

**Trans-form. Particular urban transitions of heritage areas in  
contemporary Romanian cities: 2 case studies**

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**Abstract**

The study represents an investigation regarding different types of response in the Romanian city in the particular case of historical urban areas – spaces that are protected at urban level but are difficult to integrate in the mechanism of the city, as well as challenging in relation to the contemporary urban requirements. The revaluation of urban heritage represents a process which brings together different areas of expertise and stakeholders in a permanent debate and dialogue.

A first case study follows the process of modern and contemporary urban transformation into one of the most complex urban stratigraphy in Romania - the peninsular area of Constanta. Starting from a brief assessment of the present situation, the study

Discusses the existing interventions as well as current or potential mechanisms, strategies and local urban policies in this particular fabric.

The second case study debates upon the uncertain intermediate spaces located between the old Bucharest urban fabric and the major interventions belonging to the communist regime. Eminently informal spaces due to their heterogeneous character, these areas embody the premises of experiment and innovation in the contemporary public space, in terms of the sustainability of the urban environment as well as in relation to the socio-cultural dynamics of the city.

**Keywords:**

urban heritage, territory as palimpsest, urban archaeology, urban interstice, heritage transition

**1. Introduction**

The contemporary urban environment is a hybrid, versatile and reactive organism, connected to the rhythm of present-day society and profoundly affected by it. Change and evolution remain some of the characteristic processes of cities. The continuous occupation over time transforms cities into complex palimpsests that are revealed in the processes of restructuring, densification and urban expansion. The evolution of this particular environment often becomes dependent on the relationship with the pre-existing forms, which in many cases belong to the built heritage.

The phrase "We have no more beginnings" (Steiner, 2001, p.1) used by George Steiner to open the book *The Grammars of Creation* reflects exactly this condition of the contemporary historical city.

This paper proposes an investigation of two particular urban situations recurrent in historical Romanian cities. The two types of scenarios discussed emphasize different conditions of the heritage in the contemporary city. These differences are related to the age and preservation status of heritage, the specific topography and natural environment as well as to the major interventions that have changed the Romanian urban fabric in the 19th century. Despite these variations, the fact that both cities operate inside the same legislative framework and have similar difficulties in developing a dialogue between local authorities, communities and other stakeholders generates issues that are very much alike and which challenge the professional response.

Both case studies follow a similar methodological approach. Each study starts by pointing out the particularities in the historic evolution of the city that have determined the present condition of the areas and continues with an assessment of these particular urban contexts. The conclusions of the studies are accompanied by possible short- and long-term transformation scenarios and mechanisms that can be involved in the transition process.

The first studied area - Constanta's peninsula - exhibits a very complex stratigraphy whose exposure is accentuated by the topography, the natural environment and the shape of the area.

This case study often reveals a tensioned relation between the valuable underground archaeological heritage and the historical and modern buildings that define visible urban spaces. The paper discusses possible mechanisms which can utilize archaeology as a cultural and identity resource in the life of the city.

The case study of Bucharest brings forward a specific type of uncertainty regarding the status of urban heritage. The conflictual interaction between old and new represents an informal trademark of the city, an element of public discontent or ignorance as well as a potential source of urban regeneration. The passive response of traditional tools in urban planning might suggest that the subject requires a more innovative approach - a shift in the time gap between use and re-use with the insertion of specific tools of temporary, in-between uses.

## **2. Constanța case study**

### **2.1 Constanța - a short overview**

Constanța is the most important Romanian port city on the Black Sea coastline and one of the oldest Romanian cities historically attested since the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC (Boardman, 1964) when the Greek colony of Tomis was established on the site of the current peninsula.

The object of this first case study is the peninsular area of the present city of Constanța (Fig.1), whose historical urban occupation is undoubtedly related to the topography of the promontory advancing towards the sea, "unique on the whole monotonous line of over 100km of Dobrogea's middle coast"

(Vulpe, 1969, p.150). Considering the territorial scale of Dobrogea, this unique attribute has given the place defensive qualities and access to the coast ideal for a settlement, in a geographical area poor in elements of natural fortification.

The area in question illustrates one of the most complex processes of urban stratification in Romania. The overlapping in time of several stages of urban evolution within the limits of the same peninsular territory has outlined a complex and unique urban section in the area.



Fig. 1 Constanța's peninsula. Stages of evolution

Source: Personal archive

Regarding the historical evolution of the studied area, five significant moments can be outlined: the founding and development of the Greek colony Tomis (7<sup>th</sup> - 1<sup>st</sup> century BC), the period of Roman and Roman-Byzantine occupation (1<sup>st</sup> century BC - 6<sup>th</sup> century), the medieval period under Genoese influence and Ottoman occupation, the modern period with the systematization of the port area (late 19<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> century) and the contemporary era. Using the situation of archaeological research in the National Archaeological Repertory of Romania, the chart below (Fig. 2) quantitatively reflects the presence of different historical epochs in the archaeological heritage of Constanța, dominated by vestiges of Roman, Roman-Byzantine and Hellenistic origin.

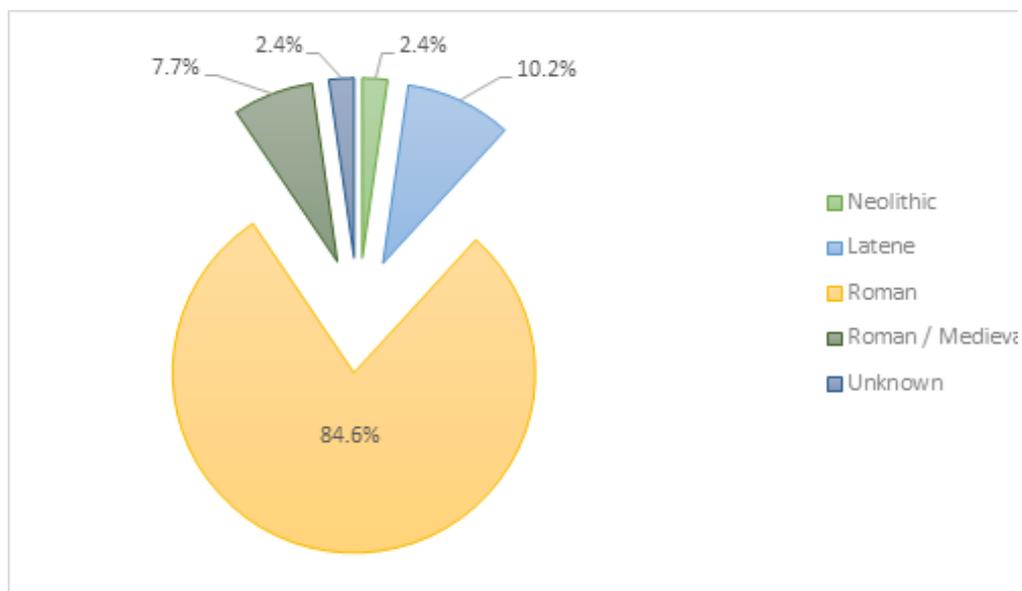


Fig. 2 Archaeological sites of Constanța according the Romanian Archaeological Database 2021

Source: Personal archive

This historical evolution of the city is reflected in a medium-level urban stratification in which the archaeological excavations reveal the presence of vestiges up to 7m in depth compared to the current topography of the city. This has resulted in two different typologies of effects: on the one hand the modern and contemporary city has developed above the ancient archaeological sites and, on the other, the archaeological areas brought to light are poorly distinguishable in the current configuration of Constanța, being generally absent in the memory and identity of the place. This condition has hindered the process of integrating the ruins into cultural routes and has favoured the residual character that the archaeological layer has in the city today (Fig. 3, Fig. 4, Fig. 5). As a result, the past of their current environment and its particular qualities are absent in the collective memory of the inhabitants.



Fig. 3  
Archaeological site  
at the intersection  
of  
A. Karatzali and M.  
Aurelius  
Streets  
Source:



Fig. 4  
Urban  
dwelling  
in the  
Peninsula  
Cathedral  
area, - 5<sup>th</sup>-  
6<sup>th</sup>  
centuries  
Source:  
Personal



Fig. 5 The North Gate of the  
Tomis Fortress, 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>  
centuries  
Source: Personal archive  
2017

Personal  
archive

archive

A closer look at the current built player of the city reveals that the area is dominated by constructions dating from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Towards the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several low-rise collective housing buildings appeared in the area of the peninsula. Regarding the public buildings and spaces, the area is distinguished by the presence of important institutions, cultural objectives, buildings dedicated to justice, commercial functions, touristic and port related spaces, buildings belonging to different religious confessions etc. The urban structure did not undergo major changes after the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The process of degradation of the built environment has determined the appearance of numerous areas of conflict: urban interstices, functional voids, leftover, unhealthy spaces.

The current archaeological background of Constanța presents some elements that are distinguishable by specific morphologies: enclosure walls, access gates, the seafront of the ancient port, basilicas, dwelling areas, the street layout, roads and mounds.

## **2.2 Exploring the archaeological potential. A sensitive balancing act**

The fact that the modern city of Constanța had embedded the Peninsula territory had led to the current sensitive coexistence between the development of the urban frame and the

archaeological ground. Managing this particular situation becomes a “sensitive balancing act” (Jacobsen et al., 2021). Decision-making in the case of archaeological excavations is often avoided or postponed by authorities encouraging the residual status of relics.

As in similar cities with extended archaeological background in Constanța’s peninsula the main conflict appears between the pace of urban development and the slow rhythm of archaeological research.

In many cases, the authorities transfer responsibilities in managing these urban situations. The absence of a clear strategy for short-, medium- and long-term interventions in archaeological sites of the peninsula becomes the main problem. Such a strategy is equally important from the heritage preservation and valorisation perspectives and city development. The lack of predictability determines a very small interest of investors for the peninsula sites.

A closer look over the Constanta Peninsula reveals dichotomous spaces: opened and closed, accessible and inaccessible (Fig. 6), past and present, residual and defined spaces, public and private, porous and fragmented, mixed into each other in a heterogeneous organism. The borders are very present and difficult to cross (Fig. 7). This co-presence of different architectures (buildings and ruins) creates a tension, a crisis of identities. In most of the cases, the archaeological remains are residual areas neither constrained nor used, lacking an open dialogue with the city.



Fig. 6 Christian Basilica  
5<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> century -  
Roman-Byzantine era,  
underneath Ibis Hotel  
Source: Personal  
archive 2018



Fig. 7 Roman baths, 3<sup>th</sup>-  
4<sup>th</sup> centuries  
Source: Personal archive

During the last 15 years the area went through an important process of gentrification. The problematic population that used to squat in the historical buildings and which contributed to their degradation was offered by the municipality the chance to move into a newly built social housing complex in another area of the city. Significant interventions regarding pedestrian area renovation in this historic centre of Constanța were accomplished in the last few years with European financing. In the absence of a clear policy regarding the urban mobility in the area, a part of these investments concerning street pavement, urban furniture and public lighting need to be reconsidered. Many of these separate interventions proved themselves not to have the expected impact over the area, due to the absence of an integrated strategy, creating issues with the whole regeneration process. Recently the municipality has succeeded to transform a significative part of the peninsula into a pedestrian area.

Despite these local policies that generated important changes within the historical area, the archaeological remains are still not considered an essential vector of development. Urban archaeology has the potential to address relevant issues in the interdisciplinary debate over the peninsula's spatial transformation.

### **2.3 The past's future: towards an urban regeneration. Possible transitions of archaeology**

During the 21<sup>st</sup> century the pressure on space in cities worldwide has achieved very high levels. Even if the importance of considering the archaeological background in urban planning as well as in the development of urban policies was stated since The Valletta Treaty (1992), the challenge to bring together archaeological heritage management and urban development remains. This new type of interaction should have raised the flexibility and the predictability of the archaeological approach in historic cities. Furthermore, the public access and involvement in the heritage process highlighted by the Faro Convention in 2005 is still an important reference regarding a new, enhanced level of social attachment to cultural heritage (Belford & Bouwmeester, 2020).

Promising perspectives of the dialogue should emerge not only from defining strategies but also from involving the local society into the process of space transition and transformation by improving the accessibility and comprehension of the past. In this regard, sharing and developing knowledge is vital in urban archaeology.

Besides the necessity to improve interaction between stakeholders involved in urban development and archaeological management, another important direction of the archaeological transition is public engagement.

Even though Romania has signed many of these European directives regarding heritage, the actual process of archaeological management is often seldom accessible, and, in many cases, the public doesn't have access to real time knowledge. Unlike other countries, in Romania the heritage management is entrusted to specialized institutions without involving other urban specialists in the decision making. This lack of communication has generated a lack of funding in the respect of heritage and archaeological interventions leading to local and non-integrated solutions.

The archaeological areas of the Constanța peninsula can be considered a form of transitional spaces, a heterogeneous territory consisting of contradictions, ambiguities, transformations and mutations, a space where different layers (spatial, temporal, cultural, religious etc.) co-exist (Pittaluga, 2020). Referring to the transformations of transition spaces, Pittaluga (2020) identifies an opportunity for explorations and experiments concerning both urban use and organisation of spaces. The author identifies 3 categories of urban practises that can happen in relation to transitional, uncertain spaces: flexibility, spontaneous appropriation, subversiveness and empowerment.

Besides the fact that archaeological ground requires specific evaluation, protection and conservation, his residual character in the historic city centre of Constanța needs a proper reconsideration. Cities with large and important archaeological remains had accepted the vulnerability of the ruin searching for ways to favour an appropriation by the inhabitants. Either using art installation or technology extended possibilities, the urban and social policies experimented with new ways of use. After all, the ruin is not only evidence of a time passing but also proof of the resistance over time, a condition that had fed human imagination and practice for centuries (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014).

New insights and potential transformations of the area are explored in a complex and recent study “Constanța Peninsula. Urban regeneration guide”, a paper that explores the liveability and the perspectives of transformation of urban spaces throughout the peninsula with the intention to define a regeneration guide for the area. The paper identifies some characteristics and potentialities of these specific urban situations that can support improvements at different levels, exemplifying the new proposed scenarios with worldwide successful intervention.

The study analyses typologies and components of public spaces, the existing built environment and particular elements that can contribute to a possible urban regeneration: materials, vegetation, infrastructure and mobility, lighting, urban furniture, temporary architectures, street advertising and art in public spaces. Regarding the existing heritage, the guide explores strategies of intervention and constraints for conservation and protection of historic buildings without referring to the particularities of the archaeological areas.

### **3. Bucharest case study**

#### **3.1. A difficult heritage. Contrast as quality in the urban tissue**

Bucharest is a city of multiple personalities, a trait that has a dual impact on its contemporary development: on the one hand, the intrinsic diversity and informal character of urban life cultivates a sense of spontaneity and the curious exploration of urban space, but, on the other, it projects on its development the difficult heritage of previous historical layers, which can, at times, become a challenge for practitioners and for its inhabitants. "A city is never an end state, but is perpetually evolving" (Bishop & Williams 2012, p.19). In this paradigm, the becoming of Bucharest can be perceived gradually (Fig.8), in a complex process of generating and rewriting its typically lax, almost lacking borders. Having developed from a rural typology, the archaic layout of the city represents a cluster of small parishes connected to a complex network of churches which translates into a specific discontinuity of the urban tissue (Harhoiu, 2001).

The organicity of its fundamental layer (the result of a mediated oriental influence) would dictate its further planimetric development which, up until the 19th century maintained its scattered, rural image with an underlying particular porosity.

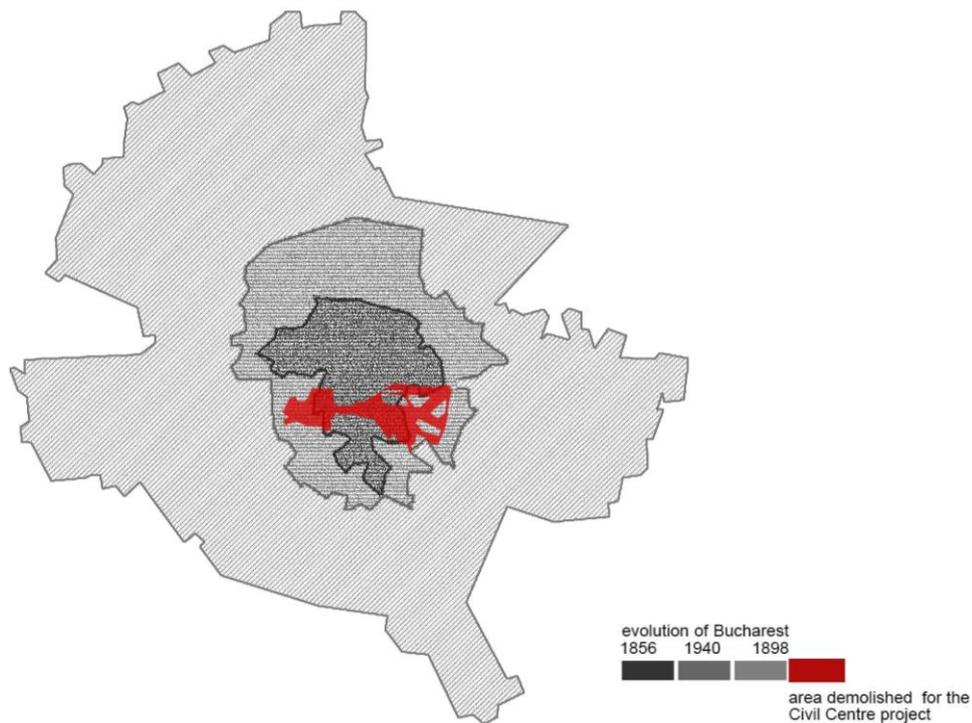


Fig. 8 Bucharest. Stages of evolution and the extent of  
demolition for the Civic Centre project  
Areas of Conflict between 1856 core and 1989 systematisation  
Source: Personal archive

By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the influence of emerging nationalist states in Europe and expressing a turn towards the western ideals, Romania underwent a process of radical change. Bucharest became the target of a sustained, though intermittent reconstruction, aiming to impose a modern structure on the city.

The *Haussmannian* instruments introduced a new infrastructural coherence, at the same time enhancing the contrast between the medieval legacy and the idealised modern city. These attempts at a structural reshape of the urban tissue continued under the different political shifts, but nonetheless contributed to an increased quality of life and the emergence of public space in its modern acceptance.

The most recent shift in the development of Bucharest represents a historical moment of political, social and urban trauma. The radical *tabula rasa* (Fig. 9) of the communist regime introduced a new typology of urban interaction which nowadays translates into the existence of urban voids as conflictual co-existence between the old and the new. This unmediated tension represents a subject of scarce professional debate, despite the mostly central location of such spaces.

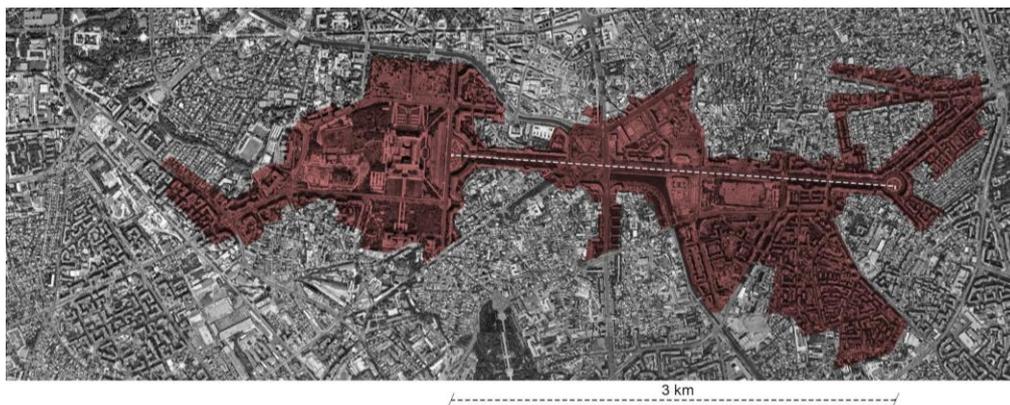


Fig. 9 Scale of demolition for the Civic Centre project  
Source: Personal archive

Despite the fact that these spaces are hard to comprehend and address, their particularities should be translated as elements of potential in the contemporary city which can constitute new precedents in the field of urban regeneration.

### **3.2. Engaging the past. Between preservation and transformation**

In the particular case of Bucharest, the presence of traditional tissue enclaves behind the concrete curtains of the communist regime represents a local element of specificity which should be enhanced. In this sense, in 2000, the local municipality established 98 protected areas, defined by structural and historical cohesion, from which 10 are centrally located and were significantly damaged by the communist Civic Centre project.

The status of protection comprises a set of guidelines for possible interventions, which ensure the continuity of specificity inside each area. The difficulty resides particularly in the areas of direct contact with the Civic Centre project, where such firm delimitations generate further ambiguity and inhibit the initiatives, maintaining a desolate landscape of social absence and public discontent in the form of urban voids, or in-between spaces.

The urban void represents a particular type of marginality which transgresses the centre/periphery dichotomy (Mubi Brighenti, 2016), usually profoundly embedded in the urban tissue, where collision (Fig. 10) generates gradual processes of abandonment (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020) and informal, usually illegal uses of space which become specific. In the case of Bucharest, the former Civic Centre restructuring project left room for such manifestations of neglect which, contextually, represent a cumulus of professional absence, of social lack of involvement and of political disinterest.



Fig. 10 Specific typological conflict. The urban interstice in Bucharest

Source: Personal archive

The particularities of the Bucharest central urban voids reside in their ambiguous vicinity - the radical architecture of communism on the one hand, and the moderate scale of traditional urban fabric on the other. The recently constituted protected status of the former challenges the conventional instruments of urban regeneration, while at the same time the autoreferential presence of the first requires a more strategic, integrated and multi-professional approach. Acknowledging the specific qualities of these in-between spaces represents the first step in elaborating efficient, unconventional, pioneering tools and practices for urban regeneration (Pittaluga, 2020).

The beginning of this shift of perception, promoted by Ignasi de Solà-Morales' paradigm (1995), defines the urban interstice as a new type of urban space with unlimited informal potential, in opposition with the traditional consumption-oriented cycle of use of the urban space (Santos, 2021) and which should, therefore, be explored as an urban event (Mubi Brighenti, 2016).

Translating this approach into the particular context of Bucharest implies a deep understanding of the processes which have led to the present state, but more important, it should begin with a firm belief of the fact that the old and the new can coexist and reassert the joint role of professionals, social actors and local municipality as active change makers.

### **3.3. Challenging the future. Temporary use as instrument for regeneration in urban heritage areas**

In the post-economic crisis city, urban planning as well as architecture have begun to anticipate all the more flexible and fluid requirements for the sustainable development of the built environment with time becoming the fourth dimension of design (Szaton, 2018). Moreover, the health crisis brought on by the COVID-19 epidemic has pushed flexibility into all areas of contemporary life, perhaps making the need for new strategies in architecture and urban planning even more palpable (Deas, Martin & Hincks, 2021). In this context, the delicate line between conservation and intervention becomes a fertile ground for innovative practices and urban life renewal, in a global paradigm when the dream of permanence is being challenged.

In this regard, the instrument of temporary use, mostly associated in the past with informal appropriation of space (Lutzoni, 2016) has started being used as a tool and gained more recognition in the professional practice. Temporary use embraces initiatives of local communities (Bishop & Williams, 2012) and becomes a channel for social engagement (Hernberg, 2021), critically responds to the subject of urban sustainability by changing the traditional cycle of use and promoting financially efficient and accessible project, provides flexibility through scalable interventions (Löwstett, 2018) while at the same time promoting and enhancing the specific historical identity of the site (Galdini, 2020), (Kasarabada, 2020).

The cumulative result offers potential for urban regeneration, bringing together diverse stakeholders, determining local public authorities and economic operators to exploit the potential of existing resources, while its mainly reversible nature can become an advantage in the case of protected or heritage areas. Transforming abandoned spaces creates benefits for all stakeholders: company owners benefit from the renovation and conservation of the building or the use of an under-exploited site, users benefit from cheap, easily available space, residents enjoy the effect of a better quality of life in their neighbourhood, entrepreneurs and local businesses benefit from higher sales and skilled designers gain new opportunities for work, also developing professional perspectives.

An extensive study (Martin, Hincks & Deas, 2020) focusing on the potential of temporary use as strategy in urban city cores, revealed that particular and attractive forms of temporary use tend to cluster in the dense urban core, as a result of better visibility, accessibility and increased interest from the public. In the case of centrally located heritage urban areas, this mechanism could raise awareness of their existence and value, while the available adjoining urban interstice could” allow the reading of the different times and the different components of their territorial palimpsest” (Iannizzotto, Santos, Trinidad & Lucchesi, 2021, p.454) offering the necessary space for intervention.

Could the urban interstice become a new typology of public space (Fig. 11)? The intermittent city (Farone & Sarti, 2008), a phrase which best summarises the uncertainty of contemporary urban space, involves the creation of an urban network of such waiting spaces, spaces with a potential public vocation that could constitute the new city, an environment conducive to change and experiment. In such a network, vacant, unused spaces become attractive nodes for novelty elements in the city, acting as catalysts and attractors of human activity and informal interactions. If we consider the fact that one of the main functions of the contemporary city is to maintain social sustainability (Lowstett, 2018), then it becomes possible to understand that perhaps a more user-oriented approach of the urban interstice could have the potential to generate a solution for this phenomenon.



Fig. 11 A difficult negotiation - in between scales. The urban interstice in Bucharest  
Source: Personal archive

The power of a single precedent grows exponentially in a network generated development. In the particular case of Bucharest, where the urban interstice is not an exceptional situation but rather a general rule, this approach could easily be scaled at a territorial level, engaging gradually more core urban tissue. Temporary use can become an innovative tool of urban regeneration in the central heritage areas of Bucharest. Exploring the particular status of uncertainty which resides in their under-managed contact with the communist Civic Centre project as a unique feature, it can furthermore contribute to a new awareness of the status of heritage and historical urban tissue in the contemporary city.

#### **4. Conclusions. Urban heritage - a new perspective**

The two case studies presented in this paper illustrate two different instances of historical traces in the contemporary city. In a time, characterised by the fast pace of change, which is more than ever present in the urban environment and which takes a toll on the status of heritage, the need for innovative practises is paramount. A city cannot part from its past development, history and the architectural heritage represent the backbone of a healthy urban organism. New mechanisms of change in respect to urban heritage reflect the fluid status of the contemporary city while at the same time questioning the lack of flexibility in the professional practice regarding the preservation of heritage architecture and urban fabric.

The first case study, Constanța's historic peninsula, offers an interesting but difficult dialog between different development eras. The present condition is mainly generated by the lack of clarity, continuity and dialog between professionals, institutions and communities. However, some recent isolated steps have generated important transformations of the area, announcing a possible urban regeneration.

In the case of Bucharest, the radical changes in recent times have generated a typological novelty in the form of a particular urban interstice - the underused spaces between the historical tissue and the communist urban projects. The multiple limitations that come from the two different identities maintain a lack of attitude and initiative in the in-between. By asserting the responsive status of architecture as socially engaging, community inclusive, regenerative and sustainable, the instrument of temporary use could provide the unexpected change that urban heritage awaits.

The role of professionals as mediators exercises the socio-political dimension of architecture and urban planning in preserving, enhancing, and promoting the potential of urban heritage, generating a shift of perception for other involved actors as well (stakeholders, users and local municipalities). Given the present need for social sustainability in the urban environment, new instruments which come from social involvement and activism generate interest and could provide the necessary resource for urban regeneration.

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