The modern mahala: making and living in Romania’s postsocialist slum

Dominic Teodorescu

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Dominic Teodorescu

Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT
Almost 30 years have passed since state-socialism came to an end, and several scholars sought to establish how the Romanian housing market has unfolded within a changing economic context and a strongly altered welfare system. This paper considers the most disadvantaged postsocialist groups in Romanian society and aims to advance our understanding of the housing situation in newly concentrated poor urban spaces. In developing such analysis, this article draws on local insights from Ferentari, a neighborhood in Bucharest where most residents I spoke saw a gradual degradation of their dwelling and living environment and do not expect any improvement soon. Not surprisingly, a strong indifference toward present-day politics and a potentially better and more inclusive space has colonized most minds. By studying their housing conditions and socioeconomic situation, this article aims to illuminate the sudden emergence and diverse character of Romania’s underprivileged neighborhoods: the modern mahalas.

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Introduction
In three postsocialist decades, Romanian cities developed according to neoliberal principles. Flat taxes and decentralized municipal taxation systems were implemented, while claims for social protection were increasingly dismissed by the new political elite (Chelcea and Druță 2016; Ion 2014; Petrovici 2013). As a result, geographic inequalities were accentuated, with Bucharest having the nation’s highest GDP growth rates and absorbing most of the international investments. Bucharest also became fragmented, with newly concentrated housing deprivation at the city’s margins. I will analyze this seeming contradiction by presenting local perspectives on the turbulent changes in the city’s poorest neighborhood, Ferentari. It is now the predominant setting where residents face substandard housing and imminent homelessness.

I refer to new spatial concentrations of substandard housing as a modern version of the mahala. I do so to highlight the Romanian character of
diminishing access to adequate housing among the lower classes. The word mahala, deriving from Ottoman Turkish, once meant neighborhood in Romanian. However, in the decades following the country’s independence (1859), Romanian was “re-Latinized” and mahala was replaced by the French word cartier (Boia 2001). Cartier primarily signified the newly built, modern neighborhood. Mahala instead became the insufficiently urbanized part of the city that “failed to evolve”, stuck in the premodern era. Interestingly, mahala was used by socialist planners to refer to failing prewar capitalist urban planning.

In discussing the “comeback” of the mahala under neoliberalism, I highlight the housing trajectories and conditions of poor (and often) unskilled Romanians that face irregular and informal employment, or structural unemployment. The main aim of this paper is to theorize, within the Romanian context, recently appearing urban slums as modern mahalas. I do this in three steps, with a corresponding section for each step.

First, the paper starts with a theory section, which is structured around the question why the mahala, as a spatial concept, advances understanding of failing housing and planning policies in Romania’s recent history. This approach is clarified by using some Lefebvrian concepts in a regressive–progressive analysis. I employ this type of analysis in order to retroactively determine how the past was produced (regressive analysis) and evaluate how the present is evolving (progressive analysis). The mahala is the starting point when analyzing historical forms of urban marginality in Romania. I use Lefebvrian concepts such as appropriation, urban fragmentation, and spatial diversion to demonstrate how the mahala was never entirely eradicated as a cruel reality or future possibility. Even if most mahalas disappeared under state socialist times, small and poorly built concentrations of blocks of apartments and ongoing neglect of the countryside proved important precursors of the postsocialist housing crisis.

Second, this paper contextualizes the marginal housing situation by showing how a postsocialist slum has been made in Bucharest and what it means to live in it. The second section clarifies how tenure type does not necessarily determine housing quality or social status in the urban periphery, and how (temporarily) abated control over space can lead to new, unauthorized claims on and productions in space. This part of the paper draws on fieldwork in Ferentari. The empirical data “‘give life’ to statistics and reflect on realities of daily life in institutional relationships” (Ronald 2011, 417) by describing the accelerated process of pushing poor households into substandard housing.

Third, I connect the empirics to the neoliberal shift in urbanity to explain how the modern mahala was made within a fragmented, yet economically booming postsocialist Bucharest. The evolution of marginal housing in Romanian urban space has been relatively neglected in the literature and will be highlighted by discussing ongoing urban fragmentation and unequal and unlawful appropriation on the margins (spatial diversion).
The extent to which one can appropriate a fragment of space is increasingly determined by purchasing power, and this process is further accentuated in the modern mahala.

**Placing mahala within the Romanian housing market**

In this consideration of Romania’s local forms of housing deprivation, I opt for a native word (mahala) to capture housing marginalization. The reason for doing so is that the mahala, arguably, never disappeared from Romania’s urban space. My approach critically engages with earlier attempts to explain marginality in Romania. Marcińczak et al. (2014), through an analysis of census data, argue that contemporary urban segregation is rooted in the socialist era. The small dormitory-style blocks of apartments from the 1960s in the southern Sector 5 (where also Ferentari is situated) became, according to them, an “obvious magnet” for impoverished Romanians. Although this picture matches present-day reality, I take issue with their claim that today’s segregation is simply an “ossification” of socialist urban patterns. This shortcoming brings me to the use of spatial concepts such as ghetto (see Sharkey 2013; Nightingale 2012), ethnic neighborhood (see Chorianopoulos, Tsetsiou, and Petracou 2014; Suditu and Vâlceanu 2013; Berescu, Petrović, and Teller 2013), or the “hyper” ghetto (see Berescu 2013, 2011; Vincze 2018; Wacquant 2008, 2007).

To start with the ghetto, Sharkey (2013) demonstrates how this concept is operationalized by geographers as an indicator of the reproduction of poor (US) neighborhoods (with black majorities). From longitudinal data, he draws the conclusion that living conditions are inherited and black households are much more prone to be “stuck in place”. Although many more studies can be reviewed, the point in this is that “ghetto” has acquired within North American literature the meaning of poor, historical, and ethnically segregated part of the city. In the case of Ferentari, we might experience the same persevering inheritance of substandard housing conditions and low socio-economic status in the future, but the reality for now is that “ghetto” – although increasingly incorporated in the Romanian language (ghetou) – is mainly used to indicate relatively recent degraded housing estates or built slums. I do not oppose the use of “ghetou” and surely do not want to impose modern mahala in people’s choice of words. However, for the academic debate, I see three shortcomings in using ghetto as spatial container. First, it tends to relate strongly to physical characteristics of small parts of a larger area with corresponding problems – such as overcrowding, illegality, or tenure insecurity. On several occasions, people told me “but Ferantari’s issues are concentrated to one street”, to Livezilor Alley for example (alternatively called the Bronx or Bronxul in Romanian – see Figure 1). The latter is exactly the setting that this article aims to not overemphasize and this will be inevitable with the way ghetto has been used thus far in Romanian case studies (e.g. Vincze 2018; Mionel and Neguț...
2011). Second, usage of spatial concepts such as “ethnic” or “hyper” ghetto implies ethnic homogeneity. Although there is indeed a disproportionately large presence of ethnic Roma in Ferentari, the neighborhood is also inhabited by ethnic Romanians and mixed households. Third, I wonder why new concepts should be used when – as will be discussed in the remainder of this section – the mahala never entirely disappeared from Romania’s urban space.

A Lefebvrian take on spatial marginality

The concepts that I work with for discussing spatial marginality in the context of the modern mahala are appropriation (Lefebvre [1974] 1991), urban fragmentation (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, [1972] 2016; Stanek 2011), and spatial diversion (Lefebvre [1974] 1991). This approach starts with a regressive analysis in which evolutions of marginal space are analyzed through general processes. The Lefebvrian concepts move us from the abstract to the concrete, from theory to Romania’s reality throughout several moments in time (Lefebvre [1970] 2003, 1996). Once that is established, the empirical data show through a progressive analysis how the modern version of the mahala functions.

But let us start with the first concept, appropriation. Just as with the production of commodities, space is according to Lefebvre ([1974] 1991) abstracted for the sake of controlling it. Space becomes “the second nature of capitalism” and is as a result increasingly pulverized into tradeable lots and parcels which inflates their value. The reason for this is because investments in space generate higher returns on investment than constant capital. Appropriation of this newly produced space is based on exchange value, thereby turning it into a commodity. What is sold is “volumes of space”: rooms, floors, apartments, or various facilities (tennis courts, parking lots), and the relation between the production costs and market price is one that

Figure 1. Aleea Livezilor, the general image of Ferentari, even if it is only one street. Source: The Author.
fluctuates, but that also proves to be resistant to major crises and maintains its value. If not as the sellable object, it will always maintain value for potential spatial development. Housing plays a crucial yet dual role in this. On the one hand, new housing is needed to absorb productive forces and on the other hand, these new urban developments are themselves sources of income (through rents or loans on housing for example). The abstraction (exchange) of residing (use) is part of the homogenization process of appropriation which according to Lefebvre is globally conceived, yet locally realized.

A vital aspect of Lefebvre’s theorization of space is the discovery of centrality. The latter is the “form” of spatial production that aims to concentrate exchange. If space is understood as a potential commodity, then centrality is the actual setting where the intensity of exchange is highest. It is the place where objects, services, or people gather and where appreciation of tradeable space peaks. Centrality is the concrete spatial expression of various ideological systems and establishes the idealized and preferred forms of spatial appropriation (Lefebvre [1972] 2016). The (intrinsic) failure of urban cohesiveness (or limits of centrality) and subsequent disintegration of the working classes is not necessarily excluded from urban agendas or a reason to question centrality. In fact, in several instances, the housing precariat preoccupied the ruling elites. An “uncontrollable, ungovernable, and uninhabitable” city had to be avoided if ruling classes wanted to retain centrality as the dominant spatial form and has as such been the spearhead of numerous national housing strategies (Lefebvre [1973] 1976). Ruling classes were thus increasingly forced to negotiate the “housing threshold of tolerability” of the working classes (Lefebvre [1974] 1991) by enabling appropriation of decent, affordable housing. The idea of turning housing into an object of control started already in the early days of capitalism when working classes were relegated to newly built slums. The search for the threshold inspired the construction of dwellings based on principles that prescribed minimal living space and programmed environments for large groups in society. So, space is not produced by political power but political power rather secures a space in which social relationships develop that reproduce the prevailing power relations (Lefebvre [1974] 1991). City planners and architects offer an empty, neutral space as a spatial container that is ready to receive “fragmentary contents” – “incoherence under the banner of coherence” (p. 208). This abstract space represents spaces inhabited by middle and working classes as rational and nonideological, promoting these spaces as a middle way between the upper classes and the “emancipated” working classes. Nonetheless, when urgent needs are not satisfied, existing spatial structures can be challenged. This is what Lefebvre ([1974] 1991) calls diversion of space. Squatting or illegal construction are examples, but Lefebvre reminds us that this is not quite reappropriation as long as the new usage is not approved. It is a very precarious spatial claim. This latter concept will be further clarified in the empirical section. In the remainder of this section, the concepts of limited appropriation and urban fragmentation will help us critically reflect on assumptions
around “consolidated socialist-era divisions” or “ghettoization”. The extreme housing decay in Bucharest around small apartments might seem straightforward due to the actual use. However, it seems unlikely we would call these quarters gheoturi, ethnic neighborhoods, or quarters behind reproduced socialist poverty lines in case the areas in question continued being maintained and allocation policies avoided overcrowding.

The origins of the mahala and the socialist “de-mahalaization”

Large parts of Romania were under Ottoman rule for centuries, so premodern urban terminology was heavily influenced by Turkish. As noted above, neighborhoods or residential districts were called mahala (from the Ottoman Turkish word mahalle; Boia 2001). However, the word gradually changed into signifying a peripheral area, the place characterized by a lack of infrastructure, sanitation, and public services in combination with slum-like housing (Cinà 2010; Smochina 2012). After the country’s independence from Ottoman rule, the new elite devoted itself to a modernization of urban structures. Romanian sociologist Chelcea (2008) has revealed the modernization mechanisms of this period where the urban accumulation process was backed by a state that guaranteed ownership and the economic power of capital. This enabled Romania’s capitalist classes to own most of society’s wealth by dominating the modes of production and forcing existing labor power (artisans or independent peasants) into the city’s capitalist relations of production when demands rose.

The concrete expression of this initial stage of capitalism was a planned city, a city that according to its ideology was expected to offer new residents better housing. The cartier thus became Bucharest’s urban “form” of centrality – one that in itself was empty (an urban expansion plan for example) but receptive for content. The extent to which Bucharest’s population could buy itself into the cartier mirrored the limitations of the city’s centrality. The city was fragmented and could not overcome its center–periphery division: the mahala persisted as a disintegrated periphery (Cinà 2010)

Subsequently, under socialism, the old mahala became the sworn enemy of socialist planners and was intended to be replaced by the Socialist City (Maxim 2009; Achim 2004). The “de-mahalaization” (desmahalagizare) of cities was accompanied by the constructions of the socialist cartier, also called microraion. This was Romania’s postwar answer to pressing housing needs caused by rapid urbanization. The object of architecture changed. This was no longer a single housing unit but the entire district. Within this district (microraion), a collective lifestyle was envisaged that was not based on class or extended family structures. The provision of public services needed to create an urban society relied on shared institutional resources (Maxim 2009). This decommodified housing model further involved extensive housing subsidies (intended to increase
general housing affordability), central allocation systems that secured dwelling space for the workforce, and state-led construction of large housing estates. Most pre-1948 housing stock was nationalized, and little room was left for self-building. Shortages remained, while the new socialist elites appropriated the bourgeois housing stock from central districts (Chelcea and Pulay 2015; Chelcea 2012; Petrovici 2012).

Nevertheless, housing conditions did improve, and in the bigger cities housing quality became from the 1970s onwards relatively uniform due to the increase of state-led construction and an attempt to even out spatial development (Chelcea and Pulay 2015). The state-led construction efforts culminated in the 1980s with more than 90% of the housing production being state-built (Soaita 2013, 2017). The results of the socialist attempt to create a mahala-free Romania were still relatively poor. For example, nationally only half and one-third of the socialist-era housing stock was connected to sewer and gas, respectively (Soaita 2017); while in the 1980s, these connected houses were rationed (Chelcea and Pulay 2015). In more general sense, Lefebvre would argue that the failure of the state-socialist model lies in the deliberate endeavor to create and reinforce “strong points” or “communist vortices” while abandoning peripheries (countryside/small towns) “to stagnation and relative backwardness and exploitation” (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, 421). Thus, the model never truly abandoned the capitalist process of accumulation but only revised and regulated it. This may also explain why in cities real excesses, harsh segregation, and slum formation were prevented in those days; the homeless were rather “institutionalized” as criminals, orphans, or mentally sick and placed in corresponding institutions (O’Neill 2010).

So, whereas the presocialist mahala was a result of unaddressed inequality in Romanian society, the socialist city was an initial attempt to alleviate socio-economic excesses within its urban spaces. Yet, this did not mean that centrality disappeared from urban space. It was reproduced and accentuated by monumental construction (Maxim 2009), whereas the new working classes were housed in the microraioane (plural for microraion). The abstraction in housing is traced to the standardization of building for the masses, which was sped up by technical advancements and the “disappearance” of the façade. The latter produced a unifunctional repetition of housing in space (Lefebvre [1974] 1991). So, whether we talk about the welfare or command system, both succeeded to sustain growth by overcoming exploitation awareness among the proletariat (Lefebvre [1973] 1976). The outputs of Romania’s industries were, however, insufficient and resulted in an “economy of shortage” that restricted the allocative capacity and, ultimately, means to reproduce at nationwide level (Verdery 1991). The concrete limits of socialist spatial appropriation were to be found in the spaces outside these “communist vortices”. Here, people who were not allocated a space in the microraion continued residing in mahala-style living conditions (Suditu and Vâlceanu 2013).
Microraioane, on their turn, could not overcome center–periphery divisions in terms of housing quality (Marcinczak et al. 2014; Petrovici 2012) and thus characterized the “controlled urban fragmentation” in Romania. The “beneficiaries of socialist victory”, the nomenklatura, were after all the ones residing in the nationalized mansions (Chelcea 2012), the newly built civic center around Unirii boulevard; the working classes were relegated to the microraioane, the newly established tolerability threshold under socialism.

**Postsocialist housing policies**

With the materialization of the super homeownership society (government decree No 61/1990), Romanian legislators soon backed off from active housing politics (Druță and Ronald 2017) and only a small number (25,000 units) of socialist era housing was finished. State-built housing was offered to sitting tenants at very low prices while backed by advantageous loans. The down payment was 10–30% of these undervalued prices, and the loan could be signed for 25 years at low interest rates. Given the extreme devaluation of the Romanian currency, most apartments were practically given away. The years following 1989 were turbulent in an economic sense and massive housing privatization was offered as a “shock absorber” for the dismantling of former welfare programs and the abandonment of public housing construction (Struyk 1996). So, the “threshold of tolerability” was once more negotiated in a critical period of Romania’s recent history. While the Romanian state was no longer able to finance large public housing projects, it arguably reframed “cheap homeownership for all” as a new threshold for sitting tenants.

This time it was the market’s turn to take over production (Amann, Bejan, and Mundt 2013). Postsocialist private construction figures remained low, and by 2014, it represented only 11% of the total housing stock (with 75% and 14% being, respectively, socialist and presocialist built housing). Over a quarter of the newly built housing is (partially) unauthorized and an even larger number is characterized by low-quality construction (Soaita 2014). This is not surprising when one takes into consideration Romania’s poverty figures and poorly functioning bureaucracy. A quarter of all Romanians live in poverty (INS 2016) and another 30% have an income that is “just enough” to live on (Soaita 2012). Poverty is largely attributed to the rise of a postsocialist class of “working poor” (Smith et al. 2008; Slavnic 2010), which are affected by the insecure labor markets (characterized by a rapid segmentation as a result of deindustrialization).

Moreover, rent regulations and housing allowances were put in place for the remaining 2% of the total housing stock that was not privatized (only 0.8% in Bucharest: INS), newly built by Romania’s postsocialist National Housing Agency (ANL), and restituted pre-1948 housing with socialist-era tenants. Hence, rent controls were not intended to open up a larger part of
the housing market to poor households because they did not cover the private rental sector (Lux and Puzanov 2013), which is believed to account for 10% (Amann, Bejan, and Mundt 2013). So unlike in many Western European countries, Romanian rent control and allowance policies did not stimulate concrete and sustainable demand outside the small social housing sector. Lastly, from 2008 onwards, right-to-buy-schemes and mortgage loan guarantee programs were initiated by the state (Druță and Ronald 2017; Amann, Bejan, and Mundt 2013). These austerity measures were intended to financialize also the remaining marginal social housing sector. So, new private production and postsocialist housing policies contributed to the postsocialist fragmentation of urban space. What further added to the fragmentation in Bucharest was the high absorption of foreign capital (Nae and Turnock 2011; Ion 2014), which changed the development logic of a deindustrializing urban landscape into a profit-oriented one. Within this context, urban space accentuated the limits of appropriation for lower income groups and marked the new centralities around quickly developing business districts, shopping malls, leisure activities, and middle- and upper class quarters. It is therefore fascinating to read how Lefebvre was ahead of his time when he wrote that “neo-capitalism” incorporated land and “mobilized” it as a central point of accumulation. Property became after all the leading branch of financial capitalism (see e.g. Aalbers 2015), “albeit in an uneven way” (Lefebvre [1974] 1991) – also in Bucharest. The last subsection will further clarify the postsocialist housing dimensions of inequalities.

**Actual housing inequalities in Romania**

Notwithstanding the marginal role of the Romanian state in affordable housing provision and construction, macro figures show a relative improvement of the housing conditions. Two aspects need, however, to be highlighted before presenting the Ferentari case: the diverse character of homeownership and the geographically uneven distribution of substandard housing. To start with the first, Soaita’s recent contribution (2017) on housing wealth advances the understanding of the broad distinctions in postsocialist housing wealth patterns in Romania. Herein she suggests that exclusion from adequate housing is much more complex than a binary division between tenants and squatters or homeless and homeowners (see also *tenure polarization* in Ronald 2008). She argues that homeownership in postsocialist Romania became a wide category, which is characterized by *unequal inclusion* (based on Buroway 2015). Among those excluded from housing wealth are individuals living cost-free in multigenerational households but without right of possession nor any prospects to move out soon (e.g. Druță and Ronald 2017; Mandić and Mrzel 2017; Soaita 2017).
Not surprisingly, according to Eurostat data (2018), 33.3% of Romanian households lived in substandard housing in 2017. Also, with so many Romanians living in poverty and virtually no public housing left, housing mobility is rather low, while less than 10% of Romania’s housing stock is mortgage-backed (Soaita and Dewilde 2017). When scrutinizing overcrowding rates by tenure type (see Table 1), one will spot, on the one hand, clear differences between homeowners and tenants but will also, on the other hand, get the impression that the figures are shockingly high. The problem with Eurostat (EU-SILC) data is that it is based on a sample size of 5250 households in Romania. It is therefore impossible to give a more detailed overview of Bucharest, especially because Romania’s National Institute of Statistics (INS) does not provide local data on overcrowding rates. What census data does show, however, is that at national level in 2011, 11% of all households had less than 8 m² per member. This figure was 9% for cities and 13.7% for the countryside. It is important to note that the majority of the interviewed households in this study falls in this category of households consuming less than 8 m² per member.

When it comes to housing quality, Bucharest-level data differ significantly from the national figures, in positive sense (see Table 2). There are still two remarkable geographic deviations. The first one is that Sector 5 scores lower than the city’s average. This figure would be even lower if the rich central quarters from the north of this sector (such as Cotroceni) are excluded. Second, the neighboring municipality Jilava, which is in terms of housing conditions a continuation of southern Ferentari, shows figures that are below or around the national averages. Jilava’s figures are noteworthy because the housing situation in the neighboring areas is not only similar, they are also the

| Table 1. Overcrowding rates in Romania by tenure type (Eurostat) and per area (INS). |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
|                                      | 2011 | 2017 |
| Overcrowding rate by tenure type\(^a\) |      |      |
| Outright homeowner                      | 50.8 | 46.7 |
| Mortgage-backed homeowner                | 52   | 40.5 |
| Tenant (market)                          | 77.8 | 67.3 |
| Tenant (public housing)                  | 62.4 | 51.5 |
| Romania                                  | 51.4 | 47   |
| Extreme overcrowding (less than 8 sq. meters per member) |          |      |
| Rural                                    | 11   | -    |
| Urban                                    | 9    | -    |
| Romania                                  | 13.7 | -    |

Source: Eurostat and Romanian Census 2011 (INS), author’s calculation
\(^a\)Eurostat’s definition of overcrowding is not based on surface but on rooms per household members. Therefore, these figures are much higher than the “extreme overcrowding” figures.

| Table 2. Connection to housing-related services in Bucharest, Sector 5, Jilava, and Romania. |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|                                     | Running water | Sewerage | Electricity connection | Central heating | Kitchen | Bathroom |
| Romania                             | 66.7         | 65.1      | 96.6         | 44.4          | 84.6    | 61.9     |
| Bucharest                           | 96.8         | 96.6      | 98.1         | 91.3          | 96.2    | 95.2     |
| Sector 5                            | 93.5         | 93.4      | 95.8         | 80.2          | 94      | 90.9     |
| Jilava                              | 63.6         | 62.5      | 97.4         | 41.1          | 87.3    | 60.2     |

Source: Census 2011 (National Statistics Institute), author’s calculation.
destination for several groups from Ferentari that I followed. Hence, statistical figures do establish the unequal outcomes of postsocialist welfare retrenchment and liberalization, but blur local realities as long as the measured areas and populations are so extensive. Nonetheless, macro-level and Bucharest-level data do show that even near Romania’s biggest labor market and main economic activities, high outright homeownership fails in preventing housing decay or overcrowding. This time, appropriation of decent housing was established not by allocative policies but by the market. Limited construction of new and affordable housing and reduced control over new construction only expands the breeding ground for the modern mahala.

**Research case and methods**

The empirical section of this study focuses on a part of Bucharest that is characterized by socioeconomic hardship. The approximately 120,000 inhabitants of Ferentari (Negulescu, Botonogu, and Zamfirescu 2017) experienced extreme housing degradation, escalating drug abuse, and income insecurity. By 2012, an estimated 12,000 persons lived in poverty in Ferentari (Mionel and Neguţ 2011), and the number may be as high as 36,000 (Negulescu, Botonogu, and Zamfirescu 2017). Most of this poverty is concentrated in the southern side of the neighborhood, an area enclosed by Ţărbăişu Street to the north, Livezilor Street and Alley to the south, Iacob Andrei Street to the east, and Pângărăşti Street to the west. The ethnic composition of this neighborhood is diverse. Roma comprise a major group in the southern part of Ferentari. At city level, Roma constitute only 1.3%, while at sector level (Ferentari is situated in Sector 5) Roma comprise 2.6% of the total. Roma tend to be concentrated in marginal areas where they can constitute over 50% of the population, while they usually make up less than 5% of the total population (Vincze 2018). However, many of my interviewees were not interested in dwelling on their ethnic background.

Overall, I did not use ethnicity as a main criterion for selecting participants in the study. My main goal was to gain a deeper understanding of housing trajectories and conditions in this marginalized neighborhood. In December 2011, The Policy Center for Roma and Minorities (a local NGO) served as a gatekeeper for me. After contacting the first people through them, a snowball effect was initiated. Three fieldworks were carried out, totaling 10 months. The first one took place in 2012 (January–April), the second in 2014 (March), and the third in 2015 (June–October). Although the area is perceived by outsiders as hostile, I never felt threatened. It proved easy to enter the field for observations, have informal chats, and conduct interviews. The selected 31 households reside in socialist-era apartments, detached houses, squatted places, and newly built slums. This resulted in a very diverse group of respondents, ranging from younger newcomers to multi-generational households, homeless persons, and long-time residents. A total of 50 interviews were transcribed, lasting between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Of these, 19 were follow-up
interviews with a selected group of six gatekeepers. This was a group of residents I could always contact and who introduced me to others in their block of apartments or streets. The interview questions were continuously adapted to new understandings of the neighborhood (theoretical sampling).

Observations helped me stay up to date about new developments in the neighborhood and its surroundings, and I took notes from shorter, less structured conversations with residents. Also, one survey was taken (2014) of the housing conditions in apartment building 36 on Livezilor Alley (Figure 1 on the left side) with a total of 87 households. This survey identified what types of tenure existed in that building, how large the households were, and whether people had income or not. Many of the names used in this article are pseudonyms. Although I will not specify which the pseudonyms are, I can say that several respondents stressed the desire to be mentioned by their real names. They thought it was important to have their stories told and did not wish to do so anonymously.

**Living in the modern mahala of Ferentari**

While the previous section highlighted the unequal outcomes of Romania’s postsocialist housing market, this section describes the multiple recent forms of housing deprivation in Ferentari. This is done by presenting a selection of local housing trajectories that together demonstrate the diverse forms by which access to adequate housing is denied. In the first part, I will focus on the consequences of this denial of access to adequate housing in Ferentari (unequal inclusion) – large impoverished families move in, extended families cohabit, and younger generations are unable to move out. The remainder of the section focuses on the continuous pressure of poor households to settle “somewhere” in Ferentari. This section illustrates spatial diversion by showing how new local housing forms and investments intensified housing consumption (overcrowding) by means of subletting or slumlordism. Together, unequal inclusion and spatial diversion are the main indicators of the modern mahala.

**The early refuge to Ferentari – “without money or support, we simply had to”**

The southern part of Ferentari seems to have absorbed much of the postsocialist downsides. Stories from older inhabitants reveal that problematic streets in southern Ferentari were once inhabited by factory workers and conscripts. During socialism, the buildings had hot water and were regularly maintained, and some residents remember flowers in the neighborhood’s public gardens. The blocks in this part of Ferentari were either owned by the Romanian Land Forces or the adjacent factories and consisted mainly of bachelor’s rooms and two-room apartments. Most apartment buildings were built in the first two socialist decades. Overcrowding was avoided due to allocation policies. This active role is vividly and positively remembered by inhabitants:
The blocks during communism were so different ... clean, white ... and we experienced the janitor as a community builder and a guy that was actively raising all issues to either the army or the factories... [W]hen a problem was broached you immediately received money to fix it yourself or to hire someone from ICRAL (state-owned technical service company). Furthermore, the local authorities were putting money in kindergartens, playgrounds, rubbish collecting, school maintenance, and streets. ("Madame Ferentari", February 2012)

Now they live here with five, six, sometimes even ten people in a tiny one-room apartment. It’s a henhouse. When I moved here in 1984 that was because I was sharing my apartment in Rahova with my three adult children. That’s why ICRAL provided me with this house, it was meant for only one person or a couple... those were different times, it was better. (Ana, September 2015)

Several things happened after 1989. First, the sudden departure of many former residents (unemployed factory workers and former conscripts, according to older residents) created a void that was soon to be filled by the poor and disadvantaged. By then, local authorities were not any longer able to offer alternative dwellings for bigger households. Elena was another resident of the time who did not leave. She was living in one of the 13 m² apartments (garsonieră) and was listed for a bigger apartment due to her pregnancy. However, the Romanian Revolution prevented the forthcoming reallocation. Elena further clarifies the departure of many of her former neighbors:

There were many empty apartments because people (initial factory workers or conscripts) had no more livelihoods [in Bucharest]. But the former housing corporation (ICRAL) continued maintaining the houses in the first years... and continued allocating empty apartments to poor house hunters... By 1994 I was offered to buy the house for less than my salary of 300,000 ROL³ (180 USD) ... it costed only 236,000 ROL (142 USD) and this sum could be paid in [monthly] rates ... [O]nly irresponsible and very poor people didn’t get a house in that period. (Elena, March 2014)

The first people to settle in the abandoned apartments were households that could only afford ICRAL’s very low rents – often young families or households from outside the city hoping to make a living in the capital. Many of them were just entering the labor market and often found jobs in the informal sector. In the rest of the quarter, the bigger two- and three-room apartments, detached houses, and lots of land were the way out for households with little capital.

Doru and Maria’s story illustrates the hardship experienced by multigenerational households selling family assets immediately after 1989. In contrast to the socialist era apartment allocation practices, Romanians were now dependent only on the assets they possessed. Doru and Maria, parents by that time of two young children, were living in a three-room apartment with Maria’s parents and her two siblings (with their five children). The end of socialism meant also for them that a housing allocation was no longer an option. In 1993, the family was forced to sell the apartment in Berceni (a neighborhood in southern Bucharest) and split the proceeds. The parents moved back to their
native village and the three siblings had all roughly seven million ROL to spend (at that time 4200 USD, with the average salary before taxes being around 80 USD or 132,000 ROL). The cheapest two-room apartment in their former neighborhood costs 7.5 million ROL (4500 USD), so they needed to search somewhere else.

I didn’t even have money to spend on a pretzel (covrig)… we knew that Ferentari was the refuge for all without much money and support from the state was something of the past… so we simply had to look over there… We knew we were soon moving and the time pressure obviously was giving our hand away to the seller. It was overpriced but we knew there was a high demand for cheap apartments in the area. (Maria, March 2014)

There was no transparency, we had the time pressure and we had to do something. As a matter of fact, most of my neighbors that moved in that period of time had similar backgrounds. (Doru, February 2012)

With two children, the new 25 m² apartment on Tunsu Petre Street was far from ideal and had no warm water – “we clearly didn’t have ‘apartment conditions’ (condiție de bloc)” Maria added. “Apartment conditions” as an expression is used by older residents to specify the socialist lifestyle of the microraion. It signified once the progress represented by a heated apartment with hot running water. When another respondent said, “I left the parental house for an apartment”, she alluded to the move from a rickety mahala dwelling to modern living conditions.

Simona, a former resident, who moved in the late 1990s to Bucharest to study, exemplifies the early move to old and substandard detached houses unconnected to gas or sewerage. Her father wanted to safeguard a better future by enabling her to live in a city with good universities and more job possibilities. With the savings and the profit from the sale of their rural house, they soon realized that with only 3000 USD they could only buy a house in Ferentari. Ferentari did not offer an improvement in housing quality but simply a part of town with cheap and secure shelter. Other cases, such as those of siblings Lia and Marin, demonstrate that a growing group of young Romanians had no capital available to buy a dwelling. Their parents decided to sell their house in the Rahova neighborhood and share the yields. But in their case, only the three older siblings were entitled to a part of proceeds. Marian ended up buying a two-room flat in Ferentari, whereas Lia was one of the unlucky younger siblings. This case exemplifies the unequal inclusion into family housing wealth (Soaita 2017), which forced Lia and her husband Gabriel to turn to a burgeoning rental market in Ferentari for desperate households. The sudden concentration of large and poor households and significant increase of poor homeowners drastically changed the image of the neighborhood. Houses in this part of Bucharest were never luxurious but previous socialist housing policies at least avoided deterioration and overcrowding (Chelcea and Pulay 2015).
The post 2000s situation: slumlordism, housing wealth, and utter misery

The economic decline continued for many more years and many poor people had to renegotiate their presence in the city (Nae and Turnock 2011; Chelcea 2008) or were forced to leave for the countryside. Southern Ferentari became the place to look for cheap alternatives in a failing postsocialist housing system. Accounts from residents indicate that municipal housing queues were too long to consider, and the district office even advised people to find a vacant house so that it could be registered on the finder’s name. Most two- and three-room apartments were filled and the garsoniere (plural for garsonieră) (Figure 2) were from the late 1990s onwards suddenly much sought after. Notably, claims from large households on garsoniere were approved by the district municipality – this procedure seems to contravene the postsocialist housing law (1996) that regulates minimum surfaces and number of rooms. The biggest interviewed household in a public housing unit was a family of eight, living on 13 m². According to the housing law, the municipality had to offer a dwelling with at least 5 rooms with a total surface of 110 m². Nevertheless, given a rapid decrease of public housing, Romanian municipalities were obviously left with little elbowroom. Moreover, the public housing shortage forced many Romanians into squatting (Suditu and Vâlceanu 2013), and this became especially evident in places such as Ferentari. Some apartments were also claimed by middlemen.

As a consequence, people on waiting lists were unable to be offered a place and tried their luck with the parallel housing system. Middlemen offer leasing contracts of 400 RON per month (85 EUR) or illegal purchase agreements of 5000 EUR for a garsonieră. The latter option created a type of homeownership that is highly insecure and potentially hard to valuate when the owners want to sell. According to the French diplomat and former coordinator of

Figure 2. Blocks of apartments with garsoniere and unauthorized extensions.
Source: The Author.
a masterplan for Ferentari, Jérôme Richard, it is uncertain that tenants and owners of illegal dwellings would be offered replacement housing in case of demolition of their residences. Also typical for the neighborhood are the unauthorized recent extensions to the apartment buildings and illegal construction of detached houses and slums.

Many day laborers in Ferentari say that the quarter is a vital space that enables them to live near Bucharest’s considerable (informal) employment possibilities. This explains much of the proliferation of substandard housing and extreme forms of overcrowding. Marin and his family are a good example of tenants who chose to accept a risky 400 RON lease contract when things were at their worst.

We used to live in the center but the Jews (Israeli Romanians) returned to Romania and claimed it [but] we didn’t comply with the restitution claim … We were squatting the house together with two other families … our relatives … with whom we were earning money in the center as parking boys (parcagii, see Chelcea and Iancu 2015)… At one moment special units from the police (mascații – the masked ones) dashed into the Jewish house and made us leave within a day… We were lucky to know this broker in Ferentari that offered us this garsonieră we are now living in with my mom and four siblings. (Marin, March 2014)

Monica and Marian were in a similar situation. Marian was toiling as a day laborer, but during winter, he could not pay the rent for a prolonged period. In the spring of 2003, they were evicted. They left their child with Monica’s mother and lived in a tent in Monica’s cousin’s garden. By autumn, they woke up every morning with dew on their faces and saw no other option than to look in Ferentari for available apartments, and they eventually became tenants in one of the illegally claimed garsoniere. Stories like these exemplify how a new form of slumlordism preyed on the growing number of urban poor in search for housing. The additional problem of this type of slumlordism is that it is also often based on a transgressive ownership form. The illegal ownerships are frequently related to the work of local moneylenders (cămătari) offering loans (with usurious interest rates of up to 100%) for residents in financial trouble. Such activities led to extortion and ultimately to many more evictions; the more so because garsoniere are often demanded as collateral. On paper, however, these garsoniere remained the property of the evictees.

A newer phenomenon is the construction of large detached houses that are subdivided into small apartments, which are rented out. Some owners financed the construction with money saved from working abroad, others most likely from moneylender and slumlord practices in the garsoniere district. The housing conditions in these newly built houses are much better than in most of the socialist era housing estates. However, the rents are also much higher, up to 1000 RON (200 EUR) for a 2-room apartment of 25–30 m². This type of housing wealth among the landlords is arguably a direct outcome of a lack of rent controls and allowances for the rental sector (Lux and Puzanov 2013). Furthermore, it adds to the fragmentation of homeownership in
Ferentari. This type of rental is mainly targeted at households with regular, yet low income that can afford more than the garsoniere rents. Diana and her husband are good examples of such a household. Diana is a minimum wage earner and her husband is a day laborer in the construction industry. They have a sick child who requires an expensive treatment that prevents them from saving money to afford a higher rent.

We have around seven or eight hundred RON to spend on rent. For the rest we need money for food and the [child’s] treatment. Anyway, even with 1,000 or 1,100 RON you won’t find any apartment outside of Ferentari… We’ve been checking imobiliare.ro (a popular real estate website) but see no chance to find something. (Diana, June 2015)

Nonetheless, things can get worse in terms of housing in a country with high functional illiteracy and virtually no safety net. Slum building in Ferentari epitomizes many personal tragedies (Figure 3). The narratives of the slum dwellers I spoke were punctuated with doublespeak regarding the role of local authorities. These show a strong discontent with being second-class citizens (cf. Marcuse 2009; Gilbert and Dikeç 2008), while providing evidence of a silent agreement with council officials and local police whereby informal dwellings and work is tolerated. Slums indicate the extremes of the survival instinct in the postsocialist slum, the modern mahala.

We left Tulcea because after communism we had no more work there… I never went to school so I had to come to Bucharest to collect plastic and scrap… Every day I wake up at seven to work for 30 to 50 RON… The slum dwelling we have is cold in the winter but at least here we’re allowed to stay… [On the other side of the road] at the pipeline it’s much warmer but that grey-haired faggot (bulangiu) from the municipality is constantly evicting us from there. (Mustafa, July 2015)

Figure 3. Mustafa’s slum community.
Source: The Author.
Where else can we live? Only here we are able to live because we are the most wretched community in Bucharest (*suntem cei mai prăpădiți*). (Mustafa’s brother, August 2015)

Moreover, many accounts from the slum dwellers attest to the transience of homeownership in Romania. Evictions due to unemployment or illegal purchase and tenancy contracts are some of the reasons for residing in Ferentari’s slums. This indicates the limited potential of even outright homeownership to meet sudden loss of income. The red tape involved to apply for unemployment assistance and the low level of disability insurance explains to a large degree the incapacity to handle unforeseen costs. Running costs and other expenses make it impossible to make ends meet and indicate the limitations of shelter provision offered by outright homeownership (Soaita 2017). So, even if the latter is argued to be a core component of postsocialist housing wealth – namely to avert homelessness by means of outright homeownership while the shocks of economic reforms are taken by society – the modern mahala represents its antithesis.

Silă’s story highlights the inability to withstand sudden expenses. He lost his job in a factory and as a day laborer he was also unable to fulfill monthly needs. He therefore sold his apartment in Militari (West-Bucharest) and bought an apartment on Tunsu Petre Street, close to Doru and Maria. He lived there until both he and his wife became severely ill and had no hopes for recovery. Moreover, they have an adult son who has an aggressive form of autism. The unpaid bills gave them no other choice than to move again. With the money they received after selling their apartment on Tunsu Petre Street, they were able to satisfy their creditors, pay for their treatments for a while, and acquire some material for a new house on Pângărați Street, which was built directly on the ground (Figure 4). This land was bought from a local broker. The broker

![Figure 4. Silă’s house.](source: The Author.)
sold more lots on this street where many people reside without clear property rights. These streets, with slums and poorly built dwellings, are a hidden part of the modern mahala but link together the notorious streets that usually make the news with reports on criminal activities (Chelcea and Pulay 2015). What is more important to note is that also many of these streets are characterized by recent forms of housing precariat and thus represent an important component in the morphology of the modern mahala. Ferentari’s socioeconomic structure and built environment changed dramatically from the 2000s onwards. The first decade resulted above all in overcrowding in existing housing, whereas the following years signified a quick development of new substandard dwellings. This was partially the result of the residents’ own initiatives and partially because of initiators of cheap rentals and slumlords. This particular development will now be further theorized.

**Bucharest’s neoliberal urbanization and peripheral place-making**

The first section of this paper established through a regressive analysis how the mahala never disappeared as a fragmented reality or possibility of urban space during the prewar and socialist eras. Nonetheless, both periods have experienced their triumphs of centrality. The limited chances to access better living conditions were waived away by promising, yet limited developments. This section continues with a progressive analysis of the mahala. It shows how unequal inclusion and spatial diversion are the primary developments that constitute the limited means of modern mahala dwellers to appropriate space. To start with the former, we need to first consider the steep increase of average dwelling size in recent years. This demonstrates, in the case of Bucharest, two things. On the one hand, a large number of Romanians succeeded in buying themselves into bigger dwellings. One can thus argue that cheap privatization of public housing, restitution policies, and authorization of private initiatives formed a solid new threshold of tolerability. However, what remains neglected is the consequences for people dealing with structural unemployment or working in the informal labor market. Overall, postsocialist Bucharest produced a space in which the Bucharester lives on average in 19 m$^2$. My survey, on the other hand, discovered extremes where people live in less than 4 m$^2$ – whereas Chelcea, Popescu, and Critea (2015) indicate that central districts have average surfaces of 29 m$^2$ per person (see Table 3). Even if Ferentari-level overcrowding was by no means a policy aim, it was also not prevented by housing policies nor addressed by private initiatives.

Socialist era allocation policies were in that regard much more effective at the scale of the city. The discrepancy between the aims of actual housing policies (ANL) and peripheral housing conditions in Bucharest illustrates the impotence of the state to combat overcrowding and uncontrolled growth of slums. Furthermore, concentration of the housing precariat in the modern mahala
reveals deliberate action that aimed to remove poverty and degradation from the central and potentially profitable part of the city. Studies by O’Neill (2010, 2014), StudioBASAR (2010), Paraschiv (2012) Lancione (2017), and Ion (2014) illustrate this process. Concrete outcomes were the construction of new homeless shelters outside the central districts or evictions of entire communities from centrally squatted dwellings. The “non-ideological” reasoning on which such action is based is found in the city’s “rational” planning and zoning plans. But even if “second-class” citizens are expelled on legal grounds and planning affordable housing construction is postponed due to limited funds, they continue being attracted to the city due to the proliferating informal work in Bucharest (Chelcea and Iancu 2015). This political setting is one that Lefebvre ([1974] 1991, [1972] 2016; Stanek 2011) seemingly refers to when highlighting the limits of positivist schemes of cohesion that are perceived as nonideological in abstract sense, yet are fragmented in concrete expressions.

Returning to Marcińczak et al.’s (2014) point, Bucharest’s new peripheries are not simply a reification of socialist-era poverty lines. The uncontrolled peripheralization of Ferentari is a development in which different processes occur at the same time. Next to unequal inclusion in privatized socialist-era apartments spatial diversion became the other important component of the modern mahala’s spatial production. When diversion occurs,

an existing space may outlive its original purpose and the raison d’être which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, re-appropriated and put to use quite different from its initial one. (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, 167)

Diversion of space is seemingly essential in understanding postsocialist Bucharest, for diversion may enable groups to secure a residence in spaces whose pre-existing form was either designed for another purpose or for a different community. The most evident outcomes are newly built slums that resemble the old-style mahala, i.e. houses built without foundations and made of clay straw walls and recycled materials. In Lefebvre’s words, these slums are “superimposed” on a rational and homogenized space that, seen through its representations of space (zoning plans and housing policies),


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<td>Romania</td>
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<td><strong>Average household size per dwelling</strong></td>
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Source: National Statistics Institute (INS), author’s calculation.
should not permit such constructions or uses. But also the work of local slumlords and private landlords demonstrates how the situation of excluded households and tolerance of transgressive actions can be capitalized through spatial diversion. This then also highlights the cruel stages that might succeed initial diversion. Several slums have been bulldozed in recent years and the rest are likely to follow. Tackling slumlords is harder to do and requires more political commitment. Thus, I argue that concrete and lasting products of diversion are the illegal rental networks and the new houses that are divided into small apartments. Although building permits often exist for the latter, those permits certainly did not encompass the approval to use the building as a block of flats. Diana and others clarified that they are not allowed to register at that address nor do they receive documentation for the rents they pay. But as long as no real alternatives are provided to this group, diversion seems only to turn into appropriation where wealthy slumlords are involved and, thus, to be a reifying form of substandard housing conditions.

**Conclusion**

[The housing shortage] cannot fail to be present in a society in which the great masses of the workers are exclusively dependent upon wages, that is to say, on the sum of foodstuffs necessary for their existence and for the propagation of their kind; in which improvement of the existing machinery continually throw masses of workers out of employment; in which violent and regularly recurring industrial vacillations determine on the one hand the existence of a large reserve army of unemployed workers, and on the other hand drive large masses of workers temporarily unemployed onto the streets; in which the workers are crowded together in masses in the big towns, at a quicker rate than dwellings come into existence for them under existing conditions; in which, therefore, there must always be tenants even for the most infamous pigsties; and in which finally the house owner in his capacity as capitalist has not only the right, but, in view of competition, to a certain extent also the duty of ruthlessly making as much out of his property in house rent as he possibly can. In such a society, the housing shortage is no accident; it is a necessary institution.

Although this quote could summarize the present-day situation in Ferentari, it is an excerpt of Engels’ polemic from 1872 against Proudhon (Lefebvre [1972] 2016, 98). Nevertheless, the message is timeless. Engels argues that one does not solve social inequality by addressing the housing situation. It is rather the other way around, namely that the limited means to appropriate are first required to be addressed, prior to dealing with the housing question. Hence, even before massive public housing projects were proposed as negotiated midways between classes, Engels was already warning that such negotiation would only reproduce marginality. The lack of cohesive urban development was in the case of prewar and socialist Romania experienced by all Romanians who did not have access to a decent dwelling. The first capitalist era accentuated the harsh divisions between cartiere
and mahalas (Cinà 2010). The country’s socialist administration attempted to industrialize and urbanize the country but failed, due to the misfiring socialist economy, to secure decent housing conditions beyond the “communist vortices” (while fragments persisted also within the strongholds). During recent times, this study identifies a complex revival of the mahala within the former socialist, industrial strongholds.

The literature on housing policies helps demonstrate how these were unable to prevent the excesses of the modern mahala. The empirical section subsequently clarifies how a group of urban poor, lacking substantial financial and regular income, were relegated to marginal housing. The fragmented housing realities are the new nature of the modern mahala and its final form is not fully crystallized. On the one hand, extreme forms of unequal inclusion characterize the new housing consumption. On the other, ongoing construction of apartments in Ferentari with relatively cheap rents indicates a new wave of investments toward poor households. Also, alarming reports from the possible evictions of 500 let garsoniere demonstrate that forced evictions are no longer limited to central areas (O’Neill 2010; Lancione 2017). The latter example concerns apartments on Iacob Andrei Street in which sitting tenants were offered to buy their garsonieră for 5000 EUR. In the autumn of 2015, a mass eviction was avoided by a provisional ruling of the local municipality. Nevertheless, it is not unthinkable that even in the modern mahala, land prices will change, rent gaps will appear, and that most deprived residents will be pushed even further to the margins of Bucharest. In fact, slum clearance is already threatening most hovels built on public space.

This brings us to the concept of spatial diversion. The initial concretized aspirations of poor city dwellers (claiming a space in Bucharest) are in most cases doomed to fail. I observed such failures in several visits to the southern neighboring village of Jilava, where slums arose inhabited by people that were previously evicted from Ferentari or did not dare to build in Bucharest. However, less visible forms of diversion, such as illegal rentals, are likely to persist and allow their exploiters profit from the appropriation of space in Ferentari. Hence, the modern mahala is revived, seems ageless, and its ongoing development is increasingly characterized by a pursuit of profit.

Notes

1. Over 9 of 10 Romanians live in an owner-occupied dwelling (96.5% according to EU-SILC, 2013 – from 67% in 1989).
2. This figure is an accumulation of housing deprivation items (defined by Eurostat) per household. Examples of such items are a leaking roof or no bathroom. So, for example, households with only one housing deprivation item constitute 7.7% of the total stock, whereas those with 4 or more amount to 23.3% of the total.
3. In this document, I use ISO 4217 currency codes. ROL signifies the third Romanian leu, in use between 1952 and 2005. RON signifies the revalued Romanian leu (at a rate of
10,000 ROL per one RON) and was in use from 2005 onwards. These two currencies I use for the corresponding periods. Also, I use USD (US dollar) for the first post-socialist period when many of my informants sold their houses in USD. The USD is calculated with the exchange rate of that period. Furthermore, I use EUR (Euro) to specify the present price.

4. This masterplan was finalized and accepted in 2018.

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ORCID

Dominic Teodorescu http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8287-2213

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