

Social implications of communist-era residential neighbourhood planning: from the utopia of the microraion to urban reality

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Implicații sociale ale planificării cartierelor rezidențiale din perioada comunistă: de la utopia microraionului la realitatea urbană. Lucrarea analizează modul în care ideile și teoriile pot modela geografia urbană, punând accentul pe unul dintre cele mai elocvente exemple ale relației dintre ideologie și spațiu: orașul comunist. Sub acest regim totalitar, dezvoltarea urbană nu a fost ghidată doar de considerente economice și funcționale, ci și de o viziune politică care urmărea transformarea societății și crearea „omului nou” prin însăși organizarea spațiului. Studiul se concentrează pe un model urbanistic specific, microraionul, explorând trăsăturile sale distinctive în comparație cu alte modele de planificare teritorială din perioada comunistă, analizând totodată aplicarea acestui concept în cartierul Drumul Taberei din București. Importat din U.R.S.S., microraionul a fost conceput ca o unitate relativ autonomă, un nivel intermediar între blocul de locuințe și cartierul în ansamblu. Acesta pune accent pe integrarea locuințelor colective cu facilitățile de zi cu zi (școli, magazine, spații verzi) pe o rază pietonală de aproximativ 500 de metri, permițându-le locuitorilor, cel puțin în teorie, să își satisfacă nevoile zilnice fără a fi nevoiți să părăsească perimetrul microraionului. În condițiile în care dezbaterile actuale de urbanism etichetează adesea cartierele socialiste drept simple „cartiere-dormitor” monofuncționale, lucrarea argumentează că o astfel de abordare este contraproductivă. Aceste structuri au o permanență materială puternică și continuă să ne influențeze viața de zi cu zi. În loc să ignorăm sau să desconsiderăm aceste spații, putem încerca să le înțelegem mai bine pentru a putea concepe politici urbane pragmatice și strategii eficiente, capabile să adapteze această moștenire la nevoile urbane actuale și viitoare.

Cuvinte cheie: geografie urbană, microraion, urbanism socialist, cartier, Drumul Taberei.

Social implications of communist-era residential neighbourhood planning: from the utopia of the microraion to urban reality. The paper examines how ideas and theories can shape the urban geography, focusing on one of the most striking examples of the relationship between ideology and space: the communist city. Under the socialist regime, urban development was guided not only by economic and functional considerations but also by the political vision that sought to reshape society and create a “new man” through the organization of space itself. The study focuses on a specific urban model, the microraion, exploring its distinctive features in contrast to other urban models of the communist period, as well as the concrete application of the concept in Drumul Taberei neighbourhood of Bucharest, Romania. Imported from the U.S.S.R., the microraion was designed as a relatively autonomous unit and an intermediary level between the apartment block and the wider neighbourhood. It prioritized collective housing integrated with everyday amenities (schools, shops, green spaces) within a strict 500-meter pedestrian radius, theoretically allowing residents to fulfil their daily needs without leaving their district. As contemporary planning debates frequently dismiss the socialist neighbourhoods as mere monofunctional “sleeping districts”, this paper argues that such an approach is counterproductive given the material permanence of these structures, which continue to shape everyday urban life. Rather than dismissing these spaces, we should try to better understand them in order to design pragmatic and effective strategies capable of adapting these inherited spaces to contemporary and future urban needs.

Keywords: urban geography, microraion, socialist urbanism, neighbourhood, Drumul Taberei.

1. INTRODUCTION

Geography is usually associated with the study of landforms, climate and natural processes that shape the physical world and human life. Yet, cities can become sites for the “social production of nature” (Tonkiss, 2013: 136) and for many people, their relationship with the natural elements is mediated through the anthropogenic environment in which they live, and the settlement where they reside becomes their primary known geography. Cities must be therefore understood as natural environments in themselves, a form of “socio-nature” (Tonkiss, 2013: 115), organized as human ecosystems that integrate and through which both biophysical resources and sociocultural factors (institutions, beliefs, norms, and information) circulate (Tonkiss, 2013: 118).

Unlike natural landscape, these urban geographies are shaped not only by physical or objective factors, but by visions and ideological projects, theories and immaterial ideas, that can mold the layout of cities and change the everyday life of their residents. In this sense, this paper examines how ideas can create the physical form of cities by focusing on one of the most striking examples of the relationship between ideology and space: the communist regime, under which socialist leaders, architects and urban planners regarded the shaping of space as a mean of shaping society, assigning this role to the socialist state to a far greater extent than the capitalist countries (Hirt, 2006, apud Zubovich, 2024: 5). Therefore, in communist countries architecture was not a simple shelter, but a “physical manifestation of the success of the socialist system” (Zarecor, 2011: 176).

Through its all-dominating nature, the totalitarian state, especially in Romania, had the unfortunate ability to concentrate all the resources and dictate all the policies, thus having the possibility to test and implement the urban planning theories at a large scale, the state being the sole owner, investor and promoter of architecture (Zahariade, 2011: 28).

Out of all the socialist urban planning theories, the most prominent and the one chosen for this study is the microdistrict theory, which was a “scientific” adaptation of the American concept of the “neighborhood unit”, originally developed by the urban planner Clarence Perry in the 1930s (Stanilov, 2007: 181). This approach was quickly assimilated throughout the Eastern Bloc, becoming the basis for the new organization of complex urban ensembles and it shapes the post-communist cities to this day. Unlike cities in Western Europe, where only 3-7% of the housing stock consists of large residential complexes, in large cities in Central and Eastern Europe between 40% and 50% of the housing stock belongs to this type of development, housing over half of the urban population of these countries (Stanilov, 2007: 181).

The microraion (or micro district as designated in the western sources) is a structural base unit of the communist city, imported from the Soviet Union (Gusti, 1954: 17) which was focused on providing collective housing and everyday amenities for the population, fulfilling the basic necessities of the inhabitants through carefully placed institutions, shops and recreational spaces prioritizing easy access, within approximately 500 m from the housing units (Sebestyen, 1962: 12-13).

From a hierarchical perspective, the microraion is an intermediary urban structure between the block of flats and the neighbourhood (Enache, 1964: 49), and, in theory, it should enable the residents to fulfil their day-to-day needs without leaving the microraion.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Study area

As the specificities of the communist regimes vary from country to country and the long period of wide-scale socialism in the Eastern Bloc offers multiple iterations of city planning visions, for the purposes of this paper the analysis will focus only on one of the communist urban planning models – the microraion – and on one particular national case study – Drumul Taberei neighbourhood in Bucharest, Romania.

The Drumul Taberei complex was built in the western part of Bucharest, on land used in the past as a military training ground, which was left abandoned, although its location held potential for the city's development (Stănescu, 1964: 18).

This neighbourhood represents one of the few examples in Bucharest where the evolution of socialist urbanism can be observed within a single area, its development incorporating successive territorial planning theories.

From the 1950s Soviet-inspired cvartal, based on the organization model of residential complexes, following the Party and State Decision of November 1952 (Apostol, 1987: 12) to an almost modernist vision of the 1960s which employed “the free implantation of housing and facilities in the green space through which the street network meanders” (Nadrag, 1967: 21), resembling the theory of the towers in the park of Le Corbusier (Odobescu, Bird, 2018: 116). From the adoption of the microraion model, “in order to eliminate the shortcomings in the quality of housing involved in the cvartal solution” (Apostol, 1987: 13) to high-rise developments of the 1970s and 1980s, which gives the sleeper neighbourhood character known today.

Therefore, this space can be analysed as a breeding ground for the implementation of the microraion in Bucharest, as well as a case study of the contemporary social impact of different planning models during the communist regime.

2.2. Study design

The study focuses on reconstructing the theoretical framework of the 1960s microraion typology by corroborating planning documentation found in the specialized publications and articles of the communist era, analysing the way the microraion was presented in the media of the communist period. As there is no general model or guidebook for the construction of microraions in Romania, the paper uses the state-media sources of the communist period to summarize the professional tendencies and evolution of approaches in the construction of these types of urban structures.

The method used for this objective was the documentary analysis of the mentions of the “microraion” and “Drumul Taberei” neighbourhood in the state media between 1947 and 1989, in different news and media outlets, available in the Romanian data base Arcanum. As the state press was usually a mechanism for propaganda in that period, the filtering of the opinions and media-presented image of the microraion was done by focusing the conclusions of this study mainly on the specialized publications of the time such as *Revista Arhitectura*, which is known to have a degree of professional objectivity, while the other sources were used to better understand the context of the analysed period.

The paper also examines the implementation of the theoretical framework of the microraion concept using a case study on Drumul Taberei neighbourhood, focused on the evolution of this part of the city from idea to built form, based on documentary analysis of historical sources as well as field observation of the present-day structure of the neighbourhood.

Moreover, in order to understand the contemporary implications of the communist city planning, the study maps the everyday amenities (which are central to the concept of the microraion) that exist today in the neighbourhood, showcasing that the socialist urbanism left a deeply ingrained footprint on our city and still shapes the everyday lives of the residents.

For this component, the services and amenities existent today in Drumul Taberei were mapped using a web-based data filtering tool for OpenStreetMap (i.e. OverpassTurbo), alongside manual verification using Google Maps, Google Earth and Google Street View. Based on this data, the maps in this paper were made using an open-source GIS software (i.e. QGIS).

3. RESULTS

3.1. The microrraion theoretical framework – typology, models and differences from prior neighbourhood planning theories

3.1.1. The context in which the microrraion was developed

Before further describing the microrraion, it is necessary to understand the context in which it came to be and the constructive model for socialist housing before the 1960s. During the first years of communism in Romania, the “cvartal” (in English roughly translated as “quarter”) typology dominated the structural form of new urban organization. This model was based on quarters made up of enclosures, semi-enclosures, street alignments and, to a much lesser extent, independent blocks of flats (Silianu, 1962: 7). The 4- or 5-story blocks of flats usually created an inner courtyard with a green space or a recreational zone which could also have a small shop or a nursery for children.

This system of blocks was mostly non-invasive and opted for the construction of the ensembles, especially the small ones, of 3-6 hectares (Budişteanu, Rău, 1960: 22), in the empty plots along the existing streets, being usually relatively well integrated in the existing urban fabric (Zahariade, 2011: 54). This led to the creation of rather rigid and geometric ensembles, and, due to the constraint of following the alignment of the streets along the contour and having multiple small buildings inside the complex, a very dense street network was needed (Budişteanu, Rău, 1960: 22). Due to the limited surface area, it was difficult to comfortably accommodate the facilities needed by a community in such a structure. The blocks usually only managed to include a small park and preschool institutions, but they did not have the necessary space for larger shops, sports fields or cultural amenities (Budişteanu, Rău, 1960: 22).

Moreover, the housing blocks in the cvartal were usually built in the socialist realist neoclassical-inspired architectural style, with brick and quality materials, also making use of decoration and ornamentation (such as columns and colonnades). Therefore, this constructive style was rather expensive and time-consuming to build, in a rapidly industrializing society that needed mass housing.

In this context, the microrraion model emerged as a technological and efficiency necessity, aiming to offer dense neighbourhoods, with sufficient amenities for the inhabitants, using industrialized and cheap construction methods such as panel-block building.

Form an ideological perspective, the microrraion opposes the capitalist and individualist bourgeois city, which is characterised by the individual housing units and the clear distinction between the elite neighbourhoods and the way of living and the proletariat. In the capitalist society, the bourgeois owner tended to isolate himself from the social environment, his home being a self-contained unit, based on self-service

(Gusti, 1959: 34). In the communist society, the services were communal and equal and the need for private space was meant to shrink as the “new socialist man” had to focus on the collective project rather than its own family and home.

Although the territorial planning concept of microraion was not inherently new and had many similarities with the “neighbourhood unit” (ro. unitate de vecinătate), which appeared in the capitalist world, the regime tried to distance the socialist model from its precursor. The neighbourhood unit was ideologically criticized as an utopian solution, whose principles might be beneficial, but whose applicability is restricted because of the “imperialist and corrupted underlying objectives” (Gusti, 1959: 34), thus “creating only isolated islands in antagonistic relations with the anarchic structure of the capitalist city, dominated by the law of profit” (Gusti, 1959: 34).

In practice, the key difference between the neighbourhood unit and the microraion lays in scale and replicability. The microraion is planned to be extended throughout the entire urban territory so that the city is not a mere agglomeration of residential “islands”, but a unitary and harmonious ensemble. While principles of the two models might concede, the means for implementation are radically different: the capitalist city relies heavily on individual and private projects, which should respect urbanistic norms, but have inherently the freedom of choice over the scale, objectives and techniques used. In contrast, the communist city has the only initiative, all the resources and the means to dictate the entire urbanistic development, having the possibility to test and develop a model at a greater scale. Therefore, the microraion acts as a concrete building block for creating the city, rather than a theoretical concept.

3.1.2. Microraion structural models, their advantages and deficiencies

As previously described, the microraions can come in multiple shapes or forms, but for a coherent functioning of such urban component, the model needs a focal point, acting as a polarizing nucleus, not only from an urbanistic or architectural perspective, but also from a sociological need for organizing the space according to people’s lives and actions.

Therefore, through the documentary sources researched for the purposes of this paper, the following three distinct microraion centres typologies have been identified, each representing an all-encompassing necessity, that most of the families housed in the microraion would have had in common:

- the school, as the centre of the microraion, which gives rise to the most prominent and frequently described structure in the specialized literature of the time. In this model, the elementary school with 16 or 24 classes was considered the characteristic that determined the size and population of a microraion (as

an elementary school would serve approximately 6,000 - 8,000 inhabitants) (Sebestyen, 1962: 12);

- the industrial plant, as an everyday work destination. In this model the industry is treated as a functional area organically integrated into the neighborhood (Enache, 1964: 50);
- the commercial complex, as the centre of the microraion, to accommodate the consumer needs and frequent shopping trips of all categories of inhabitants.

Out of the three mentioned models, surprisingly, the preferred and most debated one was the microraion organized around the elementary school.

This is because, while the industrial neighbourhood model would be a more obvious choice for the communist rapidly industrializing society, it has a series of strong territorial planning disadvantages that cannot make this model a universally applicable and replicable structure. The main argument against this model is the impossibility of completely eliminating pollution factors such as smoke, noise, vibrations, dust, odors or radiation, in spite of the modern technological advancement (Enache, 1964: 53). From an urbanistic perspective, including the industrial site within the housing area would also lock pedestrian flows and act as physical barriers, separating the microdistricts from each other and cutting off the natural links of the community.

As for the commercially-oriented microraion model, the placement of the main neighbourhood shopping centre in the middle of the microdistrict was often avoided (initially preferring to locate it on the edge or on the periphery) due to conflicts between the logistics necessity for large scale commerce and the ideal of a quiet living within a mostly pedestrian neighbourhood. Although the central location has the advantage of providing easy access service to residents, it would however mean introducing car traffic and freight vehicles into the heart of the neighbourhood. This would also potentially attract residents from neighbouring microdistricts, who would have crossed the interior of the residential district by car, disturbing the tranquillity of the area. (Sebestyen, 1962: 12-13).

Moreover, the optimal functioning of a shopping centre requires storage, operational spaces and parking lots, which, if placed in the middle of the microraion, would undermine the potential for green space and recreational facilities (Sebestyen, 1962: 12-13).

3.1.3. The preferred model: centring the microraion around a school

Given the mandatory nature of elementary education in Romania, the communist urbanists considered that a very large percentage of the neighbourhood's families had or would have had at least a child using the basic education institutions daily for an extended period of 7 years (kindergarten and elementary school). Therefore, placing the

school in the middle of the mostly pedestrian microdistrict would ensure a safe environment for the children that would not have to travel long distances or cross heavy traffic in order to be able to walk on their own from their home to the school, also liberating the parents from the daily chore of accompanying the children. Moreover, as the specialists of the time noticed that children returning from school were often left unattended while the parents were still at work, it was proposed that the microdistrict schools should take on extended functions, with student clubs, libraries and play areas, where children can spend their free time (Florescu, 1969: 39).

It is important to note that the microdistrict model centered on educational facilities strictly refers to the elementary school as compositional unit. High schools and middle schools serve a much smaller percentage of the population (only 4-5%) (Budişteanu, Rău, 1960: 23). Therefore, high schools would not have been located in every microdistrict and were usually identified at the level of the neighbourhood, as they were justified only for larger groups, serving the population of several microdistricts together (Budişteanu, Rău, 1960: 23).

A study from 1962 (Sebestyen, 1962: 13) showed that for 10,000 sqm of urban space, there was a need for 15 nurseries, 38 places in kindergartens and 135 places in elementary schools.

Regarding the visual representation of this model, the first calculations proposed for the microraion blueprint a circle with a radius of 500 meters, which would encompass a vast service area of about 80 hectares (Sebestyen, 1962: 11-12). This shape could have included a large number of homes, but it turned out to be too extensive for optimal needs. Therefore, experts of the time concluded that the optimal size of the microdistrict should be reduced to 25-30 hectares (to serve 6,000-8,000 inhabitants), which geometrically corresponds to a square with sides of approximately 500-550 meters (Sebestyen, 1962: 12). These models are, however, theoretical.

In any case, even though the school-centred model dominated the urban planning of the microdistricts, the architects of the time began to question whether the elementary school should remain the main facility that determined the structural composition of the city and therefore, the model began to be viewed with more flexibility over time.

3.1.4. Public services and facilities in the microraion

In the 1960s conception of the socialist city, the services and facilities provided to the public were based on a hierarchical structure, corresponding to the frequency of the population's needs (daily, periodic and occasional) and the size of the groups of residents served (Budişteanu, Rău, 1960: 22). This structure ensured that each level of the city (group of dwellings, microraion, neighbourhood and city) was taking on specific

complementary tasks, which would not only have the advantage of predictability and better servicing for the users, but would also represent an economical model for the state.

Despite the different models of microraions, the common ground is that, essentially, the microraion is designed to provide everything a family needs on a daily basis, from dropping off a child at daycare to buying bread, leaving only trips for specialized healthcare, cultural events or major shopping at the neighbourhood or city level.

3.2. From theory to practice: the evolution of Drumul Taberei neighbourhood

The best example to illustrate the microraion and the evolution of the territorial planning in the communist Romania is the Drumul Taberei neighbourhood in Bucharest, which observes all the most important urbanistic theories and implementation tactics of the time.

3.2.1. The evolution of housing in the microdistrict

The first housing development begun construction in 1954 and can be included in the cvartal typology, designed in the socialist realist style. The complex was built from brick, with a concrete belt, making use of moderate decoration and ornamentation, with details inspired by the neoclassical style. The blocks of nearly 600 apartments were constructed for the employees of the Ministry of Armed Forces and the buildings created an inner courtyard with a park and plenty of green space (Voinea et al, 2024).

As the cvartal model was abandoned in Romania in the early 1960s – following the shift in architectural discourse initiated by the U.S.S.R. leader Nikita Khrushchev after 1954, when he condemned the excesses of Stalinist architecture and promoted a more functionalist approach to urban planning – the plans for Drumul Taberei integrated a transitional period, before adopting the full-fledged microraion typology.

The following urbanistic experiments (approx. 1958-1961) in the Drumul Taberei neighbourhood illustrate the adoption of the modernist concept of functionalist cities as well as the indirect exchange of ideas between the East and the West.

This influence is visible in the first development of the Drumul Taberei neighbourhood, which is known to have been shaped by the principles of the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier's (Odobescu and Bird, 2018: 116) Ville Radieuse city planning model. The first 17 blocks of flats, designed by the architects Marcel Hornstein and Mircea Săndulescu included 860 apartments (473 with two rooms and 387 with three rooms) and occupied only 15% of the total land area, the rest of space being designated to green spaces, leisure and circulation (Institutul Proiect București, 1961:

21). This way, on a surface of 7,5 ha was obtained a density of 500 inhabitants/ha (Institutul Proiect Bucureşti, 1961: 21).

Regarding the constructive structure of the blocks, for a rapid execution, they were designed on a GF+4 stories plan using “reusable sections” (Institutul Proiect Bucureşti, 1961: 21), meaning a standardized segment plan, which can be multiplied and used with minimal adaptations in different architectural projects. This model is a precursor for the standardized design of the prefabricated blocks. Because the large-scale utilization of the standardized projects could create a monotonous and rigid look of the neighbourhood, the architects also opted for different aesthetic details, such as colourful facades, green spaces and playgrounds (Institutul Proiect Bucureşti, 1961: 21).

From a services perspective, according to the identified sources, this unit of blocks would have been served by the stores and amenities of the future facilities that were to be included at the microraion level (Institutul Proiect Bucureşti, 1961: 21). Therefore, this stage of the neighbourhood is not a microdistrict in itself, but a transitional experiment, which was viewed as part of a future microraion, that would have been equipped with all the necessary social buildings.

The next stage of the development of the Drumul Taberei neighbourhood took on larger proportions, leaning into the microraion theory and extending on a territory of 420-450 hectares (Colea et al., 1972: 78), divided into 10 complex housing units (micro-districts). Between 1963 and 1966 the first large micro-districts were built: 1, 2, 3 and 8, which combined 18,955 apartments, housing approximately 60.000 people (Colea et al., 1972: 82). The other micro-districts (4, 5 and 6) were constructed in the 1970s on a territory of 110 hectares with 20,000 apartments (Lazarescu, 1980: 9), while micro-districts 7 and 7' brought an additional approximately 12,000 apartments especially in GF+10 buildings (for 33,800 inhabitants) (Colea et al., 1972: 82).

In Drumul Taberei, the architects adopted a free landscape compositional system, using winding street routes (Nadrag et al., 1967: 21) and planting different types of buildings in the middle of green spaces, such as bar blocks (ro. blocuri bară) and point-type blocks (ro. blocuri punct). The GF+4 blocks represent approximately 35% of the buildings of the neighbourhood, while GF+9 or GF+10 blocks represent approximately 65% (Colea et al., 1972: 82).

3.2.2. The street network of the neighbourhood

The key principles of the microraion concept, which can be well observed in Drumul Taberei, is the separation of vehicle roads from pedestrian circulation. The heavy traffic was directed to the outline of the microdistricts, while the entry of cars into the microdistricts was strictly limited for access to housing and facilities. This

delimitation remains visible today, with the roads continuing to outline the boundaries of the 10 microdistricts (Figure 1).

According to the documentary sources, road traffic in the microraiions “must ensure the possibility of the most convenient access to each building, without crossing the microdistrict and, as far as possible, without intersecting major pedestrian traffic flows” (Sebestyen, 1962: 14). In this sense, the solution was for the traffic to surround the microdistrict and serve the buildings with the help of “dead ends facing inwards” (Sebestyen, 1962: 14), while the traffic speed would be adapted to the context, with 15-30 km/hour speed roadways and secondary streets, 30-60 km/hour speed main penetration arteries, belts and bypasses, and 60-80 km/hour speed express highways, for transit or bypasses (Guțu, 1962: 38).



Figure 1. The road network outlining the microraiions of Drumul Taberei and the planning typologies of the neighbourhood

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3.2.3. Population, density and capacity of the neighbourhood

Drumul Taberei reflects the constant upscaling specific to the communist urban planning, which went progressively further than the microraiion theoretical model. In the first plans for the neighbourhood, in 1961, the ensemble was designed for 100,000 inhabitants (Institutul Proiect București, 1961: 21), while the extended general plan from the 1960s-1970s was designed to accommodate 150,000 inhabitants (Colea et al, 1972: 78). Over time, the neighbourhood exceeded even these estimates and, according

to a statistic of 1980, the population reached 165,000 inhabitants (Lazarescu, C. 1980: 9) in a housing stock of approximately 70,000 apartments (Mahu, 1987: 25), which would mean an average household size of 2,35 persons/household.

This figure remains very close to the contemporary average of 2,39 persons per household recorded in Bucharest, suggesting a degree of continuity between the demographic plans of the socialist-era city planning and present-day. In this sense, the communist neighbourhood continues to shape everyday urban life, as many of the residential units designed decades ago still accommodate household structures similar to those originally envisaged by planners.

3.2.4. Services and amenities

Commercial facilities and retail centres. Regarding the application of the microraion theory in the services of Drumul Taberei neighbourhood, the urbanists of the 1960s opted for ensuring proximity by constructing independent commercial centres rather than traditional stores at the ground floor of the blocks of flats or commercial streets. Moreover, this conception aimed at placing the commercial services on the contour of the microraions or at the intersection of arteries, without disturbing the inner part of the housing area (Ricci, 1963: 5).

In this period, in the neighbourhood was constructed the first self-service supermarket type store in Romania (Teodoraşcu, 1966: 8) and a cultural and commercial centre in the microraion 2 – Favorit Complex, with a 900 places cinema, shops and services (Colea, Stratu, 1969: 72).

In the 1970s, the available space became more precious and therefore, the conception regarding the commercial spaces was changed as urbanists proposed the reintroduction of active ground floors with commercial spaces, for a more economical land use and more lively streets (Popa, 1971: 49).

This historical evolution of principles is visible in the distribution of grocery stores and supermarkets in the neighbourhood today, as the fabric of the microdistricts mostly shapes the present-day retail activity, which is predominantly located within the spatial premises originally designated for retail by the communist neighbourhood's design.

Analysing the layout of the area (Figure 2), it is observable today that the 1950s cvartal is not well served by the supermarkets of Drumul Taberei, but rather benefits from the shops exterior to the neighbourhood, while the 1960s Favorit and Orizont zones (constructed in the period of the rise of the microraion) mostly concentrate the retail activity in the former nucleus of the microdistrict, where the community commercial centre was. In contrast, the 1970s blocks have relatively more stores, due to the designated spaces at the ground floor of the buildings.

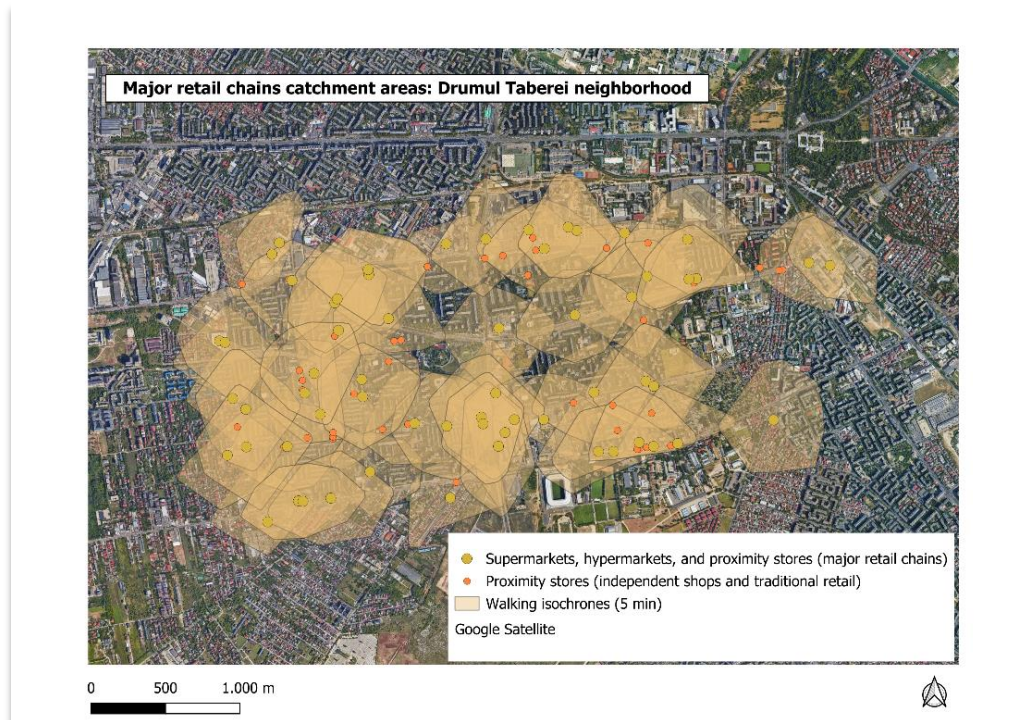


Figure 2. Food retail and grocery stores in Drumul Taberei neighbourhood (2026)

It is observable that today the 1950s cvartal is not well served by the supermarkets of Drumul Taberei, but rather benefits from the shops exterior to the neighbourhood, while the 1960s Favorit and Orizont zones (constructed in the period of the rise of the microraion) mostly concentrate the retail activity in the former nucleus of the microdistrict, where the community commercial centre was. In contrast, the 1970s blocks have relatively more stores, due to the designated spaces at the ground floor of the buildings.

Educational infrastructure. As for the schools, which were the heart of the micro district, the application of the theory is mostly visible today, with educational units distributed throughout the neighbourhood, with a relatively central placement in the microdistricts (Figure 3).

It is also visible in the isochrones described by the schools that the cvartal, which does not follow the microraion model, is further from the educational centres. Nevertheless, it remains within walking distance from schools. The map also shows that the theoretical model of the school-centred microraion was not always applied in practice, with some areas not being covered by the 500m catchment area, despite the school being placed relatively in the centre of the microraion.

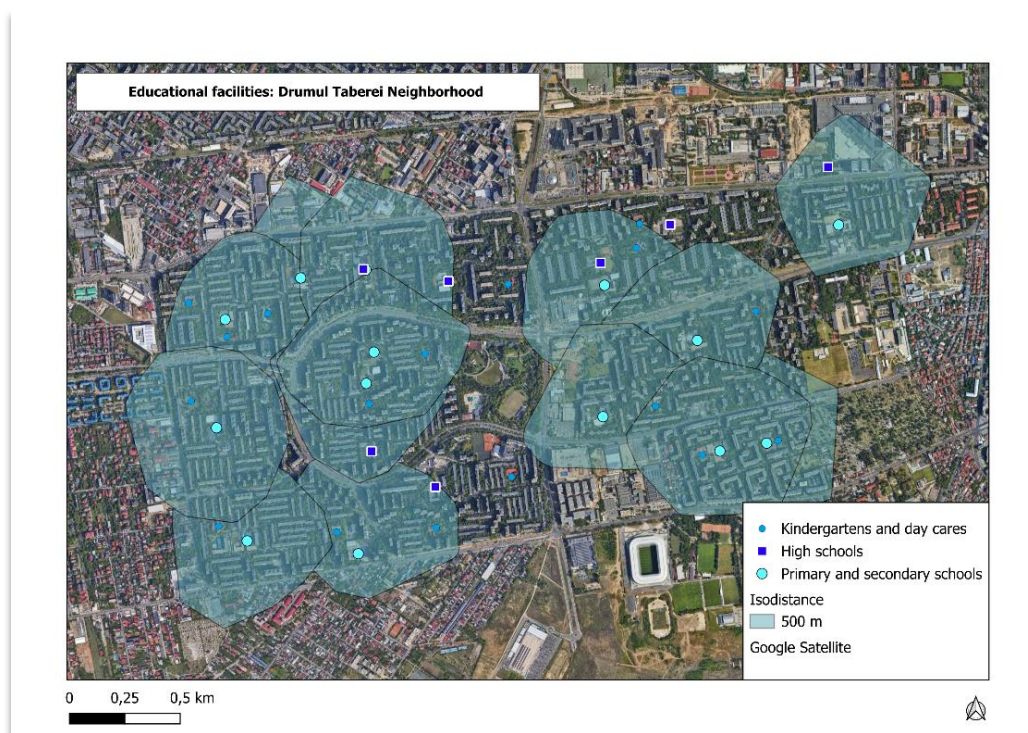


Figure 3. Educational facilities in Drumul Taberei neighbourhood (2026)

It is also visible in the isochrones described by the schools that the cvartal, which does not follow the microraion model, is further from the educational centres. Nevertheless, it remains within walking distance from schools. The map also shows that the theoretical model of the school-centred microraion was not always applied in practice, with some areas not being covered by the 500m catchment area, despite the school being placed relatively in the centre of the microraion.

Medical facilities. As for the medical amenities, at the level of the neighbourhood a large medical complex was planned, with a hospital with 600 beds, a maternity with 360 beds and a polyclinic (Colea, 1972: 80), while in the micro-district dispensaries for daily needs were introduced (ex. for micro-districts 1, 2, 3 and 8, a dispensary for 2 health districts was initially built, and later, in 1967, a larger dispensary for 4 districts was planned, also equipped with dental units (Nadrag, 1967: 21). Urbanistically, the dispensaries were designed to be located within the micro-districts, often along the route of pedestrians, near schools and nurseries.

The remaining medical amenities that exist today in the neighbourhood can be observed in Figure 4.

Green spaces. Regarding the inclusion of green spaces in the urban development of Drumul Taberei, a 1962 article indicates this was “one of the most important issues related to the design of micro-districts”. However, the architects’ vision was met with the reality that “the experience in this field was very limited and there was no specialized qualified personnel” (Sebestyen, 1962: 14).

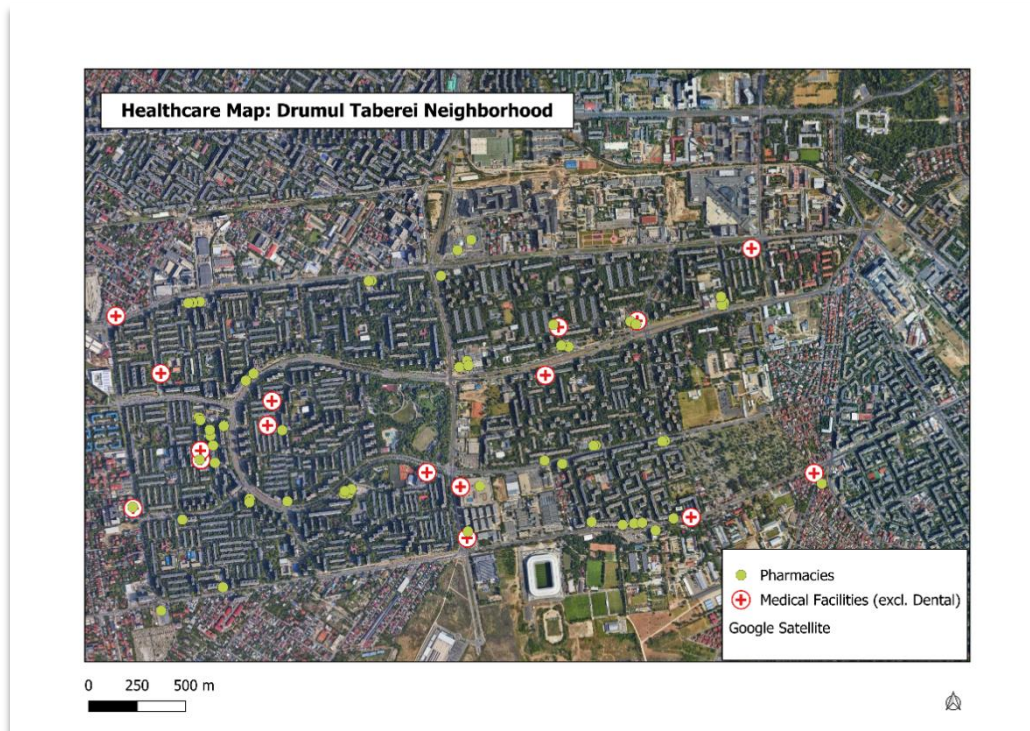


Figure 4. Medical facilities in Drumul Taberei neighbourhood (2026)

This observation is also supported by other urban analyses of the time, which recognized that the lack of adequate maintenance equipment and the failure to instruct qualified personnel prevented the generalized creation of quality planted spaces.

The green spaces were divided into general-use spaces standardized at approximately 0.35 m^2 for every 1 m^2 of living space (such as the central garden of the microdistrict, street plantings) and the limited-use spaces (directly related to housing) (Sebestyen, 1962: 14). While at first the green space in the microraion was central to its planning, by 1966, it was considered that the green spaces between block were too large, economically inefficient and created wastelands that were not well taken care of. Therefore, the articles indicate that the free planted space should be “grouped, thus being easier to notice and maintain” (Ghelman, 1966: 34). One article from the period summarizes the paradigm shift, concluding that architects and urbanists should no longer plan neighbourhoods in parks, but parks in neighbourhoods (Ghelman, 1966: 34), with the possibility to skip the green areas altogether if the microdistrict was already surrounded by public green spaces (Ghelman, 1966: 34).

In Drumul Taberei the microraion park is mostly abandoned in favour of the central neighbourhood park which spreads over an area of about 18-20 hectares (Colea, 1970: 43), having an artificial lake and vast areas of greenery, a sports facility and which was planned to also integrate an open-air cinema, designed to have a capacity of 2,000 seats and a swimming pool (Colea, 1972: 78).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The urban planning of the communist era in Romania is not a mere history subject but has large scale effects that shape the everyday life of the contemporary inhabitants of the spaces designed under the totalitarian regime.

Based on the microraion model, the communist neighbourhood was created as a closed and complete ecosystem, with most of the available space being designated to specific functions, which today gives little to no adaptations possibilities. While the urban fabric of these neighbourhoods is mostly inflexible, new residential complexes, shopping centres or recreational spaces can and are being built in the in-between few spaces left unoccupied by the communist design or on the location of former industrial sites.

However, even these new additions are marginal and adapted at the scale permitted by the communist urban fabric, which remains a constant reminder of the past. In this sense, we live in the urban forms created during the communist period, in a sea of concrete that possess a material permanence that is likely to outlive several generations, regardless of contemporary attitudes towards it. Consequently, the communist neighbourhood should be viewed as an ongoing subject of urban planning debates as the future of cities lies not only in planning new developments, but also in adapting existing neighbourhoods to contemporary needs.

This paper aims to highlight that, by understanding the historical processes that shaped the communist neighbourhood, more effective strategies can be developed for the rehabilitation of residential blocks, the creation and enhancement of recreational spaces and the activation of the underutilized areas between buildings as places hubs for community life.

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