have become nearby refuges for the disoriented and anxious residents. For many owners, garages were not necessarily a pandemic discovery, but rather a rediscovery triggered by the current needs. The practice of going to the garage was boosted during this period. Few open doors, tinkering noises and some occasional music enlivened the alleys of the blocs in times of uncertainty. Their owners have rediscovered - if they had forgotten - the potential of their garages to accommodate various activities. Limited to walks around the house, working from home, engaged in online schooling, with parks, playgrounds and other public institutions, such as libraries, being closed, garages have become once again a substitute versatile space for the lack of activities and public programs. Some took up various hobbies; others started fixing things around the house; and few keep repairing their cars. For those garages already working as workshops and alternative living rooms, their usage only increased, making the restrictions more bearable for their owners. Only the physical presence by the opened up garages, such as working, arranging or repairing, was an opportunity for the socially distanced neighbours to interact as much as possible across the alleys. Furthermore, garages were hosting even small "out of sight" gatherings behind the half-closed doors or near the small corner shops, when such activities were not always allowed. The garages once more came to the aid of their owners and in support of the neighbourhood networks.

Affected by the same restrictions and having similar needs as the majority of Bucharest residents, after a few months into the pandemic and lockdown, I rented a garage in the *Buclă* area of Drumul Taberei. It was a former parking garage, transformed by its owner to host various commercial functions, like a herbal and handmade shop, or small services, like a tailor. It had been refurbished with double glazed windows and door, floor tiles and plasterboards over the concrete walls. Above all, it had a toilet, which made it suitable for independent and longer time use. As I'm not a resident in the area, traveling to the garage and back was in itself a very useful activity that alleviated the isolation and lack of movement. The garage kept me busy, concerned with its management, in search for solutions to current problems and in contact with others. Once arrived

there, I didn't have a clear plan from the beginning. I rather let myself be inspired by the neighbourhood and adapted my actions to the characteristics of the space and its location. In the first couple of weeks, the garage had become a studio away from home, used for readings or desk research specific to the current research underway. During the weekly visits to the garage, I started taking small walks in the area, thus observing different informal spatial practices. As the cold season approached, the first situations observed were the garages transformed into different commercial or small services. I started visiting them regularly and actually used them. I began buying coffee and snacks from the corner shops, or repair things around the house at the tailors and shoemakers. Returning to the garage, I began drawing and archiving their various adaptations. Thus, I started to apply to the garage from the lessons observed at my neighbours. Among these, the use of the facade and the space in front of the garage was evidenced as an important pattern. Keeping the "Open" sign on the window frame from the previous tailor shop, I began taking out in front of the garage books read by my children, as the basis for a small library. That's how I started talking to neighbours and passers-by and began joining the local practice of opening up garages. These initial actions have later become the trigger for the OPEN Garage research and activation project (Fig.47).



**Fig. 47.** Interactions with neighbours based on book exchange in the early months of opening the garage, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest, (2021). Photo by Iuliana Dumitru.

The garages opened to the public worked also during the pandemic. Usually, these are operated as small family businesses, thus their functioning was critical for its owners. Although facing difficult conditions and various restrictions triggered by the unpredictable situation, some of them even thrived in the new context. Especially the small proximity services had an increased clientele, as one tailor (E.G.) confessed to me: "Hey, do you know how many people came to mend clothes during this pandemic?" Nonetheless, the amount of extra work was barely enough for her

just to keep afloat with the costs of the space: "My neighbours keep asking me why I work on Saturdays and Sundays. Well, why do you think the other tailor shop closed? What can I do, if I don't do them..." (E.G.). Thus, some of the garages open to the public were closed during or just immediately after the pandemic, due to the decreasing number of customers, their diminished purchasing power, combined with the increase of maintenance costs for the space. However, for their customers and users, the open garages that managed to survive proved quite useful during this period. As one regular customer chatting with the seller about the role played by the corner shop in contemplating leaving the district during the pandemic: "I could move to the countryside if I wanted. And why not? Well, at my age. But what can I do there? Without a shop like I have here?" Not just the commercial supply in the proximity, which is still highly regarded by many residents, but also their capacity to act as a social infrastructure made them attractive to the residents. Here, they could exchange a word, find out the latest rumours and comment on the worrying situation. For many, the visits to the small shop down by the garage were perhaps the only moments of social interaction during intense periods of isolation. These open garages thus contributed to improving mental health of many residents who otherwise lacked diversified activities and alternative spaces for interaction or relaxation in the proximity, such as gardens or personal garages.

#### Garages in the Buclă - closed, half-open, open

Field research from the *Buclă* area of Drumul Taberei district evidenced several typologies of uses for the ground floor garages. As part of the research was undertaken during pandemic, it functioned as a revelatory factor for their alternative uses, specific to the area. Some types of uses were not found as distinct on the ground, but rather overlapping or working in turns in the same spaces, depending on location, relation with neighbours, week day, season or users' characteristics.

The *open garages* are former garage spaces destined for parking or storage, which are completely refurbished and transformed into commercial or small service spaces. Such spaces are accounting for less than 5% of all the garages in the *Buclă*. Their programing covers a wide range of functions, depending on the needs of the area, tested and changing over time. As a corner shop owner remembers the moment of garage re-functionalization:

"Across the street there was a soda shop, back there you had two shops, now it's a tailor. The one next to the entrance is the storage space for the florist down the street. In 2003, my son wanted a boutique. He evicted all my stuff out and I set him up" (D.B., garage owner and seller).

Most of them are hosting small corner shops, grocery, fruit-and-vegetable stores, but there are also some wine shops, car parts or sanitary ware. There are as well several tailors and cobblers', workshops, few barber shops, or vets and even an optician practice. They are located in the more trafficked areas, along the routes through the *microraion* which lead to the transport stations, or connecting major destinations, such as the park, the food market or the dispensary and usually pop up also nearby schools. The finishes and accessories are supporting their new functions. As

the original garages had wooden or metallic opaque doors, the open garages are fitted with new layer of double-gazed windows and doors. Usually, they are keeping the old doors on the outside, or just the system of folding opaque panels, which get a new colour of paint and become a support for the signage of the commercial space. Most of them have a canopy over the entrance, useful for display, but handy for protection, as the space in front of the garage is also part of the program. Here, goods are displayed when opened, working in the same time as a meeting space and even quick consumption for the corner shop' customers. Folding chairs, beer crates, stools appear outside when it's open to support the customers "of the house" for a chat, a coffee and a cigarette. The public use of this space in front is the most contentious for the neighbours upstairs, leading to conflicts among shop owners, clients and tenants or bloc's administration. Left unfinished from the construction, with concrete floor and walls and exposed pipes, their inside needed to be updated to support the new functions, as the owner of the corner shop remembers: "Only when we made it into a shop, we built the installation for the sink. Then we repaired the ceiling, we covered the pipes. He laid tiles right there, under the sink, on the ground" (D.B.). After the demolition of the kiosks from the districts' streets and intersections started around the 2000s, some of those commercial and small services, along with their social functions, migrated and relocate at the garages by the bloc. Thus, the open garages are working as a legacy, becoming a landmark in their areas, both functionally, addressing the inherited undersized commercial and service spaces of the district, but also socially, supporting a personalized trade of proximity and opening up spaces for interaction and community crystallization (Fig.48).



Fig. 48. Garage transformed into a corner shop, *Buclă* area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

Derived from the alternative uses developed since the acquisition of the car-less garages, the *half-open garages* grow from the residents' need to socialize and from the potential of the space to host it. Regardless of the passers-by flux, used mostly by their owners living in the apartments upstairs, they are randomly located in the neighbourhood. Some of them are hosting functions opened to the public, but only with programming, such as rooms for private classes for pupils or guitar lessons. Referred sometimes as "closed-circuit" garages, there are also several places where the hard core, mostly male clientele of evicted terraces, demolished kiosks or former garage corner-shops that no longer have authorization for commerce, took refuge. Here, they continue to meet for a beer and a chat in the former store now emptied of goods, behind half-closed doors. Furthermore, several of the private garages not opened to the public were transformed by their owners in some sort of "alternative living rooms" (Siegelbaum, 2008).



Fig. 49. Garage used for collective car repairs and meetings, *Buclă* area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

Quite domestic interiors can be glimpsed through the garage doors as music and cooking smells are coming out. With interior furnishings, completed by sofas, tables with chairs, spotlights, even TV sets, together with improvised canopies outside, they give the image of "little houses", as a local resident (J.T.) noticed. Here, the families sometimes joined by friends or neighbours, socialize, have a barbecue and a beer together, while kids are playing nearby. Like for the *open garages*, the space in front is also used. Locals practice "going out to the garage" as a form of relaxation and interaction with neighbours, taking part with their bodies in the life of the street. From a quantitative perspective, there are not many *open* or *half-open* garages. But a few here

and there are enough to liven up the garage alleys with their utilitarian destination, as one resident (J.T.) growing up among the district perceives them: "It seems to me that there are garages which don't have any kind of identity, I don't know them, and there are those that have this life, which are more open." The *half-open garages* hosts both the needs of the residents, while in the same time carry the capacity of contributing to the street life, supporting the social infrastructure in the area (Fig.49).

"The garages are good, who managed to get one made it" admits a fortunate owner of a garage (H.E.). Nearest to their initial destination, the closed garages are used as the above apartments' domestic extensions. They are storing furniture, sports gear, bicycles and car equipment, such as summer-winter tires or tools. Quite often, less used cars are also crammed inside, among shelves, boxes and jars. Because, the other, more informal initial destination, that of the cellar, also survived. As a resident (J.T.) remembers the garages of friends and neighbours seen through a child eyes as "cool universes" full of barrels, jars, and bottles with zacusca, canned fruits and vegetables, jam, pickles, wine and all kinds of juices which are still stored here. Although it evolves and changes, the local kitchen still maintains areas that require products preserved for the winter, traditionally prepared and used in the family. Hence, garage-cellars are ideal storage and supply points for extended families. It is guite common that parents' garage to be used by the children or grandchildren, even if they have long since moved out of from home and from the district. Beyond its utilitarian function, the family garage becomes also a device to connect family members, triggering interaction among them. As one garage goer (H.E.) observed their use in the area: "From what I know and see, 85% of the cars are kept outside. They park their cars outside and use the garage as store rooms. (...) A lot of them keep their bikes, what they can't keep in the house." It's not only objects which are kept in garages, but also practices that no longer find a place in the house. The garage can host even gyms or play areas, but especially DIY workshops. Most of them are coming from the tradition of car repairing and in general of anything that breaks down, becoming like in the rest of the Eastern Bloc hubs for "creativity 'from bellow'" (Möser, 2012, p.207). If car repairing behind the bloc has become an accepted informal practice over time, repairing in front of the garage was practically formalized from the start. Often, on weekend days, cars with the hood open, or jacked up, recently joined by opened up motorcycles, still gather few concerned neighbours around a technical problem. Sometimes, more skilled repairmen by the garages also take care of neighbours' cars, becoming informal mechanical service hot spots. There is also a strong social component attach to them, as chatting sometimes evolves into small gatherings with food and drinks. However, such places are in a constant and difficult negotiation with other tenants due to their associated noise and the too intensive use of the garage as a clandestine car repair workshop. But, in most cases, garage owners passionate about repairing stuff keep their use within tolerable limits. The garages are offering valuable spaces for the repairing activity which goes beyond the utilitarian need and become a means of participating,

interaction and relating, as one resident remembers the workshop by the garage as a place of her memory:

"They kept the car and there was also a workshop, where my grandfather repaired all sorts. Or we DIY-ed together. I was finding wires on the ground and we were making keys. He would show me how to bend it with the vise grip and stuff like that" (N.B.).

The *closed garages* are not just sealed off places, but they open up for uses elsewhere excluded, supporting practices of different generations of repairmen, but also various users and their diversified needs (Fig.50).

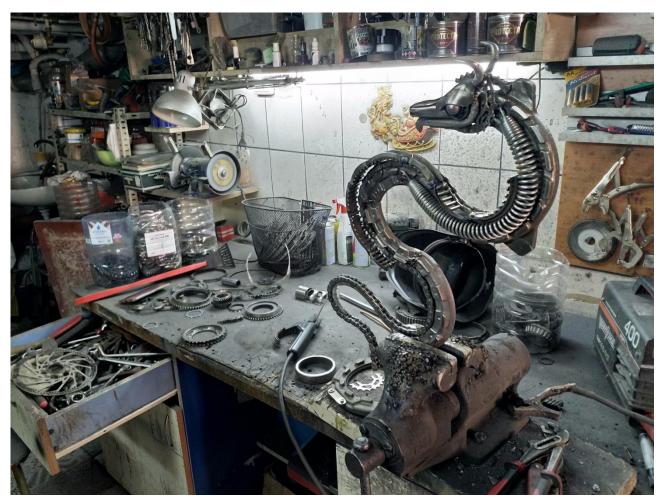


Fig. 50. Garage transformed into an artistic workshop, *Buclă* area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

#### Garages - Autonomous Spaces

Throughout the post-socialist context, the garages use and its associated socialization was perceived as predominant male. Since their beginnings, garages served a car culture, doubled in socialism by a culture of self-repair. Similar throughout the region, although polytechnic education was spread beyond gender barriers and the dominant socialist discourse supported the emancipation of women in relation to the "automobility", the car usage and maintenance remained a rather male practice (Siegelbaum, 2011). However, the representations of the woman passionate about technique and mechanics appeared in the films of the time, such as *Raliul/ The Rally* (1984), directed by Mircea Drăgan. Here, the young Tasica, after failing the exam to the polytechnic

school, follows her passion for cars and joins Dacia automobile factory, where she becomes a mechanic, like her father. Once there, she manage to fulfil her dream and becomes the first female test pilot, despite traditional preconceptions and her mothers' protests, which didn't want her daughter to work at the garage and "come home with black and torn hands", considering that mechanics is "not a job for the girl!". Besides such exceptional examples, there were more casual portrayals of the everyday driving women, such as in the film Angela merge mai departe/ Angela moves on (1981), directed by Lucian Bratu. Here, the main character, Angela, is a single woman that works as a taxi driver in Bucharest. Although depicted as strong, independent and determined throughout the film, when suffering a flat tire in traffic she is helped by a male driver to change it. However, masculinized by practice, the relationship between men and the socialist car was not similar to Western representations. Even if driving and maintenance was mainly done by men, the socialist car was a project of the whole family. The high price and sacrifices made for its acquisition required an effort involving every family member. I remember how my aunt, even though she didn't have a driver's license, but had a polytechnic education, wouldn't let my uncle driving at high speed or taking sharp curves with their car, so he wouldn't wear out the tires. So, the car was a family matter.

Perceived as mainly inheriting the male bonding specific to mechanical universes, the garages were not men's exclusivist territory. Especially their alternative uses, such as cellars, living rooms, DIY workshops, fitness rooms or playgrounds, opened them for diverse categories of users. There are quite many residents of Drumul Taberei district recalling the garages as playgrounds, either using the outdoor space in front, or even participating into the tinkering activities, as one resident (N.B.) remembers joining her grandfather by the garage when she was a kid: "I was going to help. I had made a pit here, I was taking tools and playing with them". Garages for play are not so rare, especially since they were a recurring practice in the local memory, as another resident (D.J.) remembers from his childhood among the garages: "I had a friend and when he went out his grandmother stayed with us, she took care of all the children. And he kept his toys in the garage, all that stuff. And we were going there; they let us in to play." The garages' transformation into commercial or small service spaces didn't trigger a complete erasure of these practices. Groups of users are still bonding around the corner shop or the barber, while friends still get together by the garage for play, for a chat or for a beer. However, sometimes their intense use as social infrastructure can lead to conflict with other tenants, especially in the context of dwellings' close proximity. Thus, the use of the garages is also a matter of the collective.

Beyond gender stereotypes and functional limitations, the practice of socializing along informal and creative repairing or tinkering was transferred further to the diversified use of garages. 'Going by the garage' assumes a space and a practice that tends to be more autonomous from the mainstream and formalized economic, cultural or social representations. By their versatile nature, garages are not only storing goods and private property, but also shelters activities elsewhere excluded which allowed its users to develop their skills and practice a form of freedom. By

engaging into such autonomous culture of living, (some) individuals began to recognize each other, bonding together and eventually forming a community based on a shared culture of living by the garages. Together with informal gardens, *bloc* entrances, closed balconies or animal shelters, garages contribute to an ecosystem of informal spatial practices. All these diverse domestic instances assemble in the end in a convivial universe that dwellers can intuitively grasp and access. Here, individuals participate into the collective by producing and reproducing tacit knowledge and relational skills as a commoning resource. All these collective spaces, shared practices, skills and knowledges are articulating socially, and as well as visually, a sense of belonging to the community (Fig.51).



**Fig. 51.** Garage transformed into a corner shop, working also as meeting and socialization space, *Buclă* area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

# By the Garages

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For a while he leans over with an involuntary gasp. He pulls the latch and opens only one of the wooden doors. It's still cool outside, but he lets it open for a while to ventilate a bit the smell of oil. "Morning!", greets him the engineer from the third floor. They were colleagues for a while at the Institut and he occasionally drops by to borrow some tools. After they first moved from the old house in 1974, he arranged it like his dad had in the barn, with shelves on the walls and a workbench on the side, narrow enough to fit the car in. He went down by the garage for the past twenty five years. Now since they both retired from teaching, he comes here every other day, just so he doesn't have to stay at home. He's repairing some stuff, crafts another, tidies up again the toolkit, or takes a look inside the car's engine. He doesn't really take it out anymore, except when they go to the countryside. Sometimes she comes down too, and then he takes out their camping chaise longues for her to do the crosswords in front of the garage, in open-air. In the meantime he goes to the corner shop to buy two Fanta orange sodas for them to properly enjoy the weekend. "Don't forget to get a small package for the cat too! She will drop by any minute now."

Many inhabitants who moved to the bloc since the construction of the big housing districts still have access to the "old house" of their family or relatives that are still standing within Bucharest outskirts, or somewhere in the countryside. Therefore, they continued to commute between the house and the bloc, trafficking objects and practices from one side to the other. This is how the gardens by the bloc appeared. They grew from the constant transfer of seedlings, seeds, animals, tools and knowledge brought from the courtyards. In the same way, the barn, or the workshop also found a correspondent in the apartment. A place was needed where stuff was stored, where furniture was repaired, where various tools could be put to use. The balcony was probably the most used space for harbouring this transfer of repairmen's universe from the house, via the factory to the bloc. I remember that my uncle, who worked at an oil equipment factory, set up a real workshop in his balcony. There he made all sorts of metallic parts when needed, suited for various domestic repairs and adjustments. But for those residents who also had garages downstairs, it was truly an ideal space. Partially disconnected from the apartment, while coupled to utilities, in a direct relationship with the street and enabling informal contact with other neighbours, the garages were like a dream come true for mechanical amateurs.

In the same time, as their way of living changed, many of the new garage users were

becoming specialized in technical jobs. In these spaces, the practices and customs coming from a rural or mahala culture were intersecting with the ones developed through in the factory. The knowledge gained and the ingenuity trained in industrial work was materializing into numerous adaptations of their nearby living spaces. Also tools and materials were making their way out of the factory being informally borrowed by the workers-neighbours to solve not just the pressing production and industrial plan targets, but also to answer their current and imperative needs at home. Faced with the delay in arranging the spaces between the blocs, skilled residents with access to materials and tools, began to take the matter in their own hands. Tables and benches, shading structures, vine vaults, animal shelters, fences and decorative grids were emerging among the self-organized community of gardens, near buildings' entrances or informal playgrounds. In this process, the garages were used as informal branches of the factories anchored around the district.

From repairing and hammering as a passion, some of the residents took their role seriously as universal repairmen in their communities. As one resident testified during a walk around *Buclă* passing by the garage of a local craftsman, who still repairs doors and windows:

"A jack of all trades. You need it, a lock breaks, a window cracks. And you need a craftsman of the place. When there is a community, around the houses, but especially around the *bloc*, you always need an electrician, you need a plumber. And it's good to find one close by; if you get to know him, it's extraordinary." (D.J., resident, former garage owner)

Especially since age began to catch up with the buildings constructed some fifty years ago, many needing constant repair, fixing and mending. Moreover, working by the garage made these local craftsmen known and available in the proximity. This way of using garages as mechanical workshops has been preserved and even diversified over time. From workshops to repair and solve technical problems, either for oneself, or even as a small entrepreneurship, garages have become in the more recent years spaces that allow and encourage the development of their owners' artistic pursuits. Both of my garage neighbours use their garages not only for storage or for repairing stuff, but also to follow their artistic passions. The garages became an art workshop, as one neighbour confessed from his garage tuned into workshop:

"I started making a closet, two closets, as I've worked as a carpenter. And since I can't carry stuff anymore because of my health, I changed my job. I said I'd move on to contemporary art, and I started with a head made from bolt

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nuts. And I saw it catches on, so I kept doing all sorts of stuff. Now I really enjoy making iron animals" (H.E., garage owner and artist).

The versatile nature of the garages as autonomous spaces becomes evident once again. Not only as a storage space for practices and skills, but supporting and boosting the development of individuals, or even supporting the community around. Garages are thus a part in an ecosystem of spaces and practices specific to collective housing districts, together with balconies and gardens. Here, resources, knowledge and skills are still reproduced, maintaining a way of being in the neighbourhood.

Shelves with fabric, crumpled clothes on the table, a TV turned on and a sewing machine that just stopped. She pins down the name and the phone number on a piece of paper and looks up over her glasses. "I'll call you when it's ready, OK?" Outside, a lady in house slippers and dressing gown, with her trousers tucked into thick socks smokes and chats with another lady in a woollen sweater completed by a thin greenish vest. They use the tall ashtray that acts as a door stop for the tailor shop. In front of the garage next door, a guy tidies up the seats of a yellow Dacia car that looks like a taxi out of duty. Bits of radio songs mix up with the calls of the workers above, which are insulating the bloc. Across the alley, a lady shows to a shoemaker working from behind a garage door half open where her ballerina is peeled off. From time to time she turns and speaks to the toddler left in the stroller at the door by making a small mouth: "Yes, mommy, yes!" By the small corner shop towards the end of the street, few guys gather for an early drink. They sit on chairs and boxes in front of the garage at pandemic distances. "Man, it hurts here. Where did I hit myself? Last night maybe. I don't know, to be honest."

Residents who moved in from the beginning remember that 'before', which means before 1989, there were no stores in the alleys among the blocs. You could only find such functions grouped in commercial complexes. There you could find a pastry, a food store, a grocery, the tobacco shop. Bigger centres had also small services, such tailors or TV repair. There were still some clothes or furniture shops that had appeared on the ground floor of the bloc built later on, along the main boulevard. From there, locals were buying clothes before the school started, in September. And that was about it. The explosion of small commercial spaces that came 'after', meaning after 1989, has its causes in the legacy of the functional segregation of the microraion, combined with the economic and food crisis of the last socialist decade. But in general, it also comes from a long term and frustrating relationship that the inhabitants had with consumer goods during socialism. Ever in short supply, such goods were always hunted and highly prized especially if they were of foreign, preferably Western origin. I remember that my cousin had an impressive collection of chocolate packaging, that when I was visiting her I smelt through and imagined the tastes of those fascinating foreign brands. The political and social change that occurred in 1989 also meant a sudden intensification of this relation between inhabitants and merchandise. Local entrepreneurs immediately started to import goods, especially from Turkey, and resold them in the city. Sweets, coffee, cigarettes, food, clothing, shoes, electronics and many freshly coloured and incredibly tasty stuff poured in. As there were no spaces for their sale, stalls and kiosks appeared. The garages, which during socialism had not been used for commercial purposes except only some dwellers discreetly sold home-made borscht, became a kind of kiosks at the base of the bloc. The residents huge appetite for consumer goods was completed by the pleasure of consuming the experience of 'going out' to the terraces and drinking a juice or a beer with friends. Before, these functions had not been too numerous either, with just two or three restaurants and a few pastry shops in the whole district. This is how the commercial garages appeared on the streets with increased pedestrian traffic. Their functions evolved over time according to the needs and habits of the residents. Besides the generic corner shops full 'with everything', other specialized functions appeared, such as few small vegetable shops, liquor or technical stores. A whole range of small services found the garages suitable and well placed near the flow of clientele among the district alleys. Tailors, shoemakers or hairdresser, completed by vet cabinets or pet shops started to pop-up at the ground floor of apartment blocs. This commercial ecosystem which appeared overnight in the transformed spaces of the garages developed as a local practice. Many residents remember the highly personalized relations that they have with the owners, which most of the time were also the sellers and their neighbours too. Small services, mutual help and even friendship were determinant in the decision to frequent one store or another. Such choices went beyond spatial proximity or even price. Among these, "selling by the notebook" was a frequently encountered practice and involved the accumulation of customers' debts in a notebook until they could pay up at the next salary. Such practices of solidarity economy were based on a tight relationship of trust between sellers and customers

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as neighbours, which developed in time. However, this practice is currently in decline, due to the tighten trade regulations, the appearance of chain stores that compete with the small corner shops, along with the changing cultural habits of the buyers and sellers.

The strong attachment and pride of belonging developed by early dwellers and transmitted to a certain extent to the following generations, manifested in this context too. After the early post-socialist years, when some residents opened commercial spaces, garages began to be sold and rented on the real estate market. That's how merchants "from outside" the neighbourhood started to come. One of the ingredients of the success of the business amounted in the way in which they integrate or not in the local networks and managed to adapt to the neighbourhood practices.

A resident identified the causes of closure for some corners shops as they were "somehow disconnected from what's going on here and they didn't last" (J.T.). Moreover, residents and garage owners have developed strong feelings of territoriality over time. Among childhood memories, a dweller also remembers how she used to play when she was little in front of some friends' garage, as their parents allowed their playmates to use the space. However, the space was considered as "belonging to them" (J.T.). I also felt these nuances as I rented a garage in the district. Despite the shared local landmarks and stories accumulated since childhood when my grandparents lived in the area, my presence at the garage was not unanimously well received by all residents. After almost two years of using the space, I was finally called "the neighbour from the garage" by a corner shop seller. Nevertheless, it was rather the residents who moved relatively recently into the neighbourhood which proved to be more open and accessible. In the same time, some of those born and raised in the bloc still remain somehow reluctant towards outsiders.

### 4.4. Libraries: Community Home

Early beginnings – a house of mirrors (1930 - 1949)

The public libraries program starts late and with difficulties during interwar Bucharest<sup>84</sup>. The few existing libraries in the city were not accessible to all citizens85 and didn't work in a coordinated system, as parts of a network (Buluta, 2000). The interwar scarcity of public libraries in Bucharest<sup>86</sup> brought disappointment, frustration and mockery by the cultural actors of the day, some calling the situation a "national shame" (Eliade, 1934 in Buluta, 2000, p.165). Well known writers such as Liviu Rebreanu characterized the long-awaited establishment of a public library as "the dissipation of an atmosphere that had become unbearable" (Tribuna edilitară, 1934). Following the long awaited law for the system of public libraries in 193287 the "Municipal Library of Bucharest" is re-founded<sup>88</sup> in 1934<sup>89</sup>. Hosted initially in the town hall building, it was at first specialized in Bucharest history, urbanism and local administration, becoming later an encyclopaedic library as well. It has "modest beginnings" after moving from the city hall and renting three rooms and a hallway in a "cramped apartment". Only in 1940 it becomes "really public", being better housed, staffed, supplied and accessible to the general public (Martinescu, 1998). Yet, even here the space was not enough, as the director of that time remembers in an interview where the source of its nickname as the "house of mirrors" came from: "Not that the mirrors were necessary for better reading, but in the absence of a proper construction, the mirrors at least gave the illusion of a larger space, lengthening the perspective of the rows of reading tables" (Rally, 1972, p.583). Although there were some plans for its upgrade and expansion into the city districts<sup>90</sup>, with the beginning of the World War 2 and the pressure of other priorities, the only public library in Bucharest further remained in an inappropriate space, located in a central area, difficult to access for the residents outside the centre. Despite the preconceptions of the time, regardless of city hall officials' lack of interest and even disregard towards their role, new visions about the library and librarians began to emerge. Inspired especially by French cultural perspectives, the librarians were called to overcome their conservation and archiving missions towards a post-school education

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> The Bucharest Statistic Register 1931-1936 accounts for 5 available public libraries, while Gazeta Cărților from 1934 (in Buluta, 2000) mentions few more hosted by universities, high schools, foundations, professional associations or foreign cultural institutes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> Some public libraries were accessible only with charge and limited just to certain categories of the public, like academics, students, pupils or certain professional categories.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Further research is needed into the programing and the transformation post 1947 of the 'Popular Athenaeums', which counted as 43 by 1936. These institutions where the results of private initiatives, active in the peripheral neighbourhoods that suppose to have a reading cabinet in their structure (Daiche, 1969).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Nicolae lorga, an important culture figure and the prime minister of the time, managed to pass the "Law for organizing the libraries and public museums" which obliged the local administrations to open a library in every city, if not their budget wouldn't be approved. The measure had limited effects though, no budget being refused on these grounds (Corptu, Mătuşoiu, & Dinu, 2003).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> The Saint Sava College was open to public since 1838 as the first public library in Bucharest, only that in 1901 to be closed and its book collection transferred to the Library of the Academy (Buluta, 2000; Gabureac, 2020).

<sup>89</sup> City Hall Decision no.40/1934.

The energetic and visionary director of the time, Georgetta Elena Rally, mentions that she drafted the "scheme" for the development of the program for Organisation Law of Bucharest of 1939 which consisted from a central library with branches in sectors and suburban communes (Călăuza Bibliotecarului, 10/1972; Buluta, 1998).

approach, working as a "social engineer" in a "living" library. Such ethos "to administrate books for the common use" (Rally, 1943 in Buluta, 1998, p. 137-138) with librarians engaged in serving the public have developed later and materialized in the following decades of popular libraries expansion into the cities' communities<sup>91</sup>.

The Socialist Library – from the state to ours (1949 – 1960)

Following the post-war transformations of the country<sup>92</sup> the public libraries became key ideological tools in the architecture of the new communist regime. After years of delays and inaction, the project of expanding the network of municipal libraries in the city's neighbourhoods gets underway. Driven by Soviet referencing, it gets generous resources and fresh ideals. For the new political orientation, making books accessible to the communities from the peripheral neighbourhoods, previously ignored by the interwar public policies, was one of its declared missions. The first two "neighbourhood public libraries" were opened in 1949 in Grivita and Ferentari working class districts by the city's outskirts (Călăuza Bibliotecarului, 1949). The specialized press informs that the libraries were occupying former pubs which were nationalised by the new regime, one formerly run by a known money lender from the area. The event aims to mark a change of paradigm by opening these libraries in the neighbourhoods kept by the previous bourgeois regime in the "blackest misery and illiteracy". It wasn't just propaganda, the illiteracy level by 1948 in urban Romania, and in Bucharest too, although improving since the 1930s, was significantly high<sup>93</sup> (Golopentia & Georgescu, 1948). The article also mentions that for the newly opened libraries, "the arrangement of the two rooms was done through the voluntary work of the women from the Household Committee" (Călăuza Bibliotecarului, 1949, p.24). Even if must be treated carefully, considering the strong propaganda in action during 1950s which underline the collective volunteer efforts, information about voluntary work often appears along the years in the specialized publications, also when the propagandistic approach had diminished, such as 1960s and 1970s. However, aspects of volunteer actions are a constant in the memories of readers and librarians. This aspect of volunteer support will constantly return during the evolution of the neighbourhood libraries, becoming a fundamental ingredient of their functioning. As up to ten other similar library branches were opened that year in the marginal districts, furniture donations, voluntary work and collecting resources were always highlighted in press articles, aiming to emphasize the socialist ethos of citizens' participation and contribution for their shared common goods. At the same time, the authorities' habit of relying also on the resources and the involvement of the population will continue and will be perpetuated beyond the post-war economic crisis into a

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> Georgetta Elena Rally was in charge of the Municipal Public Library of Bucharest since between 1938 and 1949. After the change of the political regime, she was removed as director, however remaining in the institution and contributing to the organisation of the new library branches and temporary libraries that will be opened in the city (Buluta, 1998).

<sup>92</sup> The People's Republic of Romania was founded in 1947 as a communist state, part of the Soviet-aligned Eastern

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> Overall, Bucharest had an illiteracy of 8.4%, with difference in favouring the central neighbourhoods, the younger generations and men.

pattern present to this day. Henceforth, for the majority of city dwellers, their first contact with a public library was with a public institution always in need.

Existing and newly opened libraries were plugged into a top-down formally organised system, facilitating public access, disseminating knowledge and enabling civic emancipation, but also exercising state control and censorship<sup>94</sup>. The birth certificate of the public libraries' as a network was the 1951 systemic reorganisation<sup>95</sup> which produced a "wave" of new public libraries in cities and villages (Buluta, 1998, 2000). This moment was also marked by the paradigm of urgency, the decision granting only a six month deadline for the local administrations to provide premises and furniture for the newly established libraries (Mătusoiu & Dinu, 2001). As there was no time and funds to build new and specialized spaces for the library branches, they had to be accommodated in available public buildings, such as city district culture houses and workers clubs. But most of them occupied nationalised houses<sup>96</sup> (Buluta, 1998, 2000; Gabureac, 2020). During the 1950s, public libraries spread throughout the city beyond the central area into the peripheral neighbourhoods as Bucharest reaches almost fifty 'popular public libraries' branches by 1962<sup>97</sup>. But despite their stated intentions, libraries followed their foundational pattern and continued to suffer from material limitations. Their permanent precariousness generated solidarity, support and participation from readers, who got involved side by side with librarians in a kind of guiet maintenance, including repairs, donations, volunteering, up to co-management and selforganisation. An article from 1954 describes how the librarian of the library no.14 addressed the citizens and "asked for their help" in setting up the new library. A "support committee" was formed, which organised fund raising events, bought materials and "went from house to house" through the neighbourhood in search of volunteer craftsmen, gathering donations of materials, tools and skills, eventually renovating the library (Călăuza Bibliotecarului, 1954, p.34) (Fig.52). However, still improvised, underfinanced and struggling, libraries were getting closer to their users, becoming a matter of concern for the neighbours-readers, which began to adopt and domesticate them. The public library was turning into "our library". At the same time, the librarians develop into active actors, who transformed their library, making possible the participation and the contribution of users. They were constantly mediating between the authority, the collection and the citizens. The librarian employed to preserve, administer and distribute books was becoming a relational agent, attached to the library and the readers, developing creativity, adaptability and engaged in reaching out, being an active social agent, involved in the community. Although graduates of specialized

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> Part of the library system since its beginnings, in place also during the 1930-1940s, the censorship was intense between 1945-1989, as secrecy and control of the printed word were key to the political regime (Costea et. all, 1995). Censorship was also active after 1989 as a reversed self-censorship, purging libraries' collections of their communist

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> Decision 1542/1951 of the Ministry Council regarding the measures to be taken for the improvement of the libraries' activity in the People's Republic of Romania.

96 Decree 92/1950 for the nationalization of some buildings belonging to former industrialists, former bankers, former big

traders and other elements of the big bourgeoisie, buildings built by landlords, hotels, issued by the Great National

Assembly.

97 1 Regional, 48 District and Popular, 8 in Culture District Houses, according to the Bucharest Statistic Register for 1962.

higher education, the job of a librarian was also learned through practice and transferred from generation to generation. Therefore, these features of a personalized approach to librarianship have been consolidating over time in a local practice.



**Fig. 52.** Extract from an article illustrating the refurbishment of the library no.14 with the help of the support committee, in Călăuza Bibliotecarului 3/1954, courtesy of *Biblioteca Metropolitană București* (BMB).

Since 1952, the *cvartal* model was introduced for the construction of new collective housing complexes. With an integrated approach that went beyond the dwelling unit itself, the *cvartal* also included the provision of commercial spaces along the fronts of the premises. Without a special layout and not becoming a rule, libraries were also found among food stores, groceries or clothing shops on the ground floor of the apartment buildings from some *cvartals*, like the one in Ferentari district (Voinea, et al., 2022). This marks a key moment, as the library program was for the first time purposely included by urban planners amid the functions associated with collective housing. However, such generous initial intentions will be less materialized by facts on the ground<sup>98</sup>.

98 Not all the new *cvartals* included a library, for example the one in Drumul Taberei didn't had one.

Alternative Libraries – mobile, in the park, at work and at home

Despite the opening of numerous public libraries in Bucharest' districts starting in the 1950s, the small and inappropriate spaces, the lack of funds necessary for the construction of new premises, the rapid expanding of the city and the urgency of accessing books for a growing population, determined the emergence of a series of alternative library programs. Hence, the "Mobile Libraries" program appears, associated with existing, fixed branches. Even with a long history behind them starting from the 19th century, they still enter the local context through the Soviet connection. These temporary libraries were set up in public spaces, such as the Biblioteci Estivale/ Summer Libraries which were hosted near public pools or in pavilions in park, like the ones from Cişmigiu, Herăstrău, Tei, National or Carol. The temporary libraries were not only accessible during workers' free time, but also made available by their workplace, through the Biblioteci Volante/ Flywheel Libraries program which consisted of standardised furniture elements placed in factories, sometimes managed by volunteers workers. Also as an answer to the need for increasing books' access in areas poorly served by branches, the Biblioteci de Casă/ Home Libraries program was initiated. These externalised libraries consisted from a collection of books, curated by a local library branch, which was managed by volunteer readers and hosted in their private homes from where they distributed books among neighbours.

The mobile libraries programs had developed and diversified even more, until some of them became mobile in their own right: the *Bibliobuz/ Library Bus* (Fig.53). The solution was quite widespread, being used in several countries, but mainly in rural areas, intended for smaller, isolated communities without library spaces. In Romania, not only libraries were on wheels at that time, but also a whole series of services that had to become available quickly, such as, among others, medical or cinema caravans in the villages. In the cities, transport buses transformed into shops, or *Automagazin/ Auto-shop*, have circulated for a while. They especially supply the newly built collective housing districts until the construction or arrangement of commercial spaces on the ground floor of the new *blocs*. These mobile shops functioned as kiosks on wheels, which parked in districts' busiest areas and distributed various products, from grocery to clothing.



**Fig. 53.** Bibliobuz no.1 in the station from its weekly route, around 1980s, Bucharest, courtesy of *Biblioteca Metropolitană București* (BMB).

Along these lines, passenger transport buses<sup>99</sup> were painted, inscribed and set up to become small mobile libraries. The passenger seats were replaced with shelves full of books, magazines, vinyl and dispositive. Each operated by a driver and a librarian, the Bibliobuz toured Bucharest between 1974 and 1992 on four routes that served areas without branches, especially in the new neighbourhoods. The library buses, numbered from 1 to 4, travelled on established routes and stopped according to a weekly schedule at predetermined stations in landmark places of the districts. As a librarian on the Bibliobuz now retired (F.T.) remembers, the stations were always "in the same place, so that the readers would know about it, not walk around", but over time they "even came to other stations, because they had learned the route of the bus". Each station had its characteristics, given by the adjacent urban context. Thus, in the market area "all those who were shopping would come to the bus, and after filling their bags with vegetables, everyone wanted to leave with a book too", remembers another bus librarian (E.J.). In more residential areas, the neighbours were announcing each other, as she remembers further: "The bus has arrived!" as "they waved and everyone was coming down from the bloc" (E.J.). Even though at that time "there were never any problems with the parking", the management and working conditions on the Bibliobuz were difficult, especially since "we were freezing in winter and baking during the summer"

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup> TVR and later Rocar buses were produced in the south of Bucharest at Rocar factory, now demolished.

(F.T.), as several librarians confirms. Similar to fixed branches, librarians in need generated care and support from the readers, who attached themselves even to such temporary branches. One librarian (F.T.) especially remembers the support networks that formed around the stations. Here, "readers-friends" from nearby institutions, health-clinics, cinemas or shops offered her access to the bathroom, and welcomed her into their house to warm up during winter time when her hand was "freezing on the pen". On a similar note, another librarian recalls how, throughout the winter, every Thursday, there was an old man who would come with - well, his wife prepared it, not him with the tray, the kettle of hot tea and some cookies" (E.J.). Except for a "small bench", there were no tables or chairs in the Bibliobuz which didn't hosted activities and didn't allow much socialization and interaction as in a fixed branch. Nevertheless, some readers still developed a personalized relationship with the bus librarians. As a characteristic that seems to cross through the public libraries historical evolution in Bucharest, despite their temporary nature, a network of "library friends" has developed around the bus stations, similar to some fixed branches. This network was made up of loyal readers from the area, attached to the mobile library, which the librarian "knew like the back of their hand". In turn, the librarian was becoming a member of the neighbourhood community, as a librarian (E.J.) recollects: "they recognized me on the street, Hello, miss librarian! Are you coming to us tomorrow? We're coming, yes!" The success of such mobile libraries largely depended on the librarian capacity to adapt to difficult working conditions, compared to a branch librarian. Without having a special training for operating the Bibliobuz, librarian' relational abilities and informal practices have become key elements. As other researches of librarianship in socialist Romania noticed, although valuable, this personalized model of librarianship wasn't able to keep this mobile service alive (Şerbănuța, 2017, p.187).

Collective Library – living rooms among the blocs (1960 – 1975)

In a little over a decade, Bucharest libraries came a long way from the "cramped apartment" and the "mirror house" of the interwar period. The "District" Libraries become "Popular" in 1958 and their numbers are replaced by proper names. The change reflected the cultural policies trends, dominated by literature and marked by patriarchy, which at the same time announced the cultivation of the national specific pursued by the Romanian socialist movement. Starting from 1960, the encyclopaedic book collection diversifies and some branches become specialized, such as in music or art. Mentioned since the 1951 reorganisation, specialized branches for "children and adolescents" were opening. From 1968 onwards, the public libraries in Bucharest were organised in a unitary system, becoming branches of a central library <sup>100</sup>. But their impressive progress relied especially in numbers, people, programs and organisational system. Some of the spaces of the new branches were still inappropriate for the library use, lacking utilities,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>100</sup> "Mihail Sadoveanu" library became the loan officer and methodological coordinator of the network, according to the Decision 571/ 1968 of the Bucharest People's Council.

furniture and staff. Many of the branches longed for the better spaces on the ground floor of the new *blocs*, which were beginning to be built in the city.

The public libraries had been organised and began functioning as a coordinated system. At the same time, urban planning adopted a scientific approach, following norms produced by the coordinating central institutions. Starting with the 1960s, the microraion becomes the local model for the design of large collective housing districts. At least in theory, the library program was part of the planned functions associated to collective living. The norms from the centre provided for "the opening of popular, neighbourhood libraries within the socio-cultural unit of the microraion" 101. Planners were encouraged to account for the "need to organize a meeting point for the residents of the residential complex (...) which will complement the comfort of the apartment" which included besides a multifunctional hall and spaces for various activities, also a library (Rău & Mihuţă, 1969, p.132). However, the guidelines assumed the possibility of constructing such spaces "at a later stage", which often didn't materialize. In an article of Călăuza Bibliotecarului/ The Librarian's Guide (1964) the location of libraries in commercial shop fronts is criticized due disturbance potential of the crowded streets. At the same time, the article recommends that the location of libraries should not be done "by chance", in spaces that do not correspond to the needs of the program, giving the example of a neighbourhood library in the cvartal in the Ferentari neighbourhood (p.360). Such materials signalled the continuation of the already 'traditional' hosting of the neighbourhood libraries wherever they could be fitted in. In the case of apartment buildings that meant in spaces designed with a generic layout destined for generic commercial uses.

Although the neighbourhood library program was mentioned in studies, indications from the planning bodies and in specialized publications (Derer, 1985; Lăzărescu et al., 1977; Rău & Mihută, 1969), their planning wasn't detailed, as an article in Arhitectura magazine (Teodorescu, 1963, p.53) complained about the lack of regulations for the libraries that followed or even that had been foreseen in the sistematizare projects of the new districts. Libraries rather remained to be dealt with by the local administration departments of the city that had to find spaces to accommodate them. However, the big collective housing districts were rising fast and the newly moved dwellers needed social-cultural equipment, including libraries. After a decade of combating literacy and increasing book accessibility campaign in the city, many of the opened libraries needed better conditions and proper spaces. Despite planning bodies' recommendations, but lacking alternatives on the ground, between 1965 and 1977, about 30% of the existing library branches moved from the old houses to the new commercial spaces on the ground floor of the blocs. Also in the context of postponing or even cancelling the construction of the several planed socio-cultural or commercial complexes, the relocation to blocs' ground floor was the solution at hand. The process became a generalised practice, continuing until the end of the 1980s. In a rather improvised route, neighbourhood libraries became entangled with the evolution of the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> The order no. 288/1963 of the Comitetul de Stat pentru Construcții și Sistematizare/ State Committee for Constructions and Systematization (CSCAS) who was one of the central institutions coordinating the planning of the housing districts (Călăuza Bibliotecarului, 1964).

collective housing project, which proved to be one of the best things ever happened to the public library local program.

It's not just landscaping responsible for the "resort atmosphere" in neighbourhoods like Drumul Taberei, but also the very existence of apartment buildings transformed from hotels' typified projects. During the 1960s, many of these former hotels adapted into studio blocs were built among the *microraions* of the district. As the rooms became studios, the ground floor hotel reception was turned into "common spaces – entrance hallway, bicycle store and doorman room" ('Arhitectura R.P.R', 1966, p.39). In the context of the studios' above limited dimensions, these ground floor spaces were tested to function also as "family reunion rooms" (Fig.54). However, as one planner recalls: "The success was small. Because it wasn't yours. You passed by and the space was all glazed and you were having a party. The idea didn't catch on. Plus, it had no furniture, no chairs, no kitchen. So it was just a hall, with no facilities, nothing" (B.R.). What seemed like a "smart thing" at the beginning, turned again into an improvised solution as these spaces began hosting commercial functions and small services. The re-functionalization of these ground floor spaces destined for socialisation was necessary, as a dweller (N.L.) recalls their unclear management: "the problem was that it was everyone's responsibility and no one's in particular. And then no one bothered to clean, for example, or to furnish." Some of these spaces become neighbourhood libraries, as three such branches were opened in Drumul Taberei<sup>102</sup>. The change was well received by the residents, as the space was still open and welcoming, yet having a clear administrator and a program. The library was thus being frequented by many people from the area, while the librarians "knew the readers", who were also their neighbours. In fact, this change was an improvement in the context of the *microraion* functional segregation and lack of such spaces in the housing proximity. Still occupying spaces that were not specially designed as libraries, actually being quite small, these libraries on the ground floor of the blocs at least benefited from better utilities, compared to their previous spaces. Moreover, their location in the middle of the mono-functional *microraions* and in direct contact with the nearby residents transformed them into landmarks for the community. In a way, through the library program, these former receptions and family rooms fulfilled their original purpose and functioned as "living rooms" for the nearby dwellers.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>102</sup> Two of them are still open today, as one of the branches was closed during unclear privatization of its space during the 2000s.



Fig. 54. Collective housing bloc with studio apartments and collective spaces in a ground floor pavilion. Arhitectura/ Architecture 1/1966, courtesy of Union of Architects in Romania (UAR). Scan by the current author.

#### At Home Library – implicit community centre (1975 - 1995)

Even if the need for material support and help decreased with the relocation of the libraries to the bloc, it however persisted. Furniture repairs, voluntary work, contributions to the programming of the space remained customary in the everyday life of the libraries. Since 1975, the race for *densification* begins in urban planning, doubled by a renewed 'economicity' of investments. Further on, libraries remained dependent to the twists of the housing policies. The return of the commercial street through the construction of the corridor boulevards meant that libraries again had to do with whatever generic space was left. Placed among diverse commercial spaces, at least the libraries were more visible and plugged into the large flow of pedestrian traffic. At the same time, generalised austerity was directly affecting libraries, as from 1975 the specialized education for librarians was stopped, as budgets, activities, furniture, collection, staff or specialized press<sup>103</sup> were shrinking even more throughout the 1980s. Even if trained to work under constant pressure. austerity and a general crisis' context, these measures were a major blow for the library system.

103 For example, Călăuza Bibiliotecarului/The Librarian's Guide cease to exists as a magazine and from 1974 becomes a

supplement for in the cultural magazine Îndrumătorul Cultural/ Cultural Guide and from 1981 becomes just the semester section Biblioteca/The Library in the cultural magazine Cântarea României/ The Song of Romania, illustrating the more professional or technocratic subordination to the hard line of national communism ideology specific to the 1980s.

As in the early days of first libraries opening in dire conditions, library users still rallied around libraries during the rather sombre context of the 1980s. In a period characterised by stagnation, economic austerity and deepening political crisis, some libraries functioned as cultural driven oasis of getting together. This drive of users' attachment to their library continued even few years immediately after 1989, as one librarian tries to understand their motivations:

"These people came because they enjoyed being together, that we were all there at the library and we felt a sense of belonging. It's like we were a family that helped each other when needed. Not necessarily because they loved the cultural act or because they enjoyed coming to a book launch. But they felt that they could contribute and that made them feel at home. (...) Actually, the library functioned also as a community centre." (N.D., librarian)



**Fig. 55.** Organising events where readers were meeting with the writers in one of the library's branches, (1972). Courtesy of *Biblioteca Metropolitană București* (BMB). Scan by the current author.

Readers continued to adopt them as "our library," developing a kind of attachment and loyalty, especially towards librarians who managed to maintain a social network around the library, turning some of these branches into a kind of implicit community centre (Fig.55). However, public libraries have soon caught up with bigger socio-political changes after 1989. The generalised austerity of the last socialist decade becomes even more intense during the 1990s, in the conditions of the economic collapse, radical privatisation and cuts in public spending. The grid of public infrastructure is dismantled, being fragmented, with its components transferred into private use and transformed for economic gains. Libraries' alternative programs are cancelled, the

*Bibliobuz/ Bibliobus* is stopped and the *Biblioteci Estivale/ Summer Libraries* are closed, their premises in the parks being privatised and transformed into cafes and restaurants. Libraries finally come out from under the censorship pressure, but facing a chronic lack of funds they could no longer keep up the rhythm with the wave of publications flooding the liberalised book market.

Invisible Library – surviving and adapting post-1995

Besides the wave of system changes, budget cuts and constant uncertainty, libraries were strongly affected by an urban phenomena invisible at the beginning, but which radically transformed the structure of the city, like the retrocession of nationalised property<sup>104</sup> (Zamfirescu & Chelcea, 2020; Chelcea, 2018; Axinte & Borcan, 2010). Starting with 1995 when first legislative measures were aiming for retrocession of the previously nationalised buildings<sup>105</sup>, the network of public libraries in Bucharest lost almost 30% of its spaces through the restitution in kind to their former owners<sup>106</sup> of the nationalised buildings during the 1950s. The lost spaces were mainly in the central areas, occupied by branches from the first wave of openings, which were especially valuable on the real estate market. After the 2000s, only a few of the evicted branches were merged and relocated. Some were sheltered among the last spaces still in public property on the ground floor of the apartment *blocs* that were still being finished into the 1990s. However, perhaps for the first time in its history, two new branches were opened in spaces especially designed to host libraries<sup>107</sup>.

Thus, after closing the mobile, the temporary and the outsourced libraries programme, after losing spaces, after branches disappeared, while others have been relocated and merged, the library network has just 29 spaces left open to the public in 2023<sup>108</sup>. Adding over the inheriting lack of a planned placement in accordance with the sizes and needs of the neighbourhoods, the loss of spaces left large areas of the city no longer benefiting at all from access to public libraries in proximity. From the remaining branches, approximately 65% are located on the ground floor of *blocs* in collective housing districts. Here, in the context of the collapse of the community infrastructure, they are extremely valuable and appreciated by dwellers, as most of the cultural spaces remain located in the city centre. However, the spaces are still unsuitable for the library program, as currently approximately 50% of the branches have just about 100 square meters. More than that, the *Legea Bibliotecilor/ The Library Law*<sup>109</sup> specifies a number of volumes related to the population and hence a number of managing librarians. The law also specifies a number of

ownership of the state, issued by Parliament of Romania.

Starting with the law 112/ 1995 by the Romanian Parliament, a controverted process of property restitution began, as the state provided compensations or restitution in nature to the former owners which lost their properties in 1950s.
Law 112/1995 for the regulation of the legal situation of some buildings intended for housing, passed into the

Meaning that the former owner had received back their property in nature, not the equivalent in compensations.

The closing of the Mobile Library program allowed the demolition of their book storage and the construction of new buildings. However, since couple of years, due to problems related to the construction' reception, one of these libraries is closed to the public and works only as a book storage.

<sup>108</sup> https://bibmet.ro/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> Law no. 334/2002 the Libraries Law issued by the Romanian Parliament.

square meters of library space per capita. In Bucharest, existing libraries' surface is under 25% from the legal requirements. In Drumul Taberei district, the only two small libraries don't meet by far the required legal provisions<sup>110</sup> (Fig.56). The recorded data of public library's users (INS, 2018) shows a constant increase during the 1990s followed by a collapse in numbers towards 2006, when most of the retrocessions were effective. A revival in attendance takes place after 2009 when the existing branches were digitalized and began offering free internet connection<sup>111</sup>. However, the wide spread of internet access for individual users, contributes to a further decrease in numbers until 2018.



**Fig. 56.** Library "Mihai Eminescu" opened by the ground floor pavilion from a collective housing *bloc* with studio apartments, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2022). Photo by the current author.

Despite grim perspectives, libraries adapted, survived and some even thrived, with librarians playing a central part. Emerging from the pre-1989 context, when libraries mattered in society as keepers of common cultural goods, readers became attached to the library, developing a sort of loyalty, especially to their librarian, weaving a social network of library regulars. From roles closer to their job description, like cultural facilitator or pedagogic disseminator, librarians expanded their skills and reached out to their readers' needs for social interaction and personalized relations. Thus, recommending books in tune with readers' interests and moods while

<sup>110</sup> The existing libraries in Drumul Taberei cover about 6% of the legally required library area for its 300.000 inhabitants.

becoming trusted advisors, confidants, and even close friends, librarians acted as informal social workers and community agents, transforming their libraries into a relational device for library users, beyond the book exchange. The spatial and infrastructural resources of the library, together with their skilled relational librarians, supported activities excluded elsewhere, especially in the collective housing neighbourhoods, where they helped to maintain small communities of proximity. This relational work embodied in everyday acts, like small exchanges, gestures of care and trust, mutual support, and sharing responsibilities, transformed some branches into implicit community hubs. After the decline of the book distribution public system, after functioning for decades in the paradigm of survival and constant adaptation, libraries are by default invisible in the public narrative, marginalized in cultural policies, without a vision about their role in society and without adequate resources. The exceptional situations in which libraries become homes for their communities are the results of the initiatives and work of some collectives of librarians, who, sometimes even despite the shortages and current problems, manage to gather around them a group of library's friends.

#### The Pandemic Library – support space

In the context of lacking support, shrinking budgets and users' decline, the pandemic of 2020 was a major blow to libraries' usage. The temporary closure of the spaces and usage restrictions during the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic in Romania plunged users' frequency to an unprecedented low in 2021 (Croitoru & Becuţ Marinescu, 2021). The fieldwork research partially covered this period and recorded librarians and users reflections during the aftermath. The pandemic worked as a revealing moment and as a test for those branches where stronger links had been formed between librarians and users. In the first months of the pandemic, Bucharest branches were physically closed to the public, part of their activities moved online<sup>112</sup>. After a few months, the libraries reopened, but without granting public access inside the space, restricting book exchange only at the door. Gradually, access was allowed in stages, first bigger branches, than followed after a while by all of them. However, it will take a long time passing until the activities with the public frequency will match the pre-pandemic levels.

From the readers' perspective, the pandemic affected them differently, especially according to their age and routines of book selection. Young readers, who knew what books they wanted to borrow when they went to the library, were less distressed. For senior readers and especially for those accustomed to spend time by the bookshelves, the restrictions of entering the space and leafing books detached them from the library. Somehow the informal habit developed by librarians of recommending books to readers partially mitigated this limitation. Nevertheless, the readers who could no longer realise their habits of using the physical space of the library were strongly affected by these restrictions. For reading or study, looking for quiet time or for an

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Each of the branches has a Facebook page where they communicated their programs and activities, but also chat with the readers occasionally.

interactive space, the library was functioning as a support space, different and complementary to those at home, at school or at work.

Perhaps the most affected by the pandemic were the users who came to the library to socialize and participate beyond the book exchange. Activities in the library were suspended, as some of them moved online during the health crisis' imposed restrictions. In some branches, where explicit communities had formed around using the library space, the restrictions were a heavy blow, from which the group never recovered, as one librarian testifies:

"It was the community from around here, who were always meeting, always setting up all kinds of volunteer actions. Here it was a kind of meeting place and reading spot. They came here all the time, they were reading, talking about the next activities, this is where everything was established and from here it started. [The pandemic] finished them off. It stopped, the gang broke up" (G.J., librarian).

Thus, the presence or the absence of spatial interaction proved decisive for the formation or disintegration of communities around libraries.

At the same time, indicated by several readers and confirmed by librarians as well, the pandemic also intensified the socialization among them. Triggered by the uncertainty and anxiety of the situation, librarians and readers got closer, became confidents and "friends", opened up and allowed to become vulnerable to each other, thus adapting better to the situation. Paradoxically, the restrictions of restrained social interaction amplified the personal relationships built over time between librarians and friends of the library. Rather exceptionally though and without a systemic approach throughout the network, the creative actions of some librarians managed even to compensate the lack of physical interaction. The spatially determined library communities were able to survive despite pandemic restrictions beyond the library walls, into the virtual space. That was the case of a branch by a house with a generous courtyard for activities which entered the pandemic with a crystalized community of users, regularly engaged in the library's events. Faced with the shock of suspending physical interaction and the uncertainty regarding the future of the library programs, the librarians, together with the readers participating in the last workshops, created a WhatsApp group called "Cosbuc's Village"113. The social relations developed in the physical space of the library were thus transferred to the online environment. The children activities that normally took place weekly in the library, now happened at a daily pace in the virtual space. Their increased frequency triggered also the parents' participation into the self-organisation and content production side by side with the librarians. From an activity in which they attend, readers became contributors to a collective effort, as one librarian remembered: "we raise our children together, because it takes a village to raise a child; from the fact that we raised our children together during the pandemic more than ever, it turned out like this" (B.T.). Furthermore, the organisation of the community became explicit, as the members of the group began assuming

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>113</sup> The term 'village' comes as a reference to the name of the library which is a Romanian poet known for his writings about the countryside, which rhymes very well with the urban context of the library which is located in a traditional area of Bucharest, with small houses and courtyards.

roles and fulfilling tasks by turns, as she further describes feeling as if in a "tribe where each had some responsibilities" (B.T.). Over this background, the emotional support was no longer practiced only between readers and librarians, but also between group members, as her colleague (F.H.) recollects that "something else happened: the mothers would have a meltdown one after the other; they offered moral support to each other".

In times of crisis, the library functioned as support space for readers and librarians, even beyond the physical space. Working as an anchor in an anxious environment, the library was a safety net for a distressed community and offered a perspective to overcome the situation. They recollect that "it was our form of survival as healthy people" (B.T.). Hence, the moment of confusion and facing the unknown made visible the role of the library as a connector. Comparing the two situations, in which one group fell apart due to the pandemic, while the other one consolidated, indicates once again the critical importance of the physical space and social interaction, but also the essential role played by librarians in triggering, managing and maintaining social relations within and beyond the library. The pandemic "was a moment when we realised that we had done a good job the two previous years", observed one librarian (F.H.). Highlighted in critical situations, the cultivation of a network of personalized relationships around the library is extremely valuable, being able to extend to other areas in society, thus providing a model of functioning for urban communities, beyond the book exchange. Such bundle of relations around the libraries transformed into what Klinenberg (2020) defines as "social infrastructure" which when is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbours", and "when degraded it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves" (p.5). During the pandemic, the libraries' social role became visible and proved essential for the survival of an explicit form of community, growing into a veritable infrastructure of resilience. Although it didn't have an impact at the scale of the city, but for the small communities which were already crystalized around their library spaces, they functioned as key support structures.

#### By the bloc – 'our library'

During the field research, several typologies were evidenced among the branches of Bucharest public libraries. Their character was determined by the surrounding urban context where they were functioning: by the *house*, or by the *bloc*, in *blockhaus* or in the *park*, by the *complex* or *mobile*. With only two exceptions of libraries built as such after 1990, the neighbourhood libraries were not hosted in purpose-built buildings, but rather 'where was available'. Beyond the program dysfunctions and the insufficient coverage of the territory, this inherited peculiarity has become a local characteristic.



**Fig. 57.** Library "Nichita Stănescu" opened by the ground floor of a collective housing apartment building of a corridor boulevard, Crîngaşi, Bucharest (2022). Photo by the current author.

Relocated massively to the ground floor of the collective housing apartment buildings, starting with the 1960s, the neighbourhood libraries were inserted into the ecosystem of practices and relationships specific to life in the *bloc*. The positioning of some branches among the commercial ground floor of the corridor boulevards introduced by the *densification*, worked as an asset compared to the ones placed in pavilions, in the middle of *microraions*, resulting in an increased users' accessibility and visibility. Besides connecting into the high flow of passers-by using the boulevard, the public transport or other commercial spaces, these libraries have also joined the network of commercial actors in the area (Fig.57). Neighbours-sellers from nearby stores, banks and various shops have become readers and librarians' collaborators, engaging in mutual help when needed, up to even "promoting" the library among their clients. However, for all the libraries by the *bloc*, the relationship with the residents living above is very important. The proximity of the library to the dwelling allowed for their inclusion into the everyday practices, as one librarian recollects the familiarity towards the library of the neighbours-readers:

"There were people who used the library as something very personal. I had students or simply people from the *bloc* who, if they could, would have come to the library 24/7 because they thought: I now have a report or a paper to write and I need that book, I go down to the ground floor and get

my book from the library. As if they went to their own library and took it off the shelf" (N.D., librarian).

The neighbour-readers "called by the intercom" when needed by the librarian, developed an attachment to "our library" based on a relationships specific to collective living. Where these relationships were tight, this was also reflected in the amplitude of the library's activities.

For those libraries located behind the big boulevards, in pavilions between the blocs, their main asset is rather the access to the generous planted spaces and the potential collaboration with the community of tenants involved in their management. It's here where librarians built a close relationship with the *bloc's* administrator, with the 'cleaning lady' employed by the owners' association and with the more active groups of gardeners. Thus physical spaces around the bloc managed by tenants and librarians alike have an important role in establishing and developing a relationship among them. As one librarian (B.C.) testifies how the informal bench in front of the library adjacent to the entrance to the bloc attracted both readers and neighbours: "I was never alone in the summer. All the ladies from the bloc used to come and sit here." Furthermore, as the garden in front of the library was "looking pretty bad", but also in need for space to expand activities outside of the rather small library, the librarian, together with volunteers, started to take care of the bloc's garden. As dwellers also took care of their side of the garden, the relations among them and the library grew, exchanging seeds, tools and resources, engaging in mutual help and collaboration. Such overlapping between the library program and the transformation, use and organisation of the generous spaces in proximity, made the bloc libraries to work as hybrid spaces, where the library takes part in the ecosystem of living spaces. As most libraries in the network are now by the bloc, this specific character becomes a practice shared and recognized by most of the librarians and users. Creating and maintaining personalized relationships, based on mutual help and in part triggered by the collaborative care for the in between spaces, the libraries by the bloc became frameworks where latent commoning relations begin to activate, becoming visible and turning explicit into forming local communities.

The library users – caring friends for their community hubs

One of the first aspects highlighted in the field research was the nature of the relationship between readers and librarians, and by extension between them and the library. Based on the informal practices of book recommendations, triggered by the material needs of the library and by the socialization needs of the readers, this relationship sometimes transcends the formal and impersonal framework of the institution. Especially from the readers' perspective, the relationship can become extremely close, even one of friendship. References to librarians as "friends", "dear friends", "my friends, the librarians", "a close friend", "a dear friend", "an angel" appears often in the discussions with the readers. At the same time, the relationship is mutual, also librarians developing personal relations with the readers. From library users, the readers are thus becoming "library's friends". The openness that the librarian shows towards users, a friendly, smiling attitude,

facilitates, according to some readers, this transition from the role of user to that of friend. Furthermore, the librarian can become a confidant for the library friends, someone who listens and offers support, as one reader testifies: "maybe, simply because they listened to me, at a time when I needed someone to listen to me, just to tell them that I feel very tired" (J.D). At other times, librarians offer career and education advice to these friends, but also receiving advice, with another reader describing their relationship as "one-to-one" (F.R.) For some friends of the library, the relationship with the librarian goes beyond the physical space of the library, going out together, doing sports or visiting each other at home. "I used to go to her house, that means friendship", says the reader (F.R.). Sometimes, a strong "soul connection" grows between them, so strong that when the librarian gets transferred, very often the friends of the library are following the librarian to the new branch, as a reader (C.P.) coming from the other side of the city for "her librarian" confessed: "What can you do? You go after a pedicurist, after a doctor. You also go after a librarian, because she gives you [relief] for the soul." Hence, some readers do not enter just into an abstract relationship with the library, but into a personal relationship with the librarians, often becoming one of friendship. Readers thus become "house regulars", a kind of "friends of the library", which grow attached to their librarian, adopting the library.

The closeness between the librarians and their friends manifests as an attitude of care towards the well-being of the libraries. The users are getting involved in the spatial transformation and organisation of its activities, always ready to help, but also acting out of a need to participate, as a librarian (H.R.) recollects the motivation and effects of such practices: "They were very involved. They wanted and liked to give us a helping hand. It also happens nowadays, obviously and it's like a friendship between us". Readers donate funds, books, furniture or toys for the arrangement of the library spaces. Moreover, as many librarians recollect, they were contributing to the protocol aspect of events, such as one observed: "they enjoyed contributing to those book launches, like the protocol, with homemade cake. This really created a home like atmosphere" (N.D.). The library became a personal space, where the users felt at home. Thus, the readers transformed into friends of the library were becoming articulated in an informal "support group" of the library. By answering to the material needs of the always struggling library, they were also contributing to the creation of an atmosphere of mutual help, collaboration and solidarity which in time, grew in some branches as a practice of using the library (Fig.58). As one librarian remembers how this caring attitude of a group of neighbours-readers evolved and consolidated over time. From sharing food, to helping around the courtyard, clearing the snow and setting up some benches outside, the users became involved in arranging the library garden. The practice of taking care of the library was extended and passed on to the following generations, as one librarian looks back:

"They came to borrow books and said: *if you ever need me, you can count on me*. Some of them are readers even today, others have their children as readers and I even have pictures from the time when we were trying to improvise some activities with them" (B.E.).

The activities were becoming diversified beyond the book exchange, involving users of different ages in caring for the library space, as "in a family".



**Fig. 58.** Collective action co-organised by the current author of repairing and expanding the "Dimitrie Cantemir" library's garden furniture, with donated materials and voluntary work by librarians, readers and students, Bucharest, 2023. Photo by the current author.

The library also facilitates friendships between readers, by co-opting them in the activities and workshops of the library, coagulating them around their interest in books and socializing. Readers don't visit the library exclusively for books, but also for socializing, for meeting those with similar interests. "A lot of people don't necessarily come for, I don't know, the latest edition of some book, but they do come for the connection they find here, I mean they come for the communication, to be a part of this community" confessed a reader (F.R.). Libraries are organizing a series of actions and events, some of which are coordinated institutionally, at the network level, while others are developed locally, at the level of each branch. Part of the branch activities are developed at the initiative of the library's friends. They state that they want to support these workshops both for themselves and for the "community", that they want to do something for others, indicating as the triggers that push them to get involved in the social life of the library the need for community, the need to do something together, the need to be with others who have similar interests, the need to diversify and support their children education who can learn by practice the social life. Moreover, gathered around the common interest in books and participating in library activities, friendships develop and transcend the library sphere, with readers organizing themselves in reading circles, go out at the gym "in a kind of sisterhood" (F.R.), while finding their best friends by using the library. Also, kindergartens, schools, high schools or other civic partners in the area intersect in the library and act as part of the proximity communities.

The proximity of the readers to the library determines their symbolic appropriation of the space, which becomes "ours" for its users. This approach contributes to the articulation of a more united community of friends getting closer to library programs. In the same time, such communities are more resistant to change, being dependant on the person of the librarian which keeps the relationship active. Despite these limitations, in a city where space based isolation of various groups is increasing, the library manifests itself as an instrument of cohesion, as a community pole that brings together people of different social conditions. Libraries remain among the few public spaces that can coagulate and host diverse urban communities. In some situations, they manage to gather around an explicit community of friends who are sharing similar interest and participate together into the programing and wellbeing of their space. Thus, neighbourhood libraries fulfil the "need of community" by being accessible places in the proximity where residents can participate, contribute and be together with others differently than in the spaces dominated by consumption. The libraries become truly communities' hubs.

### Our Library

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The tram rocked her gently as she travelled to the hospital with food for her grandson. Every day, after closing the library, she was going out from the old streets with small houses to the wide boulevard where the station was. There were rumours that these streets will be demolished soon and they have to move. "Where will I go with all my books?" Just the thought of it lowered her shoulders like from an invisible weight. She was so tired. It was the winter 1986, but her library still didn't have central heating. Every morning she had to carry the wood from the backyard and make the fire in the stove. The neighbours helped her sometimes, but nevertheless, it was a hard job for a librarian. It was guite dark, always cold and often humid inside. And yet, she had to smile, to be nice and welcoming, to arrange the books, keep the records and improvise some activities for the kids out on the street, trying to keep up a jolly atmosphere. She was staring at her reflection on the tram window. Over her face there were growing rows of almost finished white blocs interrupted from time to time by broad intersections. On their ground floors, large windows let you see the welcoming, bright spaces that were waiting to host the new shops, restaurants or post offices. She could only dream to have such a space for her readers. "But why not?" The tram braked suddenly and everyone piled up in front while the conductor was shouting through the window. "What about trying something more daring for once?" She will go directly for an audience to the mayor. She heard he is a fellow countryman of hers. Maybe he can spare a space for her library by the new blocs.

At the base of a huge bloc of studios from a collective housing district, in an attached ground floor pavilion shared with an Optical workshop, there is a neighbourhood library. It's opened here since the construction of the bloc. From the outside, among the bushes and trees leaning up to the window, the library welcomes the readers with a big window shop without bars, full of posters, drawings made by children and diverse announcements. Through them you can see a rather small space, but lively and colourful. On the side wall, a light box officially announces the program of "Bucharest Metropolitan Library", but the attention is drawn by a red graffiti face, signed and completed with the urge "Read!" written directly on the white, recent thermal insulation. From the door you can see the space at a glance. The library has a single room, wall-to-wall with books, with an open space for activities in the middle. There are books everywhere, books on the walls, on the tables, on the chairs. All kinds of skilful origami are hanging from strings, brightly coloured pillows lying on the floor. A reader's remark from another branch also fits here: "it's an open space, so it opens relationships, too" (J.D.). From behind the reception desk the librarian (S.B.) tells us that she recently moved here and at first, the residents, probably used to temporary situations, received her more cautiously, with a: "have you come to stay or are you going to leave?" For some of them, everything that happens in the neighbourhood "considers as it's theirs too", like the fate of the library they refer to as "our library". But the librarian stayed, requested from the management the rearranging of the space, diversified the activities and opened up the library to new readers. One day a lady came in and asked her: "do you need help?" This is how she became even closer to some readers who describe her as "a dear friend". Together they organized community events, walks through the district, workshops with children. "Now the people in the neighbourhood really know me, they greet me on the street" and as the library door is next to the stairs of the bloc "the neighbour comes in to leave their keys, many people pass by the window, they wave at me, the children drag their mothers in here because I'm playing with them." As the librarian (S.B.) confess, "the library is totally different from other spaces where things are happening in the neighbourhood", without being anymore the place where "you come, take the book, be quiet and leave." Here children come after school, or wait for their parents who have gone to the market, do their homework or are keeping busy working at their school projects. Such library by the bloc actually functions as an implicit community centre, fulfilling the need of residents of all ages for accessible spaces in proximity, where they can participate, contribute and simply be together other than in spaces dominated by consumption. The library thus becomes a place where social relationships are formed and maintained, where the attachment to the neighbourhood is manifested and where community membership is coagulated.

#### Many librarians agree that:

"[Before 1989] the library was culturally perceived. We organized book launches all the time. We had relationships and partnerships with the writers. Now, in the library we don't just do book launches. Now we do all kinds of activities" (N.D., librarian).

This perception is supported by the quite rare appearances of libraries in the movies of the time. Libraries' scenes contains rather clichéd activities, in which librarians were filling out forms behind their piled up desks, readers were borrowing books needed for school or professional courses and authors were meeting with readers and signing books. However, there are also some scenes which don't entirely fit

such generic image. In a preview to the personalized relations among librarians and readers, much more widespread these days, in the film *Tehnică nouă*, oameni culți/ New technique, educated people (1963), directed by Alexandru Sîrbu, workers are referring to the factory librarian as a "friend" who knows their preferences and recommends them books. Such scenes are completed by few mentions and glimpses in movies of the "neighbourhood libraries" as a part the equipment of collective living districts. However brief, these mentions points even unintentionally towards the existence of a legacy of the library as a social and community space, which after the 1990s developed and became an important feature among some library branches in the city.

They are all just eyes and ears as she tells them about what they have to do today. She wrote on the WhatsApp group that she would like to arrange the little garden in the back of the library, to go out with the activities for children. And many parents responded and wanted to help. Everyone contributed with what they could. One got hold of a wooden pallet, another spared some paint and another knew a bit of carpentry. Someone brought some gardening tools and a few pairs of gloves patterned with little flowers. They knew each other as they all live in the neighbourhood and their children go to the same school. And now they attend the same library where they used to go to when they were the same age. They were part of the "support collective" as it was called back then. There are even some pictures from that time hanging in the hall. "Look how young we were!" Materials were not as cool as they are now. More like paper, glue and scissors. But they came often to the library after classes, threw their schoolbags into a big pile and hung out, still in their school uniforms. The parents were OK to have them occupied while they were still at work and the librarian would let them do what they pleased and even invent all sorts of games together. They became regulars, up until readers began asking the librarian if they are her kids. "No, they are not mine, they're the children of the library!" The noise of the drill covers the small conversations and the party music coming from the neighbours, as they need to finish repairing the wooden benches in the garden by lunch.

In an investigation show made by Romanian Television entitled Restituiri mult așteptate la biblioteca publică/ Long awaited returns at the public library (1981) are presented in an extremely intrusive manner, dotted by veiled threats, the "ingenious" ways in which readers "take advantage" and borrows books, vinyl, slides from the public library without

returning them in order to build their personal libraries. However, lost among the reporter's inquisitorial tone, the library director of the era mentions between the lines of a wooden tongue the "effective support" given by the majority of "responsible" readers in a number of areas of librarians' work. Also, another interviewed librarian mentions the informal practice of retaining books for special readers. These references of hacking and mutual informality are matching the other, unseen face of users' practices in supporting the libraries, always in need during those times, and in general, along its evolution. Regardless of the historical contexts they went through, public libraries in Bucharest have always suffered from material needs. Paradoxically, it was precisely this permanent precariousness that generated solidarity, support and participation from the 'friends of the library'. This practice has become inscribed in the institutional memory, tacitly adopted by librarians and users as a recurring habit. Not only basic material needs pushed those around the library to participate and contribute, but also more immaterial demands. As one librarian understands readers' needs as they are actually looking for "the idea of community. The pleasure they feel. People want to be helpful and to share. It's somehow, a simply human need. They feel valued" (B.T.). Over time, depending on the local context, librarians dedication and users' specific needs, such practices diversified and included other aspects of some libraries' functioning, from programing, to donations and spatial arrangements. Step by step, the cultivation of common interests, the participation in similar activities and the constant communication triggered belonging and attachment to the library space and towards the group. "It was just like a snowball", observed a librarian (F.H.) the process which led to the formation of a community around the library. She further confess:

"They knew each other at one point. They began to coagulate. And they sometimes continued their activities in the parks, in the same groups, with their children" (F.H., librarian). The library thus remains among the few public institutions which encourages and allows users participation and contributions, as a hybrid space that has the ability to articulate authentic communities.

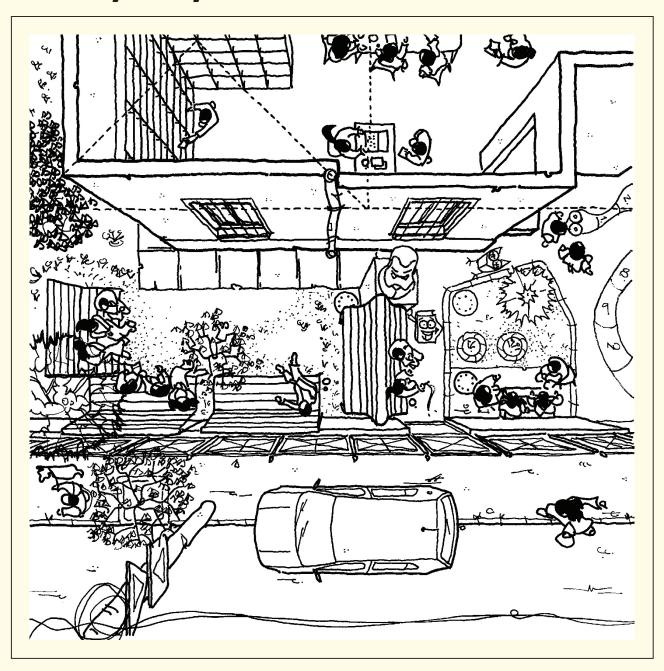
Seen from the perspective of a contemporary public service, the library requires being generic, efficient and accessible. The personalization of relationships, the emotional work of librarians, the appropriation and the opening of the governance to the users, the informal practices and spatial socialization can contradict systemic approaches. Quantitative evaluations and reflexes of network scaling up are nevertheless specific to public library

### **ISTORIES**

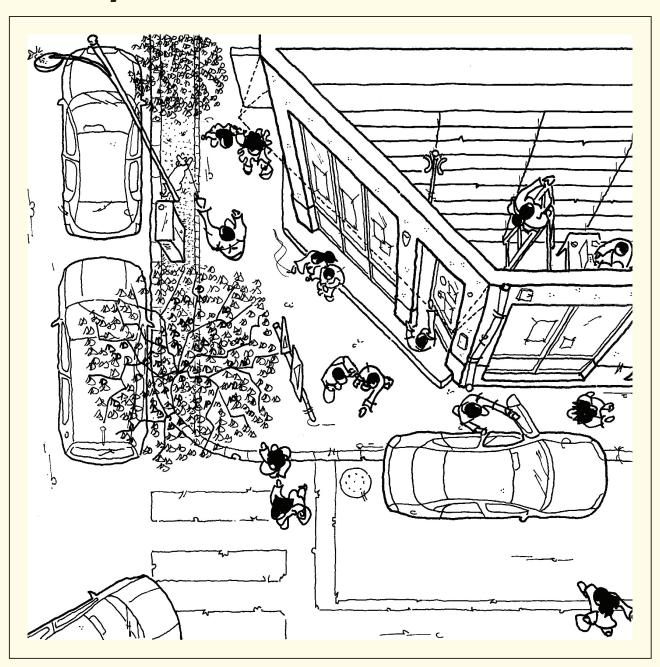
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programs. But, in a local context dominated by the narratives of individual solutions, complemented by public policies of austerity, faced with the gradual disappearance of community spaces, precisely this quasi-informal-library function as a versatile social infrastructure. Its informality is therefore best suited to the multiple roles needed to fill in the local context. Furthermore, the library becomes a laboratory space that allows to be shaped by the projections and needs of its users, friends and neighbours, which don't find so many opportunities and spaces in the city which have the capacity to bring them together. At the same time, recognizing and valuing the contribution of readers does not justify the continued operation of libraries on the edge of survival. Even in the scenario of ensuring funding according to real needs, the library can make room and invite the participation of readers in the life of the branch. This process of openness and inclusion can hybridize the program, where systemic tools and procedures articulates with approaches more creative, adapted to the local context, specific to the character of each space. Thus, by involving those who use it, "our library" contributes to increase the social resilience and public participation, becoming at the same time an aggregator and a house of communities.

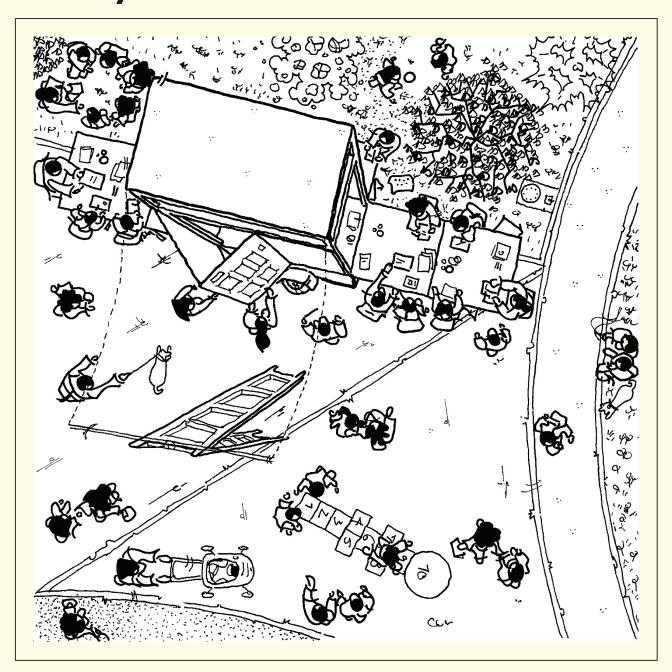
## Library - By the House



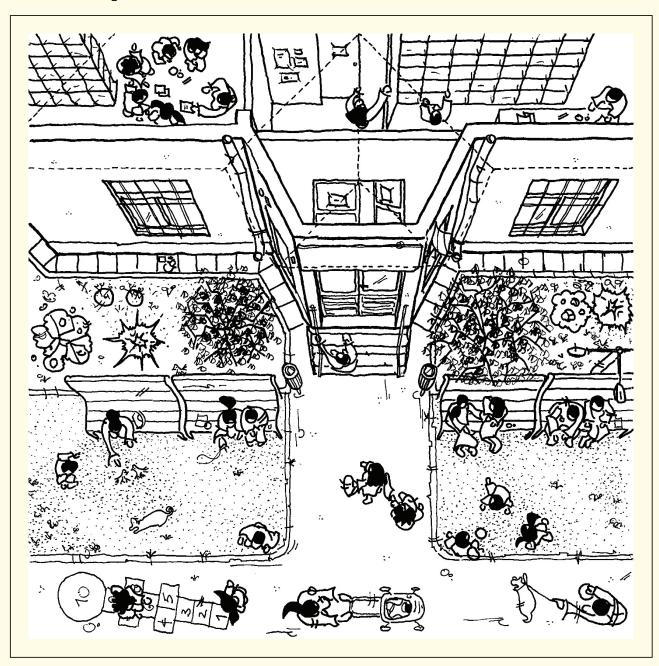
# Library - in Blockhaus



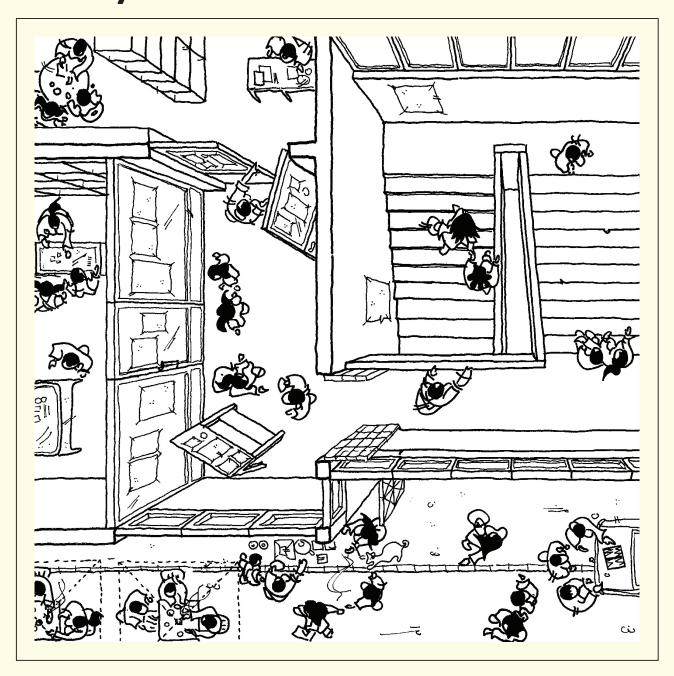
### Library - Mobile



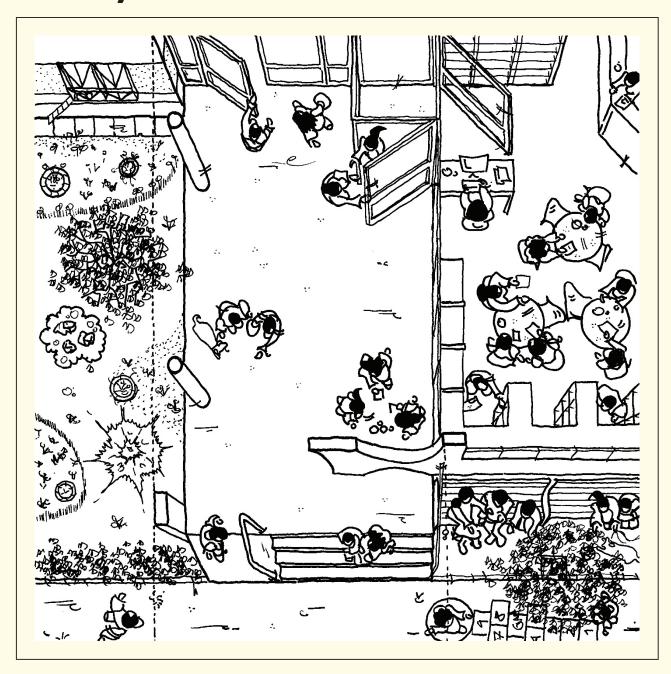
### Library - in Park



# Library - Commercial Centre

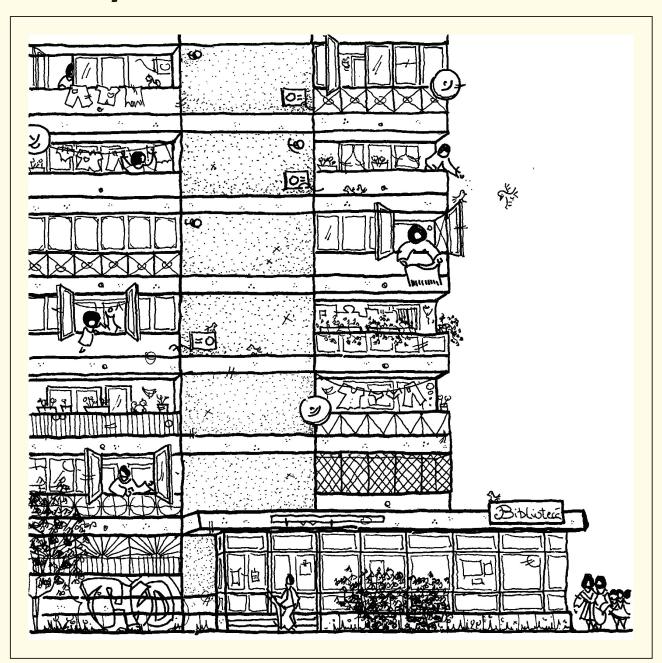


# Library - in Bloc



### Library - in Bloc

COVER



#### 4.5. OPEN Garage: Research and Activation

Opening a Garage – an ephemeral manifesto

On the ground floor of a *bloc* of flats in the Drumul Taberei district, I started the OPEN garage project<sup>114</sup>. The approach has its roots in studioBASAR practice referencing the community engagement and educational projects developed in the past years<sup>115</sup>. In the same time, the initial impulse came from the unexpected developments triggered by the pandemic context. Until the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic in Romania, the fieldwork for this research was planned to include the participatory design of the garden of a library in the Timpuri Noi collective housing district of Bucharest<sup>116</sup>. As the pandemic introduced drastic restrictions to the functioning of public libraries in Bucharest the project was cancelled. Thus, after a period of adjustments and failed attempts, I initiated a project-space, which in the same time enacted a real situation for the research, in which I could have more control over its course and outcomes. Therefore, the OPEN Garage project worked at the beginning as a substitute related to the previous fieldwork planning.

Without being born and raised in Drumul Taberei, I was familiar with the district as I used to come here when I was a child to visit my grandparents, uncles and aunts who used to live close by in the same area. Later, when I was a student, I stayed in my grandparents' apartment for a while. Hence, the area was for me perhaps the most familiar district of the city. This was the place where I had some memories, I've made a few acquaintances and over time I acquired several everyday landmarks. So, the decision to choose this neighbourhood for the field research came naturally. Moreover, there are a series of apartment buildings that have at their ground floor garage spaces which have been transformed by their owners into commercial spaces and placed in direct relation to the street. Such spaces were ideal for piloting a space opened towards the community. In the same time, the garages in the area were somewhat more affordable to rent than a space somewhere further towards the city centre. Thus, continuing professional directions that grew and crystalized over time, forced by unexpected circumstances, making intuitive decisions based on personal affinities, but opportunistically adjusting to research needs and possibilities, I found a garage in the neighbourhood (Fig.59). Next, the research-driven undertake developed into the activation project of OPEN Garage which in time became an ephemeral manifesto, articulating informal spatial practices' value for the communities.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>114</sup> The renting of the space started in November 2020 and slowly evolved by testing different programs until becoming the OPEN Garage project since the application for funds in May 2021.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> Projects like "City School" (2015-2017), "Tei Community Centre" (2017) or "The Trailer for Research and Activation" (2016) initiated by studioBASAR worked as precedents for the OPEN Garage project, more on <a href="http://www.studiobasar.ro/">http://www.studiobasar.ro/</a>
The inter/LAB project mentioned in the Methodological Framework chapter.



Fig. 59. Garage for rent in Buclă area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

#### OPEN Garage – prototyping a community equipment

Opening a garage to host other functions beyond car parking was not necessarily a new practice in the area. Many other garages have been transformed by their owners into commercial spaces or small services. Inspired into continuing such repurposing and creative practice, I rented a garage from a private owner. At the beginning, I paid the rent from my PhD research grant. I managed to agree with the garage owner for a moderate rent, due to the non-commercial nature of the activities. In general, such garages set up to host commercial or service spaces are more expensive to rent. At the same time, unfinished garages are also in high demand, either by local residents living in blocs without garages, or even living in other districts. Garages are mainly sought to house cars or motorcycles, but also for the possibility to thinker about and use the extra space for storage. Over time, I applied for various research grants, from which we covered the rent of the space. Moreover, the project received two research awards<sup>117</sup> that the project team also donated towards the rent.

Located on an informal pedestrian route inside microraion 7, or Bucla, which connects local destinations, such as transport hubs, the food market, the dispensary and the school, the garage already had a history of alternative uses. The former garage hosted in the past years a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>117</sup> The Garaj DESCHIS/ OPEN Garage project received the prize of the section "Research through architecture / architecture and experiment" at Bucharest Annual 2023 and the prize offered by Arhitectura magazine within the National Biennial of Architecture 2023.

herbalist shop, a tailor's workshop and even a handmade store. Thus, the place was already present on the residents' map of active garages in the area. Moreover, the garage was prepared to host a wide range of activities. The original wooden exterior doors were replaced with metallic ones, which could also function as signposts and paired by double glazed windows and doors, allowing its use as a street front space. Furthermore, the interior concrete walls and the apparent sanitary pipes were covered with plasterboards and the floor was tiled. But perhaps the most important upgrade was the connection to the sewage system which completed the original sink which all garages had since their construction, thus resulting in a space equipped with a fully functional bathroom. This improvement greatly opened up the possibilities of using the space. Furthermore, the time spent within the space could be extended. Therefore the potential of hosting public activities was greatly increased. In accordance to its property status, the water and electricity utilities of the garage were completely separated from the apartment with which it was initially bounded. The garage was functioning as an autonomous space. However, the apartments and other garages physical proximity, the daily interactions generated by the collective use of adjacent spaces, the inherited or newly developed neighbourhood exchanges that pass through the space, kept the garage anchored in an invisible network of local practices, everyday customs and neighbourly relationships. In the context of a district suffering from an inherited lack of social infrastructure, worsened by the constant enclosure of community spaces and facing the constant threat of the occupation of un-built spaces, the project-space was initiated rather as a 'discreet' construction, blending in the existing ecosystem of informal local practices. The restrained approach was initially manifested at the level of spatial presence. By adopting elements previously used to signal its public function, such as mobile wooden billboard for announcements, and even borrowing the name of the project from the "OPEN" announcement kept on the window frame, the approach aimed to continue the previous functions, without being too much disruptive and intruding. Further, the activities started gradually, with a low intensity, carefully testing and following the users' reactions, considering and adapting their wishes and needs, rather than imposing. For example, this approach triggered the emphasis on comics from the library collection and the development of the exhibition section related to the memory of the neighbourhood, these being among the activities best received by users. In the same time, while integrating within the local practice of re-functionalizing the garages, the content of its activation was however quite different, but still related with the hobbies, commercial or small services they are usually hosting. Through cultural and educational activities, by addressing the local memory and engaging in placebased research, the project-space attempted to spatialize an answer to the scarcity of such spaces in the area. The OPEN Garage aimed to be an "extra room", both for the residents in the proximity and also for active field researchers (Fig.60). Referencing surplus spaces of the apartments creatively repurposed by their tenants, or the nodes of social interaction grown around opened to the public garages, the activities hosted in the space aimed to address the community. In the same time, in the context of misplaced administration' interventions guided by esthetical and 'civilizing'

impulses, the project seek to enact a research-driven proposition of valorising local informal practices. Through field research and applied education, the exploration of the *Bucla* sought to map, highlight, articulate and bring evidence about the role and the potential of residents' more or less collective transformations and daily uses of the shared infrastructure of the district. Therefore, OPEN Garage attempted to be a research-driven prototype for a community equipment situated in the context of post-socialist collective housing neighbourhoods. It had two interdependent components: the research phase, focusing on supporting informal practices and a spatial activation phase, developed through cultural and educational activities. But all these started with a library.

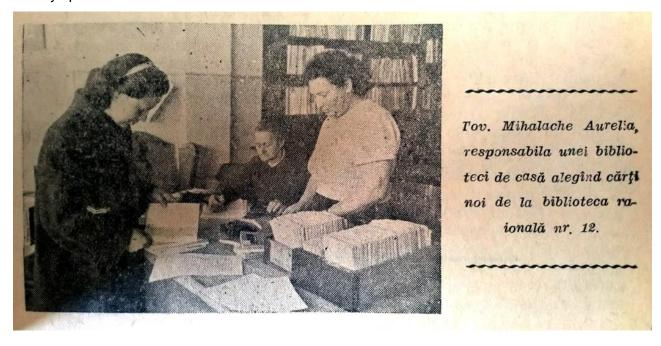


Fig. 60. OPEN Garage, a research lab and a community space in *Buclă* area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2022). Photo by the current author.

### Garage Library – relational device

The first public program tested by the garage was an informal library. The initial motivation came from the need to restart the research field abandoned due to the pandemic, but without moving to a completely new topic. Thus, the garage offered me the opportunity to initiate a library situation that I could research from within as well, as a self-initiated practice. But the goals of the informal Garage Library were twofold: first, to advocate, even on an extra-small scale, for 1:1 solutions for the libraries' shrinkage in the city, and second, to participate somehow in the neighbourhood network through a relational device. Setting up a book exchange aimed to address the area's weak coverage by the library network. The two existing libraries in the district don't meet

by far the legal provisions regarding the size related to the number of inhabitants 118 and are out of reach for many of the residents. From the Buclă, on a radius of 1km there is no public library or other institution suited for the distribution of culture and education. Moreover, during the 1990s, the neighbourhood lost one of its three libraries 119 without another branch taking its place in following years. In the absence of proximity branches, the Buclă area was served in the past by the network of Bibliobuz/ Bibliobus but this program was stopped as well during the early 1990s. All these alternative libraries precedents worked as inspiration for acting in a crisis situation. Such was the historical Biblioteci de Casă/ Home Libraries program, which involved volunteers taking in charge small collections of books and further distributing them from their homes to their neighbours, which worked as a direct reference for the Garage Library (Fig.61). Therefore, I took out in front of the garage few boxes with my children's books, provoking the residents into borrowing and exchange (see Tools). Because, besides addressing the problem of books' accessibility in the area, the library by the garage worked as an attempt of joining in the neighbourly relationships and local networks. Without being a resident of the area, I sought to establish through the informal library some connections and relationships beyond the spontaneous contacts of using garages and nearby spaces.



**Fig. 61.** The program of *Biblioteci de Casă/ Home Libraries* run by volunteers which distributed library's books from their home to the readers, in *Călăuza Bibliotecarului 4*/1954, courtesy of *Biblioteca Metropolitană București (BMB)*. Scan by the current author.

The library grew at the beginning as a collection for children and youth. Parents, grandparents, kids and teenagers from the *bloc*, or just living nearby and passing everyday by the garage on their way to school, started to borrow books. Over the initial personal contributions, also book donations from the lending residents began to add up. They felt the need to somehow

<sup>118</sup> The existing libraries in Drumul Taberei cover about 6% of the legally required library area for its 300.000 inhabitants.

Two of them are still open today, as one of the branches was closed during unclear privatization of its space during the 2000s.

contribute to the collection growing and not just benefiting from it. Not only books were donated, but also board games, toys, small furniture or various objects for the exhibitions organised at the garage. The word spread from person to person and with the help of the Facebook page, more residents from other areas of the district found out about the library. So, the library began to receive more new books, such as the generous donation from an author of children's books that lives in the area. The visibility of the process attracted more supporters of the cause, either locals, book lovers, or both. This contributed to further receiving new books' donations even from a publishing house<sup>120</sup>. Moreover, the donations were based following the participatory selection of the titles involving few regular readers, which choose their favourite titles from the publisher' list. Thus, the informal library became a community library, a place frequented not only by readers, but by users, who could participate, contribute and support the process, acquiring the capacity to influence some aspects of its development. However, their numbers were never high, but rather modest, corresponding to the size of the space, of the book collection and its activities, amounting to few exchanges per week (Fig.62).



Fig. 62. Garage Library made up of donations and based on trust and exchange. Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>120</sup> Arthur Publishing House donated new books for children and youth.

Moreover, the promise of a network was never fully accomplished. Except when there were already established relationships preceding the usage of the garage, new relationships among users were rare. With the notable exception of the organisation of a series of workshops associated with the library, the relationships remained rather filtered through me as the librarian and without gaining autonomy outside the library. The causes of this situation were rooted in internal limitations, such as the daily schedule or the scarce resources, but were influenced by external ones, like the various pandemic restrictions. Many of the users have complained over time about the lack of predictability of the library program. "Oh, I finally found you! I've kept passing by and it was always closed!" was a frequent conversation starter. Expecting a more reliable program similar to an institution, culminated with a moment when a reader upset that I was late for the program, she posted on her Facebook page a picture with the garage doors shut commenting: "Closed Garage!". The library program scheduled suffered from the project's fragile organisation, as I was being the only person who took care of the library, without living in the area and spending a lot of time traveling. In addition, any problem or unexpected situation affecting my daily program had direct consequences on the library functioning hours. Over time, I set up a schedule with fixed days and opening hours intervals which was posted on the Facebook page. But even this way of communication did not cover all categories of visitors and their daily routines. However, with the more regular users I have started a personalized communication, based on Facebook chat messages and phone calls. So, before bringing the books, they began to contact me and made sure I am by the garage. Furthermore, some of the readers were eager to have a more formalized system of loaning, based on personal records and reminders of their expiration dates. But the limited time resources prevented me to start such formalization, preferring to keep the book lending rather informal. However precarious and limited, the library function remained based on relationships, reciprocity, volunteering and mutualisation. These approaches, decisions and limitations may have prevented some of the readers from using the library more frequently. One of the consequences was a very low return rate, as many of the borrowed books were never returned<sup>121</sup>. On one hand, as one donor said, this was a good way of "distributing books" to readers who could appreciate them, but on another hand, the low frequency of users contributed to preventing the crystallization of a sustainable network of users. On a different note, external factors such as the pandemic had a strong impact beyond anyone's control, affecting readers' patterns of borrowing, contributing and relating. During the intense moments of social anxiety and spatial immobility of the lockdowns I experienced an intensification of borrowing, but with limited socialisation attached to it. However, in the post-pandemic period I noticed a decrease in the number of users, but compensated by more qualitative interactions. Thus, many regular readers dropped by to say hello, have a chat, discuss the latest news, creating a social space based on the book exchange.

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 $<sup>^{121}</sup>$  I appreciate the return rate at about 50%.

Despite these limitations, difficulties and shortcomings, the partial functioning of the microlibrary by the garage reflected the potential of this self-initiated program to function as a resource for the emerging local community. Shared cultural goods, such as books, functioned not only as a support for knowledge transfer, but also joined the already existing ecosystem of latent practices of living together. Based on human relationships and maintained through everyday rituals, rather than triggered by internalized values and without being explicitly adopted by an organised group, sometimes driven by basic needs, such as books' affordability or spatial proximity, the library allowed and provoked its users into socialized exchanges, mutual aid and solidarity. There were however some exceptions to the patterns of implicit participation, with parents rather performing the practice of sharing, even if they had enough books at home, just to pedagogically expose their children to habits of sharing, donating and contributing. Therefore, the informal library illustrate, even if within limits, that it can shelter incipient commoning processes. Nonetheless, in the current formula and within the local context, such undertake is not sustainable over medium and long term and its impact is quite limited, working rather as a tool of drawing attention to a cause, while tracing future potential, than offering a solution ready to be applied and replicated. At the same time, scaling up and replication impulses can annihilate precisely those qualities which come from the informal, discreet and implicit patterns of the everyday habits. Once institutionalised, purposively performed and regulated they risk of becoming standardised mechanisms, thus leaving open the question about their real potential to address collective living at scale.

### Garage Workshops – active relationship

As the Library evolved by working on trust and encouraging the users' participation, locals borrowed, contributed, donated and began to get used with the library. From a weekend activity of doing homework in the garage with my children, I develop a series of structured workshops inviting children which were borrowing books and were living in the *bloc* or nearby in the district. The methods used were developed in previous projects and have been adapted to their age, number and participants' dynamic. The educational activities were thought as an applied version of some of the more popular books from the library. In the same time, the workshops began to focus on the participants' representations of the area around the garage. Therefore, through these workshops, the early mapping actions of existing informal practices from the *Buclă* area began.

The first "City Workshops" from the series were rather applied conversations around the theme of living together<sup>122</sup>. Starting from the hypothesis of founding a new city, the exercise illustrates different urban processes: relations among inhabitants, resources management and group's organisation. In the same time, the participants also took part in the workshops' management, parents bringing cookies, while suggesting the direction of the follow-up activities. Beyond the immediate products - diagrams of the envisioned settlements - the participants were able to practice collaboration and negotiation, as well as representation and communication. In the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>122</sup> The workshop took place during several weekends, between November 2020 and May 2021.

following meetings, we went one step further from the generic exercise of creating an ideal city, to the participatory mapping of Drumul Taberei neighbourhood, which was planned as an ideal city as well. Familiar with the *Buclă* area, the participants pinned down on the map their own landmarks, while representing them hands-on. Besides the usual points, such as the school or the stores, the children's landmarks included mostly parks and green spaces, playgrounds and sports fields. Also the OPEN Garage was included in the short list of the area's landmarks seen through the eyes of children. Furthermore, through collages and scale models made from recycled materials, they formulated proposals for improvements and extensions of these spaces (Fig.63). The proposals for unused green spaces were the most numerous, including arranging gardens by the *blocs* or even by testing a mobile garden, which you can take with you "in a shopping cart, like the one grandma uses at the market". The sessions activated the garage, being visible from the street and enlivening the place, to the appreciation of some participants' parents, as one (P.R.) testified in a radio interview about the actions by the OPEN Garage: "I liked it. I thought is something new, there were activities for kids, workshops. Most garages are just for parking and somehow with no future. No one really comes to do something with them. I don't like them to remain so ugly."



**Fig. 63.** City Workshops in the garage which library readers participated in hands-on exercises of urban analysis and planning. Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

Over time, due to the limited space of the garage, the activities migrated outside in the space in front of the garage. Here, however, they were not well received by all the neighbours. Due to the proximity of the windows of the apartments above, some of the tenants were disturbed by the noise of children workshops. Few even resorted to extreme gestures, such as pre-emptive water throwing to discourage unwanted activities taking place "under their window". Such practices appear frequently in the memories of the residents who grew up in the area, as being practiced by adults upset by the excessive increase of the use of informal spaces too close to their windows. Thus, some of the children chased away during their childhood became adults which continue such aggressive and violent practices. They are seeking for "quietness", like in a re-enactment scene from the movie *Noi unde de jucăm?*/ *Where are we playing?* (1968), directed by Florica Holban, where a whole series of methods, from yelling, cutting the ball or throwing water, were illustrating some residents tactics to remove the "continuous noise" of children's play.

Therefore, constrained by the dimensions of the garage interior space and driven away by the tensions of using the space in front, I organized several applied workshops in other spaces near the garage. Their themes evolved, from imagining the spaces, to the inventory of their current and possible uses, up to concrete interventions in the studied spaces. As there is no garden by the garage, we travelled nearby and we have been well received by several ladies gardeners across the street where we developed the "Gardening Workshops". We planted a few primroses, tulip bulbs, we learned how to dig the roses and we watered them, but not too hard because the rain started. "Let it rain, as it does them good", the gardeners explained to the participating kids, among other tips of caring for the plants. The children were experiencing perhaps for the first time planting during these live gardening sessions. As we noticed in the area that several gardens also have an artistic component, we came with a mobile workshop installation for bricolage in which children produced on the spot a kind of "garden dwarfs" which blend in to animate the gardens (see Tools). Moreover, these actions aimed to go beyond the ecological education and spatial activation and engaged into participant observation of the informal gardening practices. Thus, the educational activities were an opportunity for informal discussions and observing the gardening practices of the residents (Fig.64).



Fig. 64. Gardening Workshops in which library readers and local gardeners participated in actions of planting the gardens by the bloc in the Buclă, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

While the research component of the project was growing by defining its themes and expanding its methods, the project was opened up to a wider group of researchers and activators and applied for a financing that allowed us to develop the project's activities<sup>123</sup>. Teaming up with an interdisciplinary team<sup>124</sup>, the research of the area and the spatial activation expanded and began to work together in a more structured approach. After successfully testing the organisation of activities outside the garage, we gained confidence and addressed a wider audience. For six consecutive weeks, a series of "Storytelling Workshops" 125 tested different approaches of transferring stories from the library into hands-on storytelling<sup>126</sup>. The materials used for DIY were recycled or collected from the area, aiming to familiarize the participants with creative recycling. The workshops took place within a playground nearby the garage, inviting children and parents to join the activities. By choosing this location, we aimed to export the methods and the activities

<sup>123</sup> Between May and October 2021, the project was supported by the Romanian Order of Architects through the Architecture Stamp program. Partners: Landscape Association of Romania, Bucharest Branch (ASoP), University of Agronomical Sciences and Veterinary Medicine (USAMV), Faculty of Political Science, National School of Political Studies and Administration (SNSPA), VIRA Association, Salonul de Proiecte, City Hall Sector 6 through European Cultural Centre Sector 6. Media Partner: Zeppelin.

Project Coordinator: Alex Axinte; Associated Researchers: Diana Culescu (landscape designer), Bogdan lancu (anthropologist), Ioana Irinciuc (librarian), Anca Nită (sociologist), Ileana Szasz (anthropologis/ director), Iris Serban (sociologist), Ioana Tudora (architect); Volunteers: Mihaela Stoean, Ioana Iordache, Irina Botezatu.

125 The workshops took place during several week days, between June and August 2021.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>126</sup> Children Workshop Coordinator: Ioana Irinciuc.

started in the previous sessions by the garage and nearby gardens. Using folding tables and chairs, the workshops also aimed to illustrate and practice alternative uses for the local playgrounds (Fig.65). As one grandmother (N.O.) who often used the playground observed that "there is not much happening in these spaces". Arranged with prefabricated objects, destined to standardised uses, these spaces are currently lacking creativity, discouraging exploration and without supporting learning through play experiences. In addition to the educational goals, the workshops created a social space and facilitated relationships between the participants, some of them making new acquaintances. If at the beginning the adults' involvement was minimal, as they were accustomed to the role of bystanders in such activities, as the workshops progressed they started to get actively involved together with the children, even contributing to setting up the furniture and began to co-organize the activities. Over time, a group of regular participants coagulated. They were waiting for us to come on the announced day and time and they were meeting us with impatiently: "What will we be doing today?" The financing and planning of the workshops offered predictability to the participating parents and children, reaching towards the community beyond the book exchange by the garage. Moreover, the series created connections among participating adults, which were able to meet, socialize, spend meaningful time with their kids and contribute to a community activity in the public spaces of their proximity. Furthermore, some participants joined the book exchange by the library, becoming some of the "library friends".



**Fig. 65.** Storytelling Workshops which took place in a playground near the garage and involved local children and parents who engaged in story and DIY workshops. Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

After the well-received actions to functionally diversify the standardised playgrounds, we continued to take out the garage towards the community by activating other nearby public spaces. Thus, with the help of the Trailer for Research and Activation (RCA)<sup>127</sup> we installed a pop-up garage on the main boulevard of the district, also known as Buclă. The event "Come out to the Trailer!"128 functioned as an extension of the activities and methods previously used by the garage and its related workshops (see Tools). Moreover, the event sought to draw attention to the potential of some important spaces for district's residents, such as the wide pedestrian sidewalks of the boulevard which functioned during the pandemic as an informal place for play, socialize and walk, in the context of the parks' closures and reduced mobility<sup>129</sup>. The pavilion hosted for two days a series of workshops for children, street games, book exchange, but also brought part of the exhibition about the local memory from the garage and continued the participative research methods, while creating a social space for the community (Fig.66). Once again, the "Memory Workshop" about the practices and play spaces of different generations of residents was very well received by the locals. As a first among the garage activities, the pavilion also included a proposal for the arrangement of the public space which could be consulted by the passers-by<sup>130</sup>. The action tested the development of ad-hoc satellite events that no longer depend on the physical space of the garage, but can export and relocate the project's components in different areas of the district. Moreover, the approach continued by engaging in several other events in the following period, located in the district's park and containing participative installations related to the memory of the informal use of the neighbourhood spaces<sup>131</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>127</sup> The Trailer for Research and Activation (RCA) was realised by studioBASAR in 2016 as a mobile pavilion destined to support public and civic organisation to organize free of charge events in the public space, more on: http://www.studiobasar.ro/?p=7133&lang=en

The event took place on 18-19 September 2021 and was one of the projects participating in Street Delivery, which is a civic initiative aiming to recover public space and imagine more people-friendly cities started in 2006 in a downtown location of Bucharest by the Cărturești Foundation and the Romanian Order of Architects. Team: Alex Axinte, Irina Botezatu, Ioana Iordache, Ioana Irinciuc, Vera Dobrescu. Partners: City Hall Sector 6 through European Cultural Centre

Sector 6, Salonul de Proiecte.

129 We can speculate that the event may have functioned as a precedent and inspiration for the local administration, which organised a large-scale event on the same boulevard, next year, on 24-25 June 2022, but without inviting the OPEN Garage project, having only public cultural institutions and several economic agents as activators.

The proposals were made by the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students from the Faculty of Landscape (USAMV).

Together with the Trailer, the participatory exhibition about the memory of the neighborhood was also part of the "Grassroots Library" events from July-August 2021 and the "Westside Christmas Market" from December 2021 which took place in Drumul Taberei Park.



**Fig. 66.** "Come Out to the Trailer!" a two days event where garage' activities expanded on the *Buclă* boulevard, in framework of Street Delivery 2021 festival. Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

#### Garage Laboratory - researching the Buclă

At the beginning, the garage functioned for me as a work space away from home during the pandemic. On the trips through the area to and from the garage, I began to record the manifestations of informal practices transforming the spaces between the *blocs*. With time, these explorations and observations became more structured and methodologically productive. This is how several typologies of practices emerged and the main research methods were fixed. The first documented typology was the *open garages* transformed into commercial spaces, or hosting small services and informal gatherings. Combining the ethnographic observation with the architectural drawing, I started to document the informal uses of such spaces. Returning from a trip around the area, I went into the garage and I was drawing what I remembered. The drawings were recording more the situation I participated in, rather than the physical space, filtering out and identifying the relevant actors and their resources' management. Drawings were illustrating residents' collective habits of spatial usage. Garages were followed by the gardens informally set up by the residents, the improvised furniture and the animals' sheltering structures. Through repeated visits, spontaneous interactions, participant and non-participant observation, I started to identify several representative case studies and began an inventory of the *Buclă* area.

Since the financing of a project based on the garage space, the research team expanded, new themes were developed and more methods were applied. The field research advanced with a pronounced qualitative and participative character, including semi-structured interviews, collecting objects and relational mapping. The quantitative inventory accounted for approximately 400 examples of spatial practices detected in the surrounding area. The garage thus hosted researchers in action who documented emerging informal practices in the vicinity, or inquired more general themes, such as the history of the district's initial project and the early inhabitant's memory. Beyond the interdisciplinary character, the team of researchers also included an applied education component. The "Garage School" involved students<sup>132</sup> in a Live Project (Butterworth et al., 2013), exposing them to the application of fieldwork methods. Continuing previous research, participants engaged and explored the spatial transformations of the living areas. They contributed further to the production of data and, depending on their discipline, went beyond reporting and analyse findings, drafting suggestions, recommendations and proposals. Their research products were added to the on-going research by the garage and were communicated to various interested actors (Fig.67).

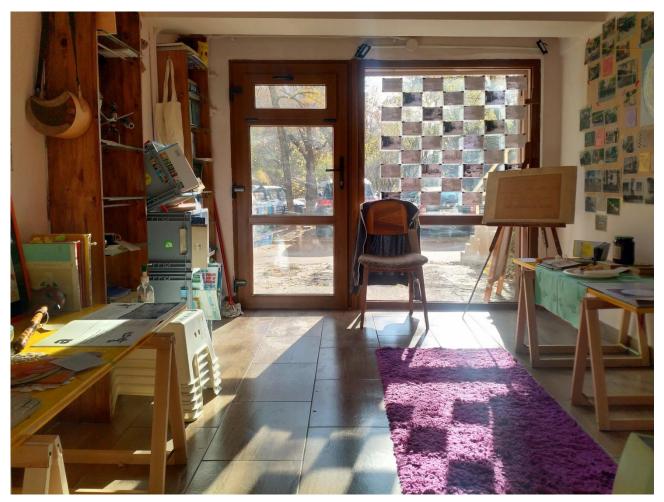


**Fig. 67.** Garage School where students from sociology and landscape engaged in fieldwork research, mapping the informal practices from *Bucla*, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

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Education Tutors: Diana Culescu, Ioana Tudora, Bogdan Iancu, Alex Axinte. Applied Education Participants: Daria Avarvarei, Ilinca Baican, Ștefania Bolea, Liliana Bujac, Mariana David, Larisa Drăgoi, Gabriela Flonta, Sonia Iliaș, Magda Matache-Baidin, Adelina Nedelcu, Doroteea Nedetu, Cristina Sasu, Daria Stoide, Georgiana Trif, Maria Udatu (Landscape Faculty, Year 1, USAMV); Adelina Dabu, Cristiana Malcica, Ioana Nicolescu, Iasmina Plesescu, Gabriela Preda (Master of Anthropology and Master of Visual Studies and Society, SNSPA).

The field research produced several outputs which aimed to communicate the research conclusions to the local public, as well as to professionals and towards the public administration. By setting up an exhibition with the research process and its results, the "Garage Gallery" became a point of attraction for the residents which didn't participated yet in the book exchange or the educational workshops. The exhibition "Drumul Taberei". OPEN Neighbourhood" consisted of a series of installations containing objects, photos, texts, videos and maps, together with related works by invited local artists living in the district (Fig.68). Several installations aimed to illustrate the main themes of the research. Such was the "Working Desk", a compiling a narrative collection of objects, publications and quotes from the discussions with the planners about the district' planning and design process (Fig.69). The "Memory Drawer" illustrated the relationships between neighbours, community and spaces by collaging photos, household items and furniture donated by the residents or found during the area's explorations (see Tools).



**Fig. 68.** Garage Gallery hosting "Drumul Taberei. OPEN Neighbourhood" exhibiting the results of the field research in *Buclă*, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>133</sup> The exhibition was opened in October 2021 and was curated by: Alex Axinte, Iris Şerban, Anca Niță, Bogdan Iancu. <sup>134</sup> Besides the data accumulated from the fieldwork, the Garage hosted a series of art works of painting, graphic, sculpture and photography realised by: Cornel Axinte, Mihai Codiță, Dan Dinescu, Gabi Dinu, Ionuț Dulămiță, Anca Niță and Mr. Bogdan. The works were realised either by the inhabitants from the area in their garages, or are illustrating research' themes. The exhibition contained a series of images from "Monografia Drumul Taberei" (1973) from the Colecția de Imagini Mihai Oroveanu, courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and Salonul de Proiecte, more on: <a href="www.photopastfuture.ro">www.photopastfuture.ro</a> The exhibition included a series of found objects, but also borrowed or donated by current or former residents attached to the neighbourhood. Special thanks: Irina Botezatu, Iris Şerban, Andreea Lisofschi, Mircea Lisofschi, Mariana Dumitrescu, Luiza Axinte, Maia Axinte, George Enescu, Mihaela Stoean.

Also the inventory of informal practices of the transformation of in between spaces in *Buclă* was exhibited through the "Informal Wall". As a synthesis and extension of the Wall, the "Map of Collective Practices from *Buclă*" folded print seek to communicate both to a professional audience and bring evidence to the local administration over the impact and value of the local informal practices to supporting residents' quality of life. Complementary to the spatial exhibition and destined to a wider public, the research was communicated through a series of video documentaries which illustrated the story of the initial project and depicted several case studies of spatial transformations and informal uses carried by neighbourhood' inhabitants (see Stories).



Fig. 69. Working Desk installation from the exhibition "Drumul Taberei". OPEN Neighbourhood" consisting of objects, publications, quotes about neighborhood' planning process, Bucharest (2021). Photo by the current author.

The transformation of the garage into a small local gallery also attracted other actors looking for exhibition spaces outside the city centre, closer to the communities from the big housing districts. Thus, the display by the garage began to diversify by hosting other guest exhibitions, such as the "Tribute to Recipe Notebooks" The research project focused on the notebooks recipes handed down from generation to generation, aiming to pay a tribute to the housewives who shaped the local urban cuisine. The exhibition was interwoven among pictures of the area, objects specific to living by the *bloc* and extras from the research, contextualizing the kitchen specific to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>135</sup> The exhibition was organised by *Caiete cu Reţete/ Recipe Notebooks* starting with November 2022 and hosted by OPEN Garage.

collective living. Once again, the meetings and discussions triggered by the exhibition of the recipes illustrated the residents' strong attachment to their neighbourhood and confirmed the existence of local practices of exchange, help and good neighbourliness, which are not only manifested in the exterior spaces, but are also present within and in between domestic universes, which are linked by long term practices of sharing, such as the exchange of recipes (Fig.70). Furthermore, mapping spaces transformed and managed by the inhabitants has developed beyond the research products exhibited in the garage space or distributed online. By collaborating with other actors interested in researching and valorising informal practices in collective housing districts, we co-organised a series of guided tours<sup>136</sup> through the *Buclă* area, attended by residents, but also visitors from other areas of the city. The tours worked as a walking illustration and open discussion regarding the impact and the role of informal local practices, such as community gardening and animal sheltering, in supporting the quality of living in the district.

The research process and its products had an impact both on the studied topics and in the spatial context. Opening the space beyond the book exchange, which implied a limited and short-term use by the readers, firmly placed the OPEN Garage on the local community map. The display of local memory was perhaps the most successful component of the exhibition. Residents from different generations and various social and professional backgrounds were drawn by the memorabilia exhibits, which worked as an elicitation for further sharing of stories and memories. The role of exhibition custodian often involved participating in long discussions about various aspects of the earlier or more recent life in the district, in which visitors were both learning from the exhibits, while in the same time contributing to the on-going narrative and research. Thus, such manifestations that enacted a sense of belonging and the pride of being a resident of the district were completing similar testimonies from the interviews, demonstrating the residents' need for landmarks and local narratives which can function as anchors for communities. The exhibition consolidated the garage as an "extra room" for the community, a proposition for the spatialization of this need for local narratives in nearby spaces, which collect, share and represent the local memories as the core of a community space.

All these various activities attempted to advocate through different channels the value of the informal practices, currently under treat by the 'civilizing' drive promoted by the local administration and shared by most of the local decision maker's professionals. As a consequence, these practices were diminished, discouraged or even evicted in order to be replaced by proper, official 'civilized' landscape arrangements<sup>137</sup>. Although attempts of sharing the research conclusions were being made towards the local administration, the suggestions and recommendations were never publicly acknowledged, neither accepted, nor rejected. Thus, I can

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representatives.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>136</sup> At the invitation of "Iscoada", an editorial platform for antropology and social sciences, we co-organised and guided two guided tours in October 2022 with Bogdan lancu and Ioana Tudora, as a result and communication tool of the additional field research undertaken in *Buclă* area togther with Bogdan lancu, Carmen Rafanell and Laura Maria Ilie, looking at the post-pandemic evolution of informal gardening and the residents' practices of care for the stray animals. <sup>137</sup> The local administration attempted however to develop a program of supporting the informal gardeners, but the framework, its implementation and the responses from the residents were considered as a "failure" by the administration

only speculate that the research had an impact more on the cultural and professional scene, than on the public policies. However, in diverse stages of the project, there were moments of interaction and direct communication with some representatives of the local administration<sup>138</sup>. Moreover, in the context of some conflicts between informal gardeners and the local administration, we informally intervened and mediated using the results of the research to argue for their value. There was even a situation in which a gardeners participating in the research asked us for support facing eviction treats of their informal arrangements from the green public domain. In this case, it is possible that the video materials publicly available on the YouTube channel of the project worked both as an illustration of how valuable are these practices from the social and community point of view, but also acting as a journalistic type of pressure on the authorities to stop the eviction (see Stories Videos). In the same time, many other residents were expressing their support for the gardeners on social media, eventually cancelling the garden's destruction.



**Fig. 70.** "Tribute to Recipe Notebooks" exhibition organised by *Caiete de Rețete/ Recipe Notebooks* and hosted by the OPEN Garage, Bucharest (2022). Photo by the current author.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>138</sup> Such as administration' representatives joining site visits and participating at final presentations of students from Landscape faculty (USAMV).

The Neighbourly Garage – discreetly articulating the commoning

Aiming to enact a local, situated type of community equipment, the garage was plugged into the neighbourhood's relational network, blending with the local practices and everyday spatial protocols. In the same time, the practice of the garage allowed for the multiplication of designer's role and agency. From an ANT perspective (Latour, 2005), the design product in this case was a relational device, meaning a space and program that allowed and hosted relations among users, as well as non-humans (see Pilot). 'Going by the garage' meant the transformation from a researcher into a librarian, than into an activator and eventually becoming a neighbour. Being practiced throughout the project, the everyday role as an informal librarian perhaps contributed the most into soften my position as an outsider. The book exchange open the way of being slowly admitted into the neighbourly rituals and informal networks, like borrowing, mutual aid and casual socialization. It happened several times to greet library users or workshop participants when meeting them by chance around the district. Participating in small exchanges based on care and trust, like watering the plants near the bloc's entrance, or accepting from time to time that the place in front of the garage to be used as a parking lot for neighbours in need, I moved from being an intruding researcher into becoming an useful acquaintance. In time, I was being included even in the local gossip, as a sign of becoming a member into the relational network of proximity. I even made some acquaintances in the bloc that I called upon when needed, sometimes without any connection with the project's research or activities in the space. Thus the garage worked as a relational device between users, neighbours and researchers, weaving new connections and expanding existing ones, evidencing the potential of shared cultural goods to support the emergence of commoning practices. Thus, the project illustrates a possible approach even to architectural practice, where design skills could be applied also for creating connections, articulating support, evidencing impact and building narratives, rather than always building and making anew.

By generating research-driven relational devices, like spaces, objects and events which evidenced some of the existing latent commons specific to collective housing neighbourhood, the project aimed to engage further with the informal local practices of latent commoning. The opened garage related with the concept of urban commons in two ways: firstly, in support of the commoning process, and secondly, aiming to become itself a resource for commoning. The research by the garage aimed to make visible resident's tacit practices driven by specific local habits of living together, while the garage activation seek to articulate them into a purposely participation of sharing the space as a collective resource. However, the garage for commoning was rather a spatial manifesto in support for the disconnected informal practices, with only short term moments of triggering explicit commoning. Lacking scaled impact and sustainability over long term, the garage model wasn't replicated further by its users, at least not in the form and without the explicit intentions assumed by the project. However, isn't the drive behind the need of scaling up and further institutionalization of every aspect of life similar with the modernist vision of

complete control and total design? As evidenced by the research, latent commoning often find such valves within the social fabric and erupts in moments of activation, taking various local forms, such as community gardening or garages as social hubs. Maybe one of the lessons of the garage experience is the need to go beyond the regeneration of hard determinist modernistic infrastructure and care also for "infrastructure as people" (Simone, 2021) through everyday encounters, implicit relationships and shared practices. A more grounded approach points towards the understanding for the intensification of those special local conditions in which local commoning grows and thrives. In the case of collective housing neighbourhood of Drumul Taberei, those conditions when commoning might blossom into a rather discreet practice are the informal use and transformation of generous spaces between buildings, completed by the sharing of the local memory and maintained through the everyday habits of relationship between neighbours.

# Opening a garage

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"Hello! Do you have a cable? I mean a TV cable?" He is wearing a cool and fairly new black and orange working slack. "Well, no. I don't have one!" With one hand still on the doorknob, he pulls his protective mask imprinted with the PRO TV channel logo under his chin. "I wanted to install one, but they've said you have to be a company. I am your garage neighbour from the back and I was thinking that if you have a cable, I can also connect from here." I've been around for a couple of months already, but I don't know yet the neighbours from the other side, only the next door ones. "Well yes, in fact I am an association, but I don't need TV cable here. And anyway, how could you connect as there is a thick concrete wall between us?" He leaves the door which swings back slowly with a squeak and comes towards me. "See, this way around the back, we could have squeezed the cable next to the water pipe that connects our sinks through the wall. We could have shared the money, because it is not much, just 26 RON." We both follow the path of the pipes through the garage. Some are from the neighbours upstairs and are coming down from the ceiling. Others run parallel to the wall and pass into the neighbouring garages. Water circulates through them when someone uses the sink, the shower or the toilet. As it's quite loud, I started to notice some patterns of use, for example the mornings are busier than the rest of the day. In those more intense moments the garage fills with a watery atmosphere, as if many springs are flowing nearby. "Well that's it, I've tried. See you around!"

With the public libraries closed by the pandemic, I started looking for a way to restart my fieldwork. I was searching among unfinished drafts of projects and bits of never pursued ideas. In fact, I always wanted to start a project space. In other words, a space where I could experiment, test and develop along the way various uses. But I never quite manage that. All previous projects had something like a definitive path that drove them from the start. At the same time, I was longing for a time where projects blend more with life. So I went back to Drumul Taberei district.

Without being born and raised here, I have some early connections with the district. As my grandparents used to live here, I visited them quite often during my childhood. Thus, I wasn't going to the countryside to visit the grandparents during long summer holidays, as some of my classmates did, but instead, I was going to Bucharest, to the capital city! And it had a certain fascinating effect on me, as the district was somehow cooler and more modern than the one where I was living back then with my parents in Ploiești. Being their only grandchild,

my grandparents were over the moon when I was dropping by. Those days spent in their apartment on the tenth floor of a collective housing building next to Valea lalomitei food market remained one of the happiest moments of my early life. We were doing something exciting every day. We were going to the big park where I could ride in some Luna park installations or we could take the water bikes for a tour of the lake. Needless to say, I didn't have anything like this back home. Or we were going to the very cool local cinema to see all those comedies, westerns and action movies which we used to comment over and over again in the following days. And we especially went to visit my uncle and aunt who lived one bus station away. They were just a couple of years older than me. My uncle was playing football for the Steaua FC junior team and he was quite known for that on his street. Of course, it immediately became my favourite team and remained like that ever since. So I was joining him and his friends in street games which were similar to the ones we used to play at home, only that here I had access to a group of older kids and I had a rather protégée status, being the visiting "nephew". I remember that the street football was taken much more seriously here, as the players had not only equipment and followed strict rules, but they were sticking to their positions in the field and were discussing tactics! And all these on a field between the heating plant and the carpet beaters, occasionally interrupted by passing cars. I was in awe by all of this and told and retold those stories from Drumul Taberei to my impressed friends from the bloc once I returned home. Try to imagine their reaction when I was telling them for example how we went to another bloc and we played Ping-Pong in the ground floor garage of one of the kids. We could only dream of these things...! Years passed and my grandparents retired and came to live with us in Ploiești. So, when I became a student at architecture, I used to live on my own for a couple of years in their flat in Drumul Taberei. The apartment was unchanged since my childhood and I even inherited my dad's room from when he was too an architecture student during the 1980s. I even inherited some of my grandparents' relations, as their next door neighbour was regularly bringing me food and cookies, coming in when I was away to tidy around, as she naturally had an extra key. For a student life it was not bad at all, especially the cookies! But she also used to give a full report to my grandparents of my whereabouts, which I learn to accept it. After all, it was another form of care. Of course, I was still visiting my cool uncle living a few blocs away. Not for playing street football or Ping-Pong anymore, but for joining all those cool parties

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he was giving with his almost grown up group of friends from around the district. Again, years passed, I moved away and my grandparents eventually sold the apartment and I lost the connection with Drumul Taberei

After many years away from neighbourhood, I rarely visited and only professionally related. But in time I realized that out of all of the city districts which I've got to know, there I could orient myself best in space and time, as it was the only place in the city I had known before turning into an architect. So, triggered by the pandemic anxiety and by the research needs, I attempted to mix work and life, looking for a space project, but also longing to return to a safe place. First, I went to Valea Ialomitei where my grandparents lived and looked for a space by the street. I was looking for a garage to rent. I checked online and the prices were not so high in that district, so I could cover them at the beginning from my scholarship. For a while I couldn't find anything, neither walking around the area, not online, nor in the budget. However, guided by a friend who lived in the district, I went to another microraion just across the street, but where I had never set my foot before. Here, I started to paste flyers by the bloc's entrances, as I saw it was customary for people wanting to rent a flat in the area. I thought it was hopeless and still the online and renting sites were the solution. But somehow, somebody called me. A neighbour saw the announcement and tipped off the garage owner who wanted to rent and gave him my number. And he called me. He also wanted to avoid the online renting sites and real estate agents which are charging a fee. He had a garage transformed into a commercial space, which was rented before for a tailor shop and which he even used to have a herbal shop where he was also selling wooden handmade objects done by him. He offered me a lower price than for a grocery store or a small service business. And I could afford it. So, I rented the garage in the district of my childhood. I was back.

In the meantime, a lot has changed in the neighbourhood, with my practice, with my family and also with me. It was like a new beginning. Initially it wasn't so clear what the research was about, but I was so happy to wander all day through those places full of memories, that this uncertainty didn't bother me too much. So I continued to leave the options as open as possible and in the meantime to observe the district. I was in an area which I didn't know, even if it was a few hundred metres from my grandparents' bloc. You know that especially during childhood, we have a tendency not to overcome certain spatial barriers, no matter what. Whether imposed by adults

or constructed from our own perception and spatial narratives, these limits could be quite enduring. This works very well among the microraions, which have from their design guite clear spatial barriers in between them. But also as you might have discovered, these spatial universes contained between those strict boundaries during childhood are actually very small when evaluated with our adult eyes. However, they were big enough to fit a world in it. Still, they remain somehow suspended, but nevertheless real spaces, if only in our memories. That was also the case with me never crossing the boundaries from the microraion where my grandparents and my uncle used to live. Therefore, I began to explore the area as from the familiar edges of my childhood world. It was like a long awaited seguel of a story which I used to love. With my designer's focus, I began to rediscover a world of informality, as the inhabitants were transforming spaces in between the buildings. I started to notice their gardens arranged near the blocs, the adapted garages, the animal shelters they've built and traced the relations among them and their shared resources. As I was drawing these practices at a table in the garage, I started to open up the space as well. I brought a few books for children and teenagers for borrowing or exchange in front of the garage. That's how I started interacting with the passers-by on the street and got to know the neighbours from the bloc or from the other garages, sharing stories, objects or help if needed. For a while, I still felt like an intruder and under everyone's scrutiny. The few local names, places and references about the area that I had from my childhood and student days proved quite useful. The former address of my grandparents worked every time to sweeten the neighbours' reluctance towards my motivations. The first stories' exchange allowed me to slowly enter the neighbourly network. Following these lines, also a project team grew around the garage, composed of people who had a connection with the place, some even living upstairs or across the street, while others dwelling here in their childhood or during studentship. Months of noticing, drawing and chatting around crystalized into a project, with a name, a budget, a calendar and with activities. However, life by the garage went on. I got to know and relate with the residents a bit more, especially through the activities by the garage where they became regulars. Some of them, more often those relatively new to the area, were even calling me "neighbour" and accepting me as part of the locals. Moreover, I developed friendly relationships with a few of them, even if they had little or even no connection with the project's activities by the garage. These relations were triggered by proximity and based on

# **ISTORIES**

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shared interests and especially on mutual help. There were still other residents who didn't accept me or the activities hosted by the garage and even made this explicit. But over time, we reached a tacit agreement in which each party accepted certain boundaries. This proved to be one of the most valuable experiences of the fieldwork as I could even implicitly understand from within how neighbourly relations are formed and actively maintained through a sort of everyday social labour. In fact, these relationships were frameworks for commoning. Furthermore, I could experience how collaboration and conflict are equally present and that I have to accept and acknowledge them both. And especially, I noticed how basic needs and local habits, rather than grand narratives and abstract values are in fact more efficient triggers for weaving the fragile net of the community relations.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusions**

**Discreet Commoning** 

Drumul Taberei district: Infrastructure for Living Together

Forged in the socialist-modernist paradigm, Romanian 'new towns' grew as open-air laboratories for collective living. Such is the case study of Drumul Taberei district, where early planners' heroic optimism was spatialized, benefiting from generous public resources and constructions' industrialization. As a key component of the socialist economy development project, collective housing was born under interventionist governance. However, the bold vision was usurped along the way by a myriad of limitations, resistances, mismatches and adjustments that transformed it. The gaps between the project, the construction, the governance and the usage deepened and multiplied in the post-socialist context, further encouraged by a shrunken state and a rampant privatisation. Among these proliferating cracks, residents' ephemeral and informal practices mushroomed. Mature and thriving, in constant negotiation and creative adaptation, while still discreetly disobeying any hegemonic forces, either the state, or the market, informality contributed to these districts' settling in, as they become at home for their dwellers. Therefore, besides the technocratic angle of architecture and urban planning and their relationship with successive political regimes, this research aims to complete the historical evolution of local collective housing by adding a more anthropological perspective of the users and their spatialized practices. The inhabitants are (mainly) those who adapted the professional and political projects into a situated form of living together. From this architectural-anthropological angle, all those intermediary spaces are valued and included in a broader definition of 'dwelling', which contains the housing units and their components, i.e. the garages, the public equipment and as well as everything else in between. Not only apartments' layouts, architectural aesthetics and urban design are relevant when tracing the historical evolution of the district. But also ephemeral and informal practices which have developed in the meantime. Practices such as gardening by the bloc, garages adaptations, playing in the streets, caring for street animals or adopting the local library, have a key role in transforming the housing project into a lived neighbourhood.

Among the lessons drawn from this historical incursion is how informal practices depended and benefited from the use of the generous spatial resources of the district. Provided by the foundational ethos of the modernist project, even if partially detoured by following paradigms, these resources were in one form or another still accessible to the residents. The practice of the district's resources maintained a collective experience throughout the decades. From carrying for leftover spaces after the first construction sites, to hijacking the 'compulsory voluntary work' into forms of socialization, up to the personalized arrangements resisting the uniform wave of 'civilization', all these manifestations evidence the coagulation over time of a locally recognized and shared practice of collectively use of the in between spaces. However, the unstable historical trajectory of these spatial resources' accessibility made dwellers to develop more individual coping

tactics, becoming more cautious and as a result being less explicitly organised. By engaging in a more 'discreet' practice of these spatial resources, residents developed tools and tactics that tends to avoid open conflict and direct confrontation towards institutions and also among them. Thus, local conviviality arises in proximity and is driven by basic needs. In the same time, it gets reinforced by belonging to informal networks, practiced through everyday acts and maintained through shared memory. For (some) dwellers, these practices are performed as local habits, being almost embodied, as for them the neighbourhood becomes *neighbourhooding*. Collective housing districts such as Drumul Taberei continue to function as a generous infrastructure for living together by managing to absorb the ever-changing needs of its dwellers through the ephemeral and informal spatial practices. By being recognized and shared in a community of practices, informality actually supports local versions of an unnamed, silent, with only occasional and spontaneous bursts, forms of commoning (Fig.71).

From the built environment perspective, among the necessary conditions through which informality enable local forms of commoning is the articulation of specific spatial practices of using, managing and transforming the in between spaces. These spatial practices, partially and formally supported during socialism, but which also grew as a form of hacking towards any top-down approaches, have flourished in post-socialism among the generously planned spaces and matured into becoming recognized and shared by dwellers as a local way of life. Furthermore, built as a 'new city' by a generation of pioneers, the district has retained an ethos of new beginnings, of overcoming the odds, of participation and collective effort. This spirit is illustrated by numerous local stories, shared among dwellers and handed down to the next generations, which carry on a strong attachment for their district. Caring for the spaces between buildings is also a form of practicing the attachment to the district and enacting the belonging to a community of similar practitioners. Supporting the commoning, the most important resources are the still the existing generously planned in-between spaces and the survival of the disobedient and creative practices associated with their use. The formats through which informal spatial practices develop into commons are, however, less explicit, devoid of grand values and more centred on basic needs, developed as habits. Being rather tacit and discrete, commoning formats are performed more as a state of *neighbourhooding*.



Fig. 71. Meeting space in the garden by the *bloc*, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest. (2020). Photo by the current author.

Gardens: Courtyards by the Bloc

One of the most complex, visible and impactful articulation of informality among the in between spaces of Drumul Taberei is gardening by the bloc. Their roots go back to the district's early days and beyond, continuing Bucharest historical paradigm of a city of domestic courtyards and shared gardens. Grown from a mixture of planning' shortcomings and overwhelmed local administrations, self-organised gardeners end up being recognized and even supported by the ethos of productive citizenship during the socialist state. Residents with a shovel in their hands filled the gaps and took care of green spaces around the bloc and cultivate available plots by the district's edges. Gardens by the bloc became places for an extended dwelling, where residents could relate, collaborate, engage in mutual help and participate to the collective. Here, more explicit communities of gardeners-neighbours could spatialize their care and forge their belonging to the community and the district. But no matter how valuable and useful, informal gardening has gone out of favour and became disregarded by the following post-socialist 'civilization' paradigm. By framing it as invasive, uncivilized and even illegal, the informal arrangements were discouraged for the benefit of beautification, non-participative and uniform landscaping. However, reinvigorated by the pandemic, informal gardening survived in more 'discreet' spaces as alternative forms of socialization. Tacitly accepted by the residents and even by some local administrations, informal gardening is assumed as a familiar phenomenon, part of the local culture of living. By adding an anthropological perspective, the research evidenced the valuable contribution of the practice supported by these ephemeral spaces to the quality of life in the district. The research identified a series of typologies that illustrate a wide range of roles which informal gardens fill in support of extended dwelling. From informal landmarks which manage to particularize the anonymous context triggering interaction and attachment, to social spaces that support the explicit collaboration between self-organised residents into communities of users, up to spaces of performing diligence and care for the place, for the community and for non-humans, informal gardens are maintaining for (some) residents a specific practice of living.

Inquiring the historical evolution and current manifestations of informal gardening offered an insight into local forms of managing more or less collectively the common resources specific to mass housing districts. Only a few examples of the more explicit, inclusive and consolidated versions of gardens by the *bloc* are acting as common resources that are created, maintained and collectively managed by a group of concerned and involved caretakers, standing as local illustrations of urban commons. Nevertheless, the more widespread version is the implicit and less articulated form of carrying for nearby green spaces that is driven rather by individual appropriations, than collective effort. The informal gardens enact a spatial and organisational horizontal green version of the vertical concrete assemblage of the collective housing building. Usually, the result is not one open and park-like green, but rather a collective patchwork of small, individual practices, that are structured by a shared infrastructure and bridged by social networks. As the need for individualization and personalization of the collective space is practiced by many

and diverse residents, they begin to recognize themselves as part of a 'community of practitioners' (Wenger, 2002). Paradoxically, precisely the need for individualization and breaking out from the uniform and the collective generates belonging to the community and triggers awareness for the common and shared resources. Thus, discreet, latent, less articulated forms of commoning are specific to the local context, where informal gardening acts as an indicator and only sometimes as an activator into more explicit forms (Fig.72).

In sum, among the most important conditions necessary for gardening to manifest as commoning is the existence of an ecosystem of informal practices that transforms the generously planned in between spaces of the district. By assimilating the socialist heritage of formally supporting the practice and organization of urban gardening, it became a widespread and accepted way of life in the neighbourhood. At the same time, the ambiguous attitude of post-socialist administrations, which neither completely forbids them, nor unreservedly supports them, is matching with the discreet, disobedient and autonomous spirit that always made the local version of gardening flourish. However, gardening would not survive as such a widespread phenomenon without access to resources, especially the public land, but also to specific knowledge, like gardening skills, which survives despite the contemporary 'civilization' discourse and practice. An important aspect in articulating this practice as a common good, and not only as another manifestation of individualisation and privatisation, is the participation in informal local networks, which, without being explicitly organised, function as forms of *neighbourhooding*, of relationship and exchange, which are spatialized and mediated by gardens.



**Fig. 72.** Caring for the green spaces in between the *blocs* in *Buclă*. Drumul Taberei, Bucharest, (2022). Photo by the current author.

Garages: Extra Rooms

Not just gardens by the bloc worked as narrative spaces for their users, but also garages from the ground floor of some collective housing buildings from Drumul Taberei district. Attached along the way during the evolution of collective housing, the garages' arrival spatialized the increased and diversified needs of the socialist urbanised middle class. At the same time, the garages sheltered the self-repair culture specific to socialist "automobility" that encouraged more skilled and autonomous consumers. Although having a personal car was the dream project of aspiring middle class, not everyone could fulfil it. In the meantime, some of the garages in waiting turned into complementary spaces of the standardised apartments chronically lacking storage spaces. Working as places for male bonding based on mechanical magnetism, or as versatile spaces attached to the expanded dwelling, garages become an "extra room" also for diverse users. Going by the garage has become a local habit, generating a space for social interaction and participation into the community life. Their alternative use only accelerated during post-socialism, when improved and repurposed garages materialise strips of community hubs that harboured the much missed commercial and small service spaces of proximity. Maintaining a social bustle around them, the garages partially compensated the general decline of public spaces for the community. Perhaps counterintuitive at first sight, but these privately owned spaces have the capacity to act as social infrastructure, working for residents as relational devices. Using tools which included architectural ethnography and mapping, the research was able to trace garages' various typologies in support of collective life, especially as the pandemic stimulated their use. From informal community hubs based on surviving traces of solidary economy, to active contribution to the street life of the mono-functional microraions, up to sheltering skills and practices elsewhere excluded, garages opened up beyond gender and functional stereotypes. Therefore, garages stand together with gardens by the bloc among the last few autonomous spaces hosting informal, creative and disobedient practices.

By looking into how also private spaces can shelter 'latent' forms of commoning, the research expanded the understanding over their local manifestations, specific to collective housing districts. Among the distinct patterns of local culture of living, the habit of 'going by the garage' assumes a more autonomous spatial practice, alternative to the dominant consumerist economy and mainstream cultural paradigm of dwelling. Garage goers practice a form of freedom by engaging in activities that develop their creative skills. In the same time, proximity driven interactions and its relational capacity makes garages among the best suited tools for enacting conviviality among neighbours. By engaging into such autonomous culture of living (some) individual practitioners arrive to acknowledge and recognize each other similar to gardeners. Forming neighbourly ties and joining informal networks based on exchange, mutual help and solidarity, they implicitly create communities based on specific garages' uses and interactions. Garages are (still) storing specific shared practices, skills and knowledge useful for *neighbourhooding*. When it is shared and collectively practiced, life by the garage is becoming a

commoning resource in itself. Together with other spaces, such informal gardens, improvised furniture for socialization, non-human sheltering, or street for play, garages too are contributing to create a convivial universe that dwellers can intuitively grasp and access. These collective spaces are articulating socially, and as well as visually, a sense of belonging to the community (Fig.73).

However, still bypassed by the 'civilization' offensive that evacuates around the district entire rows of free standing garages as '1990s relics' and forms of privatisation, only to set up instead new parking lots, the alternative use of the ground floor garages by the blocs might be sooner or later questioned too. Therefore, the survival of this specific versatile character, designed to store the car, but transformed by their owners in extra rooms according to their needs or opened up to commerce and services, remains the fundamental necessary condition for these spaces to manifests as forms of commons. The alternative use of garages is still mainly resourced by a culture of repair and tinkering, that developed over the socialist legacy of industrial vernacular practices and which needs such surplus spaces attached to dwelling for sustain itself as an autonomous practice. Although at first glance they are just private spaces, accessible from the street, used as pleased by their owners, garages are also capable to articulate forms of commoning when they host networks of proximity solidarity, that supports a lifestyle which is implicitly practiced and recognized as neighbourhooding and community' belonging. By hosting the disobedient and creative practices otherwise excluded and even threatened, garages supports the habit of 'going by the garage' as a discreet form of commoning.



Fig. 73. Greengrocer opened in a transformed garage in Buclă. Drumul Taberei, Bucharest. (2021). Photo by the Petrut Călinescu, Centrul de Fotografie Documentară (CdFD), courtesy of the author.

Libraries: Community' Home

Not only abandoned public domain adopted through gardening or privately owned garages opened to the neighbourhood can foster informal practices, but also highly formal institutions, such as public libraries. With rather modest inter-war origins, Bucharest libraries become truly public and articulated in an accessible network as they became key tools in the architecture of the socialist state. Libraries disseminated knowledge and enabled civic emancipation, but also exercised state control and censorship. The pioneering enthusiasm of the beginnings, always dealing with scarce resources and relying on a volunteer ethos, shaped their patterns of growth and function. However, constant precariousness generated solidarity, support and participation from library users, which together with librarians got involved in their quiet maintenance. Thus, informal practices came to make up for the shortcomings of the system, allowing for the domestication of its institutional status. As a local matter of concern, the library was symbolically adopted by the neighbours-readers becoming 'our library'. Librarians played a major part in this process, acting relational, facilitating users' participation, turning into social agents involved in the community. Such features proved useful for libraries also in the post-socialist context, where spaces for communities became almost extinct. Therefore, some of these branches grew into a kind of implicit community centres, based on users' attachment and librarians weaving a social network around them. By using among other tools the historical mapping combined with qualitative inquire, the research outlined how informal practices could grow also in the shadow of libraries' institutional framework. The research illustrated the versatile nature of local libraries, as branches typologies adapted to the different urban and social contexts of the city. Thus, their less programed versatility is rather the result of the robust informal practices which have developed around local libraries. Along the way, Bucharest libraries were entangled with the evolution of the collective housing process. As the most widespread typology, the bloc library joins the ecosystem of extended dwelling specific to collective housing districts, working as a shared living room in the district for the nearby residents and becoming a community home.

Gaining an insight on how local libraries developed as a hybrid between a formal system and complementary informal practices allowed for a more situated understanding of commoning patterns. Inquiring local libraries evidenced how commons' latency manifests also beyond semi-autonomous spaces and dwellers' disobedient practices. Driven by a personalized practice of (some) librarians, (some) readers become users, house regulars and up to library's 'friends', part of a support group. In turn, the library becomes for them a support space and an anchor, a social and an emotional safety net. These features are most visible in times of crisis, like the recent pandemic, when libraries supported communities' articulation even beyond its walls, despite physical restrictions. Although rather exceptional, such examples of local branches triggering explicit communities of friends are illustrating their potential to breed and activate when necessary the 'latent' commons. Thus, local public libraries illustrate how from the active sharing of knowledge as a common good, the library could become an informal and tacit common space,

while its personalized use can grow into an explicit commoning practice. By fulfilling the need for participation into the community in other spaces than those dominated by consumption, 'our library' joins the ecosystem of spaces that hosts neighbourhooding practices (Fig.74).

When inventorying the necessary conditions for public libraries to enable informal practices as forms of latent commons, it seems that, paradoxically, the socialist legacy, deepened in post-socialism, of a chronic austerity functioned as a trigger for a commoning of solidarity. Trained to lend a helping hand to local libraries always in need, 'friends of the library' adopted the library as 'ours' and coagulated more explicitly into support groups around the interest in books, mobilizing further to support these spaces. The very survival of public libraries as a network of open spaces in the proximity of dwelling, transformed them into implicit community centres, complementary to the generalized collapse specific to post-socialist of other community spaces. This historical trajectory contributed to the development of a situated practice of a relational, librarian acting also as a community agent, which gathers users around and involves them in the life of the library. As branches developed diverse local characters according to the district and users' profile, it allowed for (some) libraries to develop a specific format that enables commoning, by assuming a more explicit participation and contribution of their users into the defending, carrying for and reproducing the library as a shared resource.



Fig. 74. Library "Mihai Eminescu", Drumul Taberei, Bucharest, (2021). Photo by the current author.

OPEN Garage: Research and Activation

Continuing to inquire the informal practice' manifestations, the research initiated a projectspace that allowed for a more active participation in the context while investigating it. By renting a transformed garage space by the ground floor of a collective housing building, OPEN Garage discreetly blended within the existing ecosystem of local practices. Built over previous experiences accumulated as part of studioBASAR practice, but also in response to fieldwork readjustments during the pandemic, the project aimed to be an 'extra room' for residents and researchers alike. OPEN Garage was a hybrid proposition between anchoring a research lab within the fieldwork, while at the same time piloting a community equipment specific to collective housing districts. The project had two interdependent components: the research phase, focusing on supporting informal practices and a spatial activation phase, developed through cultural and educational activities. It all started with a library, opened as a manifesto proposition to the current crisis of local public libraries. In the same time, the informal library functioned as a relational tool that allowed for the researcher participation into the local network of proximity. Based on daily interactions, socialized exchanges and unsolicited contributions, the informal library illustrated that it can shelter incipient commoning processes. Going beyond a conviviality of proximity or an implicit care for nearby spaces, the practice of the shared library went for (some) users towards explicit commitment and involvement into a collective project. Further on, hosted by the library, a series of workshops and satellite events continued to create a social space around the research methods and activation program. Reaching towards the community went even beyond book exchange, allowing for the creation of connections among participants. At the same time, research opened up to educational practice, as students joining a school by the garage were exposed to fieldwork practice and applied methods. Moreover, the research products returned to support the activation of the space as a gallery by the garage. Especially attractive for the locals was the sharing of the local memory, thus evidencing their need for local narratives which can function as anchors for communities.

The practice by the garage offered a practical insight into the potential multiplication of designer's role and agency. Garage' programing evidenced design skills' capacity to be applied for creating connections, articulating support, evidencing impact and constructing narratives, rather than always building and making anew. The design products were not just the tools which physically transformed the space of the garage, but rather a relational device. By using such device, or in other words "going by the garage", allowed for the researcher-designer to eventually become also a partially accepted neighbour. From such an intermediary position, the garage was operated as a suggestion towards a situated version of urban commons. Among the lessons learned by the garage was also that such research-driven propositions, no matter how well plugged are into the local ecosystem, still lack sustainability over long term if they are not locally resourced by basic needs and assumed as everyday practices. But researching the various manifestations of more or less latent commoning allowed for a situated understanding. Research evidenced how local versions of latent commoning find valves and erupt in various ephemeral

forms of activation, such as gardening or *garage-ing*. It might be that architectural and planning reflexes coming from the modernist legacy could annihilate those qualities specific to the informal, discreet and implicit patterns of the everyday habits. A situated approach doesn't necessarily mean their rushed institutionalization towards scaling up replication, but perhaps an intensification of those special conditions in which these informal commoning thrives. For the special case of Drumul Taberei district, the informal use and transformation of generous spaces between buildings, completed by a shared local memory and maintained through an everyday conviviality among residents are among the special conditions when latent commoning might discreetly blossom (Fig.75).

Looking from the garage door over the necessary conditions through which local informal practices can enable commoning, one distinguishes as a fundamental feature the dimension of an ecosystem of such practices that infiltrates among the multiplicity of spaces and marks all aspects of life. Thus, the garage activation was not a singular phenomenon, but came in a context of similar practices, being accepted and integrated as a part of local manifestations. Moreover, the dwelling proximity facilitated the connection to vicinity networks and allowed the researcher to participate in everyday socialisation, becoming a neighbour as well. Last but not least, it was necessary for the project to be grant-supported and research-driven in order to remain an autonomous space and cultivate also a valued based economy for its support. Among the critical resources needed for informal based commoning was the very survival of the garages as versatile spaces that can still host such autonomous, disobedient and creative practices. In the same time, the project-space required activation skills, reaching out for diverse partners and opening up the space and programme to the community, researchers, educators and experts. The forms in which informality activated the latent commons were mainly culture and education activities based on participation in the proximity. At the same time, local narratives and storytelling especially coagulated locals' interest and contribution into the programme. OPEN Garage functioned as a relational device that allowed users to engage in a spatial form of neighbourhooding. Such practice didn't just resulted from the proximity, but was articulated also from shared interests, thus triggering a more explicit process of collaboration, contribution and participation, therefore enabling temporary forms of commoning.



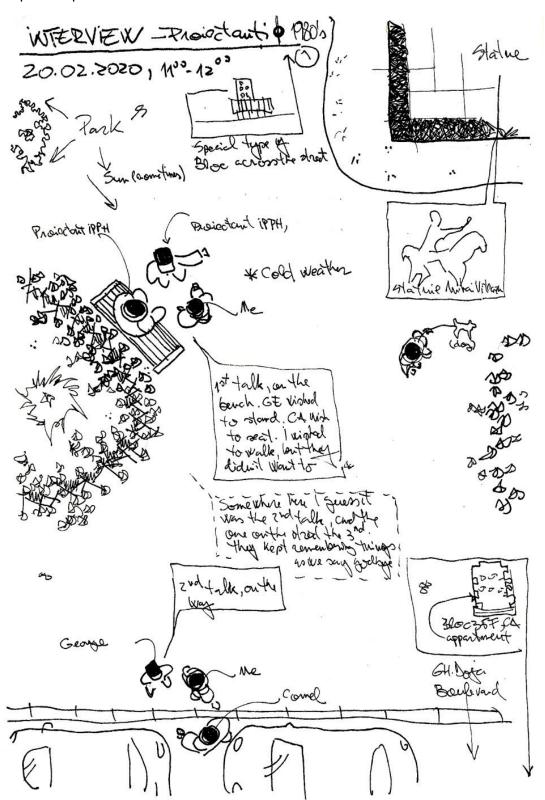
Fig. 75. Garaj DESCHIS/ OPEN Garage, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest, (2022). Photo by the current author.

Methods: Practice based Research

The research aimed to document the informal practices of usage, transformations and management of the in between spaces from the collective housing district and inquire their potential to support commoning processes. The qualitative feature was one of the main methodological pillars of the research, which ensured a situated approach. Case studies of shared infrastructure from Drumul Taberei district were explored through a series of methods ranging from social sciences, history, pedagogy, urban planning, landscape and design. Interdisciplinary research methods included from storytelling, interviewing, ethnography and drawing, up to mapping, live projects or archival investigation. The creative operation of these methods aimed for their adaptation and customization to the context of their application. Methods selection followed their stimulation potential for a collaborative production of knowledge. Moreover, some of them carried the capacity to generate a social space, which stimulated the emerging spatial practice and prompted further research. Perhaps less methodologically obvious, but nevertheless central to the research was the garage space. Its repurposing into an "extra room" for the researchers and community alike was the other key pillar as the participative component of the research process. The OPEN Garage project spatialized the research from within the fieldwork and allowed the adopting of a grounded theory approach. Thus, theoretical versions of urban commoning concepts were addressed hands-on, hypothesised, tested, tinkered and adapted through a creative practice developed by the garage. Intending to bring evidence and narrate value, the research developed as an emphatic engagement of noticing, revealing and supporting the perishable gestures and ephemeral practices through which communities live, transform, produce and co-produce spaces in collective housing districts. By spatializing the process and its products into piloting a community space, the research became propositional, aiming to articulate a situated practice in support of the emerging commoning practices.

Among the methods used, especially the drawn storytelling has become specific to this research. Narrative drawing for mapping went beyond representation and became a productive way to investigate and even to access the collectively shared imagination as a form of latent commoning. By cultivating their narrative agency and purposively tracing commoning' theoretical ingredients, the drawings were useful in articulating data, tracing emerging patterns and enabling communication (Fig.76). Research attempted to access the collective imagination also from a historical angle that required a more peripheral perspective. Little documented in the official archives, glimpses of informality were traced among embodied, situated and less intentional archives, such as oral histories, personal photo albums or films of the time. Here, the formal and informal were not so much distinct as abstract concepts, but inherent parts of life. Rather a complementary tool, this purposive look at the margins showed potential of becoming a creative inquiring method over the local commoning trajectory. In the same time, without aiming it from the start, the garage has evolved from a rented space anchoring the fieldwork into a distinct method, emerging from the local context. By carrying methodological agency, the OPEN Garage became a

relational device, which allowed for an embodied understanding of the latent commoning. The lesson drawn from the garage is that engaged research requires a physical spaces anchored in the local ecosystem of practices. Such space-as-method grants researcher access and facilitates participation into the everyday context, thus slowly eliciting and intuitively reporting over the inquired topics.



**Fig. 76.** Fieldwork sketch of the first interviews from a series with urban planners from the socialist period, Ploieşti, (2020). Drawing by the current author.

Discreet Commoning: living together in the bloc

The fieldwork research functioned as a translation, aiming to adapt the theoretical concepts to the local practices and understandings. Findings from the fieldwork research seldom illustrate the traditional urban commons' model, where a clearly delimited community of users explicitly governs a shared resource. These evidences confirm the hypothesis that successive socialist and post-socialist paradigms have produced a unique model of urbanisation (Szelenyi, 1981). Therefore also a specific local version of urban commoning has developed. One of the key elements triggering commoning processes are the informal practices. Potentially understood as convivial tools (Illich, 2009) that can activate commons' latency, informality especially thrive among the generous spatial resources of the collective housing districts. Emerging over the socialist legacy of hacking tactics into a shared living practice, informality adapted its creative disobedience to the post-socialist radical privatisation paradigm. Thus, informality manifests locally as either contributing or resisting to the dismantling of the public grid. Even if less numerous, examples of informal based collectively managed resources by a group of caretakers, such as community gardens by the bloc or adopted libraries, are illustrating an explicit manifestation of commoning. This local version of urban commons coagulates as a reaction to the threatened and broken public infrastructure. Triggering collaboration and care among some of its concerned users, this 'emergency commoning' is supported by a public infrastructure in need of repair. Without purposely supported by local authorities, but arising rather as a form of civic driven commoning, it nevertheless evidences Ostrom's "nestedness" principle (2015) essential for the existence of the commons. But the more widespread manifestations of informality are the less explicit forms, driven by personalising needs and manifesting through rather individual appropriations of the public infrastructure. At a first glance, these informal domestications are actually belonging to the larger phenomenon of breaking up the public infrastructure. However, most of fieldwork examples differ from mainstream process of for profit enclosures and commodification of public and community spaces, illustrating collective living versions of a "quiet sustainability" (Smith & Jehlička, 2013). Appropriating the abandoned and degraded green spaces or maintaining autonomous spaces such as open garages is assumed by some dwellers as a part of a collective way of life. Paradoxically, through the very individual ethos to domesticate and personalize, the inhabitants arrive to recognize each other as belonging to a community of practitioners that is using and transforming the spaces of the district as a collective resource. Prompting belonging and attachment to their community and neighbourhood, such 'everyday commoning' is a local translation of a shared culture of living together in the bloc. Diluted in everyday gestures and practices while poorly assumed, these collective appropriations however testifies for the existence and illustrate the potential of 'latent' commoning (Tsing, 2021; De Angelis, 2017). Answering different motivations, taking various forms, found in several stages of organisation and crystallization, informal urban practices articulate each other into a collectively shared practice. Therefore, informality acts in the

local context as a barometer for the presence of urban commoning. In a less visible, less explicit or affirmative version, local commoning is nevertheless widely spread and assumed as a part of a life.

The practice developed along the fieldwork worked as a continuation of the research. In the same time, it tested on the ground a format of engaging and supporting the informal practices and their coagulation into commoning. The OPEN Garage hosted and prompted the research project, being also an active physical space. Operated as a practical suggestion, the garage aimed to be a common resource open for researchers and residents alike. The research process, the activities and the everyday life intertwined by the garage, allowing for a more situated understanding of the researched topics. The creative disobedience, but however discreet character of local commoning' manifestations was noticed during the fieldwork and experienced over the garage. Discreetness could be understood as a cautious, low-profile and flexible attitude used to absorb sudden top-down shifts and articulate potentially conflicting neighbourly relationships. By purposely avoiding direct confrontation, perhaps this feature is also the cause of the weak explicit institutionalization of local commoning practices. But this low potential and even resistance to institutionalization matches Tsing (2021) perspective on 'latent' commoning as an elusive, interstitial practice that is inherent to life. Thus, seen through the half-open door of the garage, local latent commons are highly relational, implicit to the local living culture and diffused into everyday social interactions among neighbours. Put differently, living together is performed (also) through informal based discreet commoning. Henceforth, the research results and the garage experiences discouraged the disciplinary based impulses of scaling up and replication, as reminders of the socialist-modernist engineering projects. In other words, the garage pilot didn't become the solution, but it can be better described as an attitude of engaging a particular context.

On the conditions under which informal practices, starting from the large scale of the planned district, through the institutionalised public libraries, up to the more informal in between spaces of the public domain, like gardens, or from within private spaces, like garages, or as research based activation pilots projects, such as the OPEN Garage, can sustain commoning, a pattern stands out: their quality of functioning within an ecosystem and not just as separate typologies. Practiced by various groups and covering different aspects of collective dwelling, this ecosystem of informality translates as a specific way of life that can be resumed as spatial practice of *neighbourhooding*. This situated phenomenon is sustained by several local resources. Especially critical is the survival of a series of the initial generously planned, turned into versatile and sometimes networked spaces that are still hosting disobedient, creative, autonomous and even solidary practices. Carrying for the green or maintaining a repair culture, while users adopting their libraries and librarians are some of the manifestations of practices as a local resource. Moreover, also as a feature specific to socialist-modernist new towns, even the local narratives illustrating the first settlers pioneer's ethos functions here as a shared resource, triggering and illustrating dwellers' attachment and care. The formats in which these informal practices activate the existing latent forms of commons vary. Local version of latent commoning manifests itself

especially in the absence of explicit formats, but rather as everyday habits, practiced as rituals of living together and reinforced through the active participation into local networks. Tacit and discrete, commons' activation is triggered by needs, rather than values and coagulates in the proximity. However, there are also more explicit forms, whereby latent commons are activated by pursuing collectively agreed goals, such as the contribution and participation of users in supporting libraries. Such practices and their host spaces function as relational devices, in which informal based commoning gets activated, like in the case with OPEN Garage.

## **ISTORIES**

## **VIDEOS**

A series of documentaries communicating the research findings related to planning, memory, informal practices and its evolution.

### **ISTORIES**

# OPEN Garage

RESEARCH



## Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=triWSfMVolU

#### Garaj DESCHIS/ OPEN Garage (2021)

**Director:** Ileana Szasz

**Interviews:** Iris Şerban, Ileana Szasz, Alex Axinte **Image:** Ileana Szasz, Alex Axinte, Roxana Szel

**Editor:** Alexandra Diaconu **Translations:** Dana Andrei

Speakers (in order of apeareance): Ştefan Ghenciulescu, Mircea Kivu, Ioana Tudora, Matei Eugen Stoean, Cristi Râpeanu, Anca Niţă, Luminiţa Boboia, Doina Constantinescu, Jan Costache, Ionuţ Bucur, Coca Apostol, Gabi Dinu, Alex Axinte.

**Images:** Arhitectura/ Architecture magazine, issues 6/1961, 4/1966, 6/1969, 9/1969, 1/1970; Monografia Drumul Taberei (1973), from the Mihai Oroveanu Image Collection, courtesy of Anca Oroveanu and Salonul de Proiecte, more on www.photopastfuture.

Photographs from the archives of: Cornel Axinte, Doina Constantinescu, Dan Dinescu, Andreea Lisowski, Anca Niță, Dorin Sima. Special thanks: Daniel Ciobanu, Ionuț Bucur, a collective of gardeners from the Loop, Maria Alexandrescu, Mariana Dumitrescu, Anca Râpeanu, Jan Costache, Mrs. Maria, Adelina Dabu, Cristiana Malcica, Coca Apostol, Gabi Dinu, Georgiana Trif, Călin Ionașcu, Cristian Ionașcu, Roxana Szel.

#### Conclusions

Contemporary Bucharest continues to be dominated by individualistic narratives, by privatisation policies and as a consequence, by the constant disappearance of community spaces. In this context, the informal spatial practices forged within collective living are valuable resources which quietly compensate for sustaining however fragile and rather implicit forms of commoning practices. By enabling ephemeral spaces where inhabitants can pursue conviviality, practice mutual aid and involve in collective care for shared resources, informal driven commons can contribute as local answers to the social, political and ecological crisis of the city. However, a topdown discourse of 'civilization' still prevails and influences the governing of the built environment. 'Civilization' is always defined in relation to aesthetical stereotypes of 'western' references and is implacably linked with generalised liberalization and private management. A 'civilized' living environment usually translates into an over designed, expensive and unsustainable public spaces that excludes users' participation, completed by relentless privatisation of public infrastructure. Shared by mainstream professionals and administration alike, 'getting civilized' ignores or devalues any informal practices manifesting beyond private spaces. Excluded by narratives and even threatened by policy, exposed to conflicts, not accounted for and lacking support, informal practices for commoning are less explicitly articulated and poorly assumed even by most of the inhabitants. Nevertheless, stubbornly cultivating a creative disobedience, latent forms of commoning are still discreetly embraced by (some) dwellers as their living practice, thus contributing to increase the quality of life for all.

In this context, the research identified examples like gardens by the *bloc*, open garages or adopted libraries, as local manifestations where commons' latency gets activated into more explicit forms. The role of such shared infrastructure was proven and became more visible especially during the recent pandemic. Such informally driven commoning spaces compensated for the little support offered by a diminished state and by a reluctant market to provide beyond profit for communities in crisis. From this point, the fieldwork research completed by a spatial practice sought to cover this gap in their acknowledgment. By bringing evidence and engaging with local practices, OPEN Garage aimed to enact both a discursive and a spatial narrative that advocates for informal commons' reconsideration, valuing and support. However, insights from the research and experiences from the practice indicated a low potential for their institutionalization and scaling up. Without necessarily being a weakness, this specific feature derives from the direct connection of making do tactics that were assimilated into daily life, rather than assumed as an explicit political project. Therefore, the research' results offered an alternative and a more situated answer to the initial intentions. The vision of serial replication of a tested institutionalised community equipment as a way of regenerating the district at scale was adapted along the way.

The amended result shifts towards the active support and stimulation of the existing conditions that allow informal based spatial commoning to grow, to blossom and to form living ecosystems. Interventions at policy level can be difficult, considering the multitude of specific

situations existing on the ground. Moreover, the regulation of the fragile and informal spatial practices that have trained themselves to be disobedient and especially autonomous both from the state and the market can be a delicate process. However, a more facilitating local administration could engage into less top-down approach towards flexible public policies which encourage and support the participative development of these practices. At the same time, supportive framing, such as legal clarifications for collectively used land, or facilitating access to water, tools and seeds, should be accompanied by measures aiming at discouraging excesses, such as stopping the privatisation of public infrastructure by of all the actors' involved, from developers, public institutions or individual residents. Resorting to measures and policies is not enough if it is not accompanied by a revaluation of the technocratic, political and public discourses. Cultivating understanding to the detriment of vindictive discourses of 'civilization' that rather sanctions and excludes is quite a radical step to make in the local political context. Such shift in approaching informality might also allow the revision of dominant disciplinary based perceptions, which tends to ignore informality's contribution and its potential for a sustainable living. Their acknowledgment and support can further raise public awareness through narratives that are sharing local habits, practices and memories as valid and valuable ways of living. Such revisions of policies and narratives can be matched by researches and actions on the ground. By growing entangled with everyday life, engaged practitioners can develop spatial practices specific to the local ecosystems. And by opening up towards a multitude of formats and creatively develop situated methods, projects can become attitudes.

The research also builds up as an evidence-based suggestion for advancing the state of the art in the field of theoretical references adopted as guidelines. Towards the commons theories, this research goes beyond its binary economic framing as an alternative to state and market (Ostrom, 2015) and looks over its institutionalization aspiration towards autonomous self-governing of shared resources in the city (Foster & laione, 2016). By searching for its less explicit and more latent forms (Tsing, 2021; De Angelis, 2017), research findings brings to the forefront commoning as a rather discreet manifestation inherent to life. In the context of collective housing, commoning' latency gets activated into more explicit forms through practices of active neighbourhooding, which works as local versions of threshold commoning (Stavrides, 2016). Furthermore, looking at the abstract 'perceived-conceived-lived' triad (Lefebvre, 2013) established by the universalist urban theories' representations, the current research aims to de-escalate its confrontational setting. Instead of the guerrilla framing enacted by the sometimes subaltern agents (De Certeau, 1988), findings from the eye level traces diverse ecosystems which shelters practices specific to the context, escaping oversimplifying categories. Thus, the process gets reversed, from the purposive search for manifestations that match some prefabricated categories, towards starting from a detailed description of the processes from the field and going towards theory building. By grounding the perspective from within the local context, the research also seeks to expand the understanding over urban informality beyond policy framings as just the "formal's 'other" (Acuto, et al, 2019). Here, informality is illustrated as creative and even disobedient, but especially as it becomes a form of belonging and participation into a community through a shared practice. Such informal practices are not necessarily opposing and contesting, but are rather translating, adopting and customizing into vernacular languages the large-scale processes. Finally, by joining the confrontation of the socialist city failure axiom (Murawski, 2018) and its local precedents (Marin & Chelcea, 2018), the research offers a perspective over the post-socialist city legacy, where spatial resources and everyday practices inherited from state' socialism (still) supports inhabitants to face the contemporary crises of the global capitalism and its neoliberal version.

The research thus contributes to the on-going global conversation over the urban commons manifestations, with several situated propositions, evidenced at different scales. Thus, neighbourhooding harness a multitude of informal spatial practices of living together in postsocialist collective housing districts. Going in detail, gardens by the bloc are enabling the legacy of green informality to thrive, as one of the main local forms of spatial care for the in between spaces. Similar, 'going by the garage', or *garage-ing*, is the situated version of performing the participation into a community of proximity and belonging to a repair culture from the quasi-autonomous spaces of garages. On a different note, the continuous process of adoption, or our-ing, is the local proposition for public libraries turned into implicit community centres, triggered by a personalized service and resourced by users' attachment, contribution and participation. Likewise, the situated version of the action research projects is the relational device of OPEN Garage that pilots a community hub and spatialize its support for commoning by taking local forms that hosts and activates it. Through these various local illustrations, the research articulates a discreet version of the urban commons concept. As a local form of latency, discreet commoning by the bloc is enabled by an ecosystem of informal practices. Mostly assumed as a way of life, the discreet commoning sometimes gets explicitly and spatial active, hosted by the in between physical and institutional spaces of the district.

This research project approached the theoretical concepts as tools for constructing a frame for fieldwork investigation over the informal practices as enablers of commons. Following the fieldwork, the research encountered similar perspectives on theoretical construction, which were adopted along the way. The economist J. K. Gibson-Graham (2014) talks about a "weak theory" that moves away from a "strong theory", in the sense it "does not elaborate and confirm what we already know", but "it observes, interprets, and yields to emerging knowledge" (p.149). She pursues a theory in 'minor key' that uses "thick description", referring in particular to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), who assumes that "small facts speak to large issues" (p.23). Following Geertz, the role of theory is not just "to generalize across cases, but to generalize within them" (p.26). However, just by avoiding articulating a major theory is not enough. The research has thus set out to articulate rather a situated version of the theories initially adopted on the basis of some "very densely textured facts" (Geertz, 1973). These 'facts' were the case studies of informal spatial practices manifesting around gardens, garages or libraries, set in the context of collective

housing district, of the post-socialist city. Thus, matching the 'minor' and 'weak' building of the theory from the fieldwork, the research proposes the 'discreet' conceptualization as the local manifestations of commoning. The *discreet-ness* of the local commoning perhaps relates also with the notion of 'proximity commons', that are understood as directly serving the community and protecting the ecosystem to which they belong (Coriat, 2024). Although a weaker version as a less organized one, at least in the case of gardens and garages, the discreet manifestatio is perhaps more closely matching the commoning of proximity evidenced by the users' adoption of local libraries.

Dwellers of the *bloc* who are carrying for the green spaces in front of their window, who are feeding the stray cats, who are exchanging a word with their neighbours while tinkering by the garages, who are playing on the streets or who are giving a helping hand by the local library, are doing it as part of their way of life. Without following grand narratives, with no pressure, nor obligations, they do it because they feel free, they feel valued and so they can be together with others. They manage to create relatively autonomous practices and spaces where *discreet commoning* is sheltered, thus quietly sustaining the collective living. The contribution of this PhD research is an attempt to notice them as such, recognising their contribution towards potential further commoning.

**Word Count** 

Thesis = 73.413

**Practice = 15.974** 

#### **Special Contributions to Research and Practice**

Part of the research on informal practices reflected upon in this thesis was carried out in the framework of OPEN Garage project. The project was initiated and coordinated since 2020 by Alex Axinte as part of this Ph.D. fieldwork. During 2021, after receiving a grant from the Romanian Order of Architects, the research team included: Bogdan lancu (anthropologist), Iris Şerban (anthropologist), Anca Niță (sociologist), Ileana Szasz (director), Diana Culescu (landscape designer), Ioana Tudora (architect), Ioana Irinciuc (librarian). Team members contributed to fieldwork research phase, such as data collection, analysis, outputs production, communication and activation, education and exhibition phases. The applied education activities organized around the garage involved Year I students from Landscape Design, University of Agronomical Sciences and Veterinary Medicine (USAMV), and postgraduate students from the Master of Anthropology and Master of Visual Studies and Society, National School of Political and Administrative Studies (SNSPA).

Following the invitation of *Iscoada* editorial platform for anthropology and social sciences, the fieldwork research expanded during 2022 by detailing topics from OPEN Garage research in a team which included: Alex Axinte (architect), Carmen Rafanell (geographer), Bogdan Iancu (anthropologist) and Laura Maria Ilie (anthropologist).

Part of the research on public libraries was done within the project "The Map of Neighbourhood Libraries" which was initiated and coordinated by Alex Axinte as part of this Ph.D. fieldwork. Between 2021 and 2022, after receiving a grant from the Romanian Order of Architects, the research team included Alexandru Vârtej (anthropologist) and Ioana Capotă (architect) which contributed in the fieldwork research, analysis, outputs production and communication phases. The applied education activities organized in one of the libraries' branches involved Year III students from Architecture, University of Architecture and Urbanism "Ion Mincu" (UAUIM) and Year I students from Landscape Design, University of Agronomical Sciences and Veterinary Medicine (USAMV).

Some of the perspectives developed during fieldwork research and analysis, and some of the tools and methods of spatial operation and community activation are nevertheless grounded in experiences and reflections developed along the years within the practice of studioBASAR, which I co-founded in 2006 with Cristi Borcan in Bucharest.

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- C.C. (2020). Retired architect interviewed by Alex Axinte, 17 December, via phone.
- N.P. (2020). Retired architect and resident of Drumul Taberei interviewed by Alex Axinte, 21 December, via phone.
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- R.D. (2021). Architect interviewed by Alex Axinte, 06 February, Bucharest.
- E.B. (2021). Retired sociologist interviewed by Alex Axinte, 15 February, via phone.
- T.H. (2021). Architect interviewed by Alex Axinte, 03 June, Bucharest.
- T.R. (2021). Retired architect and landscape designer interviewed by Alex Axinte and Diana Culescu, 11 September, Bucharest.

- J.U. (2021). Architect interviewed by Alex Axinte and Ileana Szasz, 28 September, Bucharest.
- N.T. (2021). Architect interviewed by Alex Axinte, Ileana Szasz and Iris Şerban, 28 September, Bucharest.
- R.E. (2022). Retired architect interviewed by Alex Axinte, March, via email.

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- N.T. (2022). Library user interviewed by Alexandru Vârtej, 13 January, Bucharest.
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- N.T. (2022). Library user interviewed by Alexandru Vârtej, 31 January, Bucharest.
- R.J. (2022). Email interview by Alex Axinte, 01 February. Bucharest.
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- M.B. (2021). Former resident interviewed by Alex Axinte, 12 February, Ploiesti.
- N.M. (2021). Resident interviewed by Alex Axinte, 18 March, Bucharest.

- N.L. (2021). Former resident interviewed by Alex Axinte and Iris Serban, 02 April, Bucharest.
- E.N. (2021). Resident interviewed by Anca Nită, 09 April, Bucharest.
- N.B. (2021). Former resident interviewed by Alex Axinte, 08 April, online.
- E.R. (2021). Gardener and resident interviewed by Alex Axinte, 05 May, Bucharest.
- N.E. (2021). Former resident interviewed by Alex Axinte, 08 June, Bucharest.
- N.T. (2021). Gardener and resident interviewed by Alex Axinte and Bogdan Iancu, 20 June, Bucharest.
- D.J. & D.J. (2021). Former residents interviewed by Alex Axinte, 29 June, Bucharest.
- E.C. (2022). Gardener and resident interviewed by Alex Axinte and Carmen Rafanelle, 27 September, Bucharest.
- K.D. (2021). Gardener and resident interviewd by Alex Axinte and Ileana Szasz, 24 July, Bucharest.
- D.B. & M.C. (2021). Corner shop owner and resident interviewed by Iris Şerban and Ileana Szasz, 06 August, Bucharest.
- J.C. (2021). Gardener and resident interviewd by Alex Axinte and Ileana Szasz, 22 August, Bucharest.
- H.E. (2021). Garage owner and artist interviewd by Alex Axinte and Ileana Szasz, 08 September, Bucharest.
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- B.O. (2021). Resident and sociologist interviewd by Ileana Szasz, 16 September, Bucharest.
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- 01. Biblioteca "Mihail Sadoveanu" str. Tache Ionescu, nr.4.
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- 16. Biblioteca "Bogdan Petriceicu Haşdeu" str. Traian, nr. 2, bl. F1.
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- 19. Biblioteca "Nicolae Bălcescu" şos. Giurgiului, nr. 86-92.
- 20. Biblioteca "Otilia Cazimir" str. Turnu Măgurele, nr. 19, bl. S1.
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- 23. Biblioteca "lenăchiță Văcărescu" str. Bosianu, nr. 10.
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- Fig. 73. Greengrocer opened in a transformed garage in *Buclă*. Drumul Taberei, Bucharest. (2021). Photo by the Petruţ Călinescu, *Centrul de Fotografie Documentară* (CdFD), courtesy of the author.
- Fig. 74. Library "Mihai Eminescu", Drumul Taberei, Bucharest, (2021). Photo by the current author.
- Fig. 75. Garaj DESCHIS/ OPEN Garage, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest, (2022). Photo by the current author.

