

Carol 53 : between adaptability and transgression

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CAROL 53

**BETWEEN
ADAPTABILITY AND
TRANSGRESSION**

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Lucian Sandu-Milea

In 2012, the house on Boulevard Carol 53, in the centre of Bucharest, celebrated its one-hundredth anniversary. During that time, Romania experienced two world wars, a dictatorship, a revolution and a democracy ridden with corruption.

The origins of the house lie in the prosperous period following the independence of Romania in 1877. During this time, Bucharest's elite was oriented towards Western Europe, to France in particular. The Boulevard Carol was conceived as the east-west axis following a Haussmannian scheme, its architecture was influenced by the Beaux-Arts school of thought. After the Second World War, Romania's capital was reinvented according to the communist ideology, one of the consequences being that private property rights were revoked. Today, after the revolution of 1989, many heritage buildings are still in an uncertain situation, with the heirs of the former owners waiting for the requisition court trials to end.

Young architects in Bucharest face a similar uncertainty today. During the prospective phase after the admission to the European Union, the city desperately tried to be modern, copying the glass typologies of the West at the expense of the city's rich texture of Beaux-Arts and communist buildings. The economic crisis has frozen the ambitious projects so that most graduates directly emigrate to Dubai and China. The lack of jobs forces the remainder to choose new paths. This article describes the efforts of our collective and of how we see Bucharest's heritage as an opportunity instead of an obstacle.

Almost twenty years after the revolution, the house at Carol 53 was regained by its rightful owners, Stefan and Ioana Bortnowski. Renewal developments were begun, but they were shortly interrupted and the house was vandalized until the spring of 2012, despite the recurrent trials to stop the destruction. Afterwards, the house was in a disastrous state: it had been squatted by iron thieves who had removed its metal beams, compromising its structural integrity so that it had become too dangerous to live in. However, in order to protect the house from further decay, it was important for it to be inhabited again.

At the time, our collective was searching for a location, and the Carol house with its garden was potentially ideal for our vision of a semi-public urban space allowing numerous, possibly contradictory, activities – a fusion of programmes and functions.

The condition of the house imposed a change on the group's attitude. While in the past our efforts concentrated on collecting rent, we now had to concentrate on physical labour. During the first month of the project, we analysed the level of degradation of the house, its water and electrical systems and set our priorities. Before we could start the restoration process in the summer of 2012, we had to empty about ten truckloads of debris and waste. Firstly, the integrity of the house had to be guaranteed by fitting wooden reinforcements in the positions where the metal beams had been stolen. Before winter, the roof had to be wind- and waterproofed. Its rotten structural elements were replaced by new ones imitating original details and the smaller holes were repaired with tiles that had been discarded on another construction site. Closing the bigger gaps had to be improvised using cheap construction material that we financed through the inaugural exhibition with 20 artists, painters and photographers that was held at Carol 53 in September. The roof has a very steep slope, so we had to learn to work like alpinists, using safety ropes. The climbers of a local mountaineering association lent us some equipment and taught us how to use it. In exchange they are free to hold their meetings in one of our rooms – all the people who use the house participate to its reconstruction.

In December 2012, after rebuilding the sanitary and electrical systems, setting up a bathroom and a kitchen, the necessary conditions for living at Carol 53 were restored. We arranged our own private rooms in the attic, as the house, with a surface of around 1000 square meters on four levels, is far too spacious for the members of the collective. To open much of the house to the public is vital for the financial support of the repairs. The basement, the ground floor and the garden therefore started to function as a creative hub for a wide range of communities.

Initially, the project isolated the group from the rest of the world. The members of Carol 53 live a relatively eccentric life, on the border between public and private. The character of the space oscillates through several phases, depending on the activities that predominate in certain periods. Between restorations and events, the pace is quick, with nights that become days and days that become nights. The project continually develops, hosting art and architecture exhibitions, experiments and performances, book launches, concerts, workshops and courses that place the house on the cultural map of the city.

In the beginning, the group had to gain the trust of the owners before an official contract could be signed. The lack of a formal framework made the administrative survival of the project a challenge, navigating through a legal grey zone. At present the necessary agreements have been arranged and the house is connected to the city's infrastructure providing it with the utilities vital for the integrity of the building.

Similar to finding the proper legal implementations is the desire of the group to defy conventions in terms of housing and internal organisation, transgressing tried and tested models. Little by little, new systems for the management of resources and new rules for financial and ethical relations are being established. In the last two years, Carol 53 was seen as a relatively controversial program and people tried to frame it into certain stereotypes and misconceptions. Many journalists have called it a squat because of the appearance of the house.

It is an experimental, iterative process, and together with the owners, we adapt the initial plan according to the obstacles we meet. The Bortnowskis, being architects themselves, suggested we transform an area on the ground floor into an architectural library with a documentation of the history of the house, creating a platform for an alternative architectural discourse in Romania.

In Bucharest, Carol 53 is a new way of revitalising and rebuilding a house that would almost have collapsed. It is an architecture project as well as a community project.

Lucian Sandu-Milea, born 1986, is a graduate of the Faculty of Architecture of the UAUIM and is working as an artist in street-art, illustration and 3D graphics. He is also an architect, organiser of cultural events and a founding member of the project Carol 53. More information can be found under casacarol53.wordpress.com.

