

URBAN REGENERATION PROCESS IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The paper presents an up-to-date subject in today's Romania: urban regeneration as an objective of society. The paper try to find solutions for the essential dysfunctions referring to financial resources, migration of work labor, gentrification process etc. all related to the urban regeneration process. Conclusion is that the level of urban regeneration in Romania is far from meeting the characteristic features of the new urbanism, as perceived worldwide. The urban design focused on traditional forms aimed at putting an end to urban sprawl and the *decline* of the cities are insufficiently promoted in our society.

Keywords: urban planning, regeneration, housing

1. Introduction

Development of urban planning has come to a crucial moment at global level, faced with having to solve a big dilemma: giving priority to inhabitants' demand regarding sustainable development. Where the financial resources should be directed to? Should the focus be placed on building modern houses with proper environmental-friendly (green) urban facilities or on solving the problems each city is faced with in terms of the end-of-life constructions or dwellings that no longer meet the demands of the inhabitants?

The states with economic power try to solve this dilemma by putting in place specific community or national-level programs, giving priority to rehabilitation of collective dwellings and to adopting certain solutions whereby to make them more environmentally-friendly by means of urban sustainable development works.

In the post-war Romania, the urban housing followed the line of the economic development specific to all countries affected in and considered the defeated parties of the 2nd World War. Dwellings building were one of the components of the Romanian economy that engaged a high volume of labor and tremendous financial efforts. "The hunger" for dwellings required the post-war governments to adopt long-term programs of erection of collective, compact, cheap and reduced-surface dwellings, similar to

the model applied in the former USSR (9sqm/room). Seen as a state problem, construction of collective dwellings started back in the 50s on plots of land located in the proximity of industrial centers, under a strong pressure of the high demand of living spaces. In the last 5th decade, we noticed the first regulatory and control measures applied to the design and construction of collective dwellings (Luca, 2003) that laid-down the limits between which certain technical parameters specific to any dwelling may vary.

In the 45 years of building collective dwellings, the heritage of newly-built collective dwellings in Romania has reached 3,181,700 apartments in late 1999, different in terms of the constructive solutions applied and level of comfort, subject to various degrees of wear and tear and obsolescence.

The same state of functional “health” was to be seen in the other buildings erected in the period under review: public buildings, schools, museums, city-halls, elderly homes, a.s.o., as well as in the road infrastructure and related facilities. They were subject only to minor interventions aimed at preserving their functionality; the austerity policy of the 50 years was the main cause of this status-quo.

Since during 1950-1989 the state property was almost exclusively prevailing in Romania, the dwellings have not “enjoyed” repairing and rehabilitation services, well-known being the fact that the state is the worst manager. The state institutions responsible for repairing and management of common properties in each town (ICRAL, IGCL) limited their activity to bureaucratic record-keeping of the living spaces, preserving operation of the utilities networks (water, sewage), road infrastructure, interior repairing of the buildings part of the cultural heritage and of the public institutions’ buildings. The post-communist period failed to improve the repairing and rehabilitation systems too. In the fever of transferring the former state properties to population, the authorities were forced to start-off rehabilitation programs aimed at enhancing the safety of the constructions affected by earthquakes that did not spare Romania along time, in parallel with reducing energy consumption. Such programs were both resources and time intensive.

2. Analysis

A certain category of studies that have been developed in Romania on the subject of urban regeneration contained conclusions supporting rehabilitation of the residential areas deemed as real estate properties with high revitalization potential from both socio-economical and environmental perspectives, based on the European experience, in view of turning them into a viable housing form.

Another category of studies was aimed at diagnosing the housing conditions mainly from a social point of view and at determining the value, in specific measurement units, of the technical features of the

dwellings (sqm/room, no. of persons/room, additions to the main housing structure – kitchen, bathroom) and endowment with home appliances (cooking machines, refrigerators, a.s.o.), resulting into a Romanian-genuine indicator “real household squeeze”. These studies grounded a series of regulations on the quality and performances of the constructions.

As a result of these studies, a first program was initiated aimed at the thermal rehabilitation of the apartment-blocks, based on well-determined technical regulations and procedures. Although initiated in 2002, its application has proved very slow. Implemented with intensive financial efforts, the program was not welcomed by the population due to the high own contributions requested from the landlords (1/3 of the total value). On the other hand, the limited rehabilitation only of the apartment-blocks as a whole does not solve the problem of the perceived lack of safety resulting from the advanced deterioration of the other components of the living area whose lack of functionality is pretty high (access ways, entertainment areas, playgrounds, waste collection systems). Such a situation influences the general health of the population and has effects that are hard to control.

The aspirations and demands of the population have to be channeled by means of an urban regeneration process that could come to complement the sustainable development process (a concept that is adequate to the actual stage of the growth rate of the population and living spaces), together with the demand for modern dwellings and, last but not least, of rendering viable the existing constructions (that have already used for many years), however, notwithstanding the wish of the “common people” to live in modern urban environments and benefit from the latest developments of urban housing (Derer, 1985).

Thus, urban regeneration as a goal of the urban society could include: rehabilitation, modernization, renewal of the urban constructions, purifying the environment of the residential areas, a sustainable development of all these components, in view of satisfying the comfort demands of the population.

Urban regeneration is perfectly attainable in a period of time that is influenced by several potential factors, more or less accessible to a certain community. Regeneration is highly regional and depends on the volume of operations, on the wealth of the communities and on the “gaps” towards a certain urban state pursued; poorer communities are faced with a certain “disability” compared to the richer communities and there are certain differences between the communities that reached a certain degree/level of “updated” regeneration, in accordance with population’s demands.

Seen from a global perspective, the issue of the urban regeneration has to consider the financial sources. One question is raised: would the less developed countries, such as Romania, be able to keep pace with the urban regeneration rhythm in developed countries? Would it be possible to transfer

financial resources and know-how between them, that is to say would the progress trend be the same? Would the reach countries speed-up towards the urban regeneration, whereas the poorer ones would take only smaller steps, thus deepening the gaps? The East-West labor migration would enhance in this context leading to a differentiated urban regeneration with various effects on the living conditions.

The evolution and the trends of urban development, on purpose of meeting the comfort requirements, indicate an increase in population's interest for dwellings construction in the urban environment, especially in peripheral areas that could take advantage of the availability of certain urban infrastructure items or from the outlooks of their development. A certain category of population (young people with medium to high income) gives up living in unsafe apartment-blocks with facilities that are obsolete, unmodernized and that offer but low urban comfort levels, high losses of energy and low safety in favor of some unifamily dwellings located outside the large cities (Gheorghiu, 2002).

Adding to these difficulties also the high degree of motor-vehicle penetration that contributes to the air pollution level, as well as the constant reduction of the green areas – genuine lungs of the cities – the urban regeneration goals become more and more frequently subject to debates and programs proposals. In Romania too was confirmed the need to proceed with the urban restructuring taking place at international level, as noticed by Lester Brown that said “the traditional concentration /decentralization and urban development processes are being replaced by restructuring ones with a high horizontal impact on organization, among which:

- replacement of local spatial functions with global ones;
- losing the traditional local identity and its replacement with modern multicultural social environments;
- separation of the local city from the global city;
- the local city develops from the polycentric centers of a fragmented city”

Such situations are to be found in the key large cities of Romania (Bucharest, Cluj, Timisoara, Constanta) that accommodated the investments of large national companies with advantages for both parties (local administration – company). Thus, the urban regeneration becomes a potential sustainable development process, provided that certain criteria are met, such as:

- acting on all the urban components (buildings, roads, means of transport, utilities networks framed in a natural environment), in accordance with certain well-defined strategies;
- determination of certain key “players” and of local regulatory measures that would laid-down how the legal entities and individuals should work together and which are their specific responsibilities as participants to the regeneration process.

Planning attainment of the urban regeneration goals is highly dependant on energetic environmental factors. How the sequence of the regeneration operations could be determined?

The first operation that needs to take place is addressing the environmental “abuse”, namely relocation of industrial polluting constructions (electric plants, chemical industry facilities and other gas or dust generators, oil transport pipelines, etc.) outside the cities (Hall, 1999). However, this could result into negative economic and social consequences for the urban life (low revenues to the local budget, high transport costs, unemployment, that could question the opportunity of such an endeavor.

In this context, could the effects of pollution be addressed by using new technologies? This is desirable, but the main partners are not easy to find.

It seems that in Romania answering certain questions is very difficult: Who? How? How much? When? What regional priority was set for solving the issue of urban regeneration without affecting the environment? The Romanian economy is not strong enough, whereas the internal and external political factors that play key part in respect are not sufficiently involved.

Recourse to all members of the society could satisfy a certain share of the volume of works required to adapt the urban living areas to the new comfort requirements in terms of environmental protection, energy consumption, degree of motor-vehicles penetration and related infrastructure, as well as of the tuition and cultural facilities (Cancellieri, Foscoso, Lemoine, Mahut and Paoli, 1990). They are all asking for impressive financial efforts compared to the sources established by society’s members. Currently, only the thermal rehabilitation programs involving the apartment-blocks make clear the financial contributors (33% of the funds come from the landlord, 33% from the local budget and 33% from the national budget). Such programs have not yet been properly shaped and could be revitalized by the inflow of EU structural funds. Nevertheless, there is a certain “bureaucratic” slowness that renders both the thermal rehabilitation and the performance of EU-funded projects “invisible”.

The low “appetite” in this stage of urban regeneration is caused also by the poor organization of the construction works in which the state is sufficiently involved, but that suffers from the deficit of labor that is affecting Romania today.

There are modern technologies available, the market offers specific materials to be used for sustainable urban regeneration, but the number of specialists that could design and execute specific projects is lower by the day. Their exodus to the developed countries of the EU has been experienced in a negative manner lately. The employers in constructions complain about a deficit of approximately 250,000 workers only in case of the pending programs. And the urban regeneration contains works that

have not yet been started and thus the demand for labor is increasing. The design of the programs itself represents a big deadlock in this respect; certain stages of this programs would result into only a reduced comfort for the population compared to the performances envisaged (Choay, 2002). The “secret” of an efficient urban regeneration would come also from a reduced duration of these critical stages, so that the urban housing overall would become decent (traffic, noise level, pollution a.s.o.). The urban regeneration elements, such as above/underground passages, replacement of urban public networks or consolidation of the collective apartment-blocks, are only few of the components that demand thorough analysis from the very beginning. They are the main support pillar of the urban regeneration strategy in each city.

Another principle of urban regeneration refers to the life-cycle of the urban components. This duration should be the base for a future regeneration cycle that relies on the technologies applied, the quality of the materials and, last but not least, on the quality of the related manual labor (Caffe, 1987). This drives the special attention they benefit from, considering the volume of works, their duration and the volume of financial resources that could be raised.

Which should be starting point? Which are the actual details of urban regeneration? The answer is to be found in the studies developed for each individual urban component that is integrated in the national urban development plan. Its key stages contain:

- diagnosis of the status-quo on the date of the study. It is usually in the form of a benchmark analysis with an item of legislation or pre-defined performances that do consider the requirements of the community and their capacity to integral in a standard natural environment by comparison with the European standards (Noica, 2003). The analysis covers all the urban components (buildings, transport infrastructure, utilities, tuition, education and leisure facilities), the parameters of the polluting agents that affect the soil, air and water, the available urban environment products, including means of transport, and, last but not least, energy resources. The contribution of the civil society to raising population’s awareness in this respect has to be taken into account.
- pending urban regeneration operations that are more or less financially supported by the local authorities, such as arrangement of public markets, social and cultural facilities included in the sustainable urban development plan (libraries, theater halls, museums, parks, a.s.o.). They are specific to any urban community whose financial resources are enough to support them.
- forecasts (urban planning) – an extremely difficult stage that require specialized expertise in all the fields of urban components (architects, urban planners, specialists in various fields, a.s.o.) that are not always available in all urban establishments. The deficit or superficial involvement

of such experts to the actual works performed or to planning certain investments led to bizarre situations occurring in many localities in Romania, including Bucharest, such as visible inconsistencies as a result of not observing the buildings coexistence standards. EG. buildings that hide historical monuments, constructions with no utilities or that do not allow traffic in the relevant area, provision of low quality utilities, a.s.o. Huge problems have been experienced when attempting to set the priorities, since many times the decisions to use the financial resources for urban planning works were made to the detriment of the community's requirements (sewage, roads, transport).

- maintenance of the objectives included in the urban regeneration program.

3. Conclusions:

The main conclusions resulted from this analysis are³

1. Romania has an obsolete housing stock that awaits rehabilitation; the programs developed are suffering from a low participation of all the stakeholders (landlords, local authorities and central bodies). Efforts are required in order to raise awareness of the population thereof.
2. The urban regeneration strategy becomes a priority for each urban community.
3. The local authorities should benefit from any local investment offers, as a key vector of solving urban regeneration problems.
4. The local authorities should stop tending to manipulate the regeneration priorities towards central areas to the detriment of peripheral areas that come to a standstill.
5. The lack of qualified labor for execution of regeneration works have to be replaced by new generations of skilled construction workers that would perform the works in question, with key focus on assimilation of new technologies.

The level of urban regeneration in Romania, as presented above, is far from meeting the characteristic features of the new urbanism, as perceived worldwide. The urban design focused on traditional forms aimed at putting an end to urban sprawl and the *decline* of the cities are insufficiently promoted in our society. However, it manages to cover for a wide range of activities specific to urban regeneration, from rehabilitation of collective dwellings ensembles to the traditional design of pedestrian areas with large sidewalks as transit structure approached at different scales, from buildings with various destinations to highly specific residential areas. This regeneration principle is aimed at creating new residential areas at human scale, elimination of damaged public dwellings and demolition of the ones that are no longer fit for living, reduction of inhabitants' density, increasing the housing stock supply for various social

categories, from modest families living in public dwellings to wealthier families that acquire houses from the market.

Adaptation of the urban regeneration concept in Romania is based on the fact that there are similarities in its application and it represents one of the program tools with high political potential of revitalizing the residential areas in city centers.

Application of the new urbanism cannot counteract the multiple forces that led to social, economic and urban-planning deterioration of the traditional cities. Only when things settle-down and Romania no longer approaches in a primitive manner the idea of capitalism we will be able to speak of normality in respect of urban regeneration act and fact.

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