

CASE STUDY

The Avenue of the Victory of Socialism, Bucharest, Romania: a government precinct (1977–89 but continuing)

After World War II a communist dictatorship was established in Romania under President Nicolae Ceausescu. Ceausescu initiated a number of large-scale urban design projects as part of his programme to turn Romania into a modern country. These efforts focused on Bucharest, a city that was badly damaged by a major earthquake in early 1977. In rebuilding the city Ceausescu announced that new buildings would have to be designed along modern lines. He also seized the opportunity to demolish many structurally sound areas to enable him to build a new government complex. The complex was to be a celebration of his new political order. It was also an opportunity to get rid of a quarter of the city that was full of single-family houses belonging to the old power and intellectual elite. As Ceausescu proclaimed:

I am looking for a symbolic representation of the two decades of enlightenment we have lived through; I need something grand, something very grand, which reflects what we have already achieved (Ceausescu cited in Cavalcanti, 1997).

The public interest was defined in Ceausescu's own terms.

Ceausescu's chief architect, Dr Alexandru Budisteanu, believed that the development of monumental boulevards was the way to create a beautiful city. Like other architects working for dictators he had Paris in mind. One of Ceausescu's desires was to build a Victoria Socialismului (Victory of Socialism) civic centre in Bucharest. To achieve it he

worked outside the existing legal framework for city planning in Romania by establishing a new law and building regulations governing the reconstruction of cities in the country to suit his purposes. The aim was to demolish villages (urban and rural) and replace them with his own view of modern urban design and modern architecture. Any remark he made was taken as a design directive. Architects who protested lost their jobs.

The site chosen for the civic centre project was in the Uranus district of the city because of its historic importance and elevated location. A competition for the design of the civic centre was held in 1978 in order to give the appearance of democratic decision-making. It was a sham. The programme was announced verbally and Ceausescu chose the winner, Anca Petrescu, despite the presence of jury members drawn from the nation's architectural elite. Demolition of the site began in 1978 with many of the inhabitants being given only 24 hours notice to vacate their houses. Forty thousand people were displaced and relocated on the outskirts of the city. Their departure impoverished the social and intellectual life of central Bucharest because the displaced included artists, professors, writers and many craftspeople.

A grand boulevard, the Bulevardul Victoria Socialismului (Avenue of the Victory of Socialism, but now Bulevardul Unirii), 3.5 kilometres in length (purposefully longer than the Champs Elysées in Paris) and 92 metres in width was driven through parts of the historic core of the city and lined with 'North Korean' style Socialist buildings (see