

A Different Kind of Radiant City: Bucharest

Comparing Le Corbusier's plans for Paris with Ceaușescu's plans for Bucharest

Abstract: Comparing Le Corbusier's unrealized plans for Paris and dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu's completed plans for the Romanian capital Bucharest reveals similarities in their urban forms. Analysis of three features in both cities – their nineteenth-century urban forms, the integration of twentieth-century plans into the existing urban forms, and the political symbolism of each plan – reveals the two places as reflections of each other. The comparison matters because it establishes an unconscious aesthetic link between the progressive (almost utopian) urban designs of an architect like Le Corbusier and the repressive (almost dystopian) urban designs of a dictator like Ceaușescu.

Utopia and totalitarianism are both engaged in a mirroring game, tirelessly sending the same image back and forth as if utopia were nothing more than the premonition of totalitarianism and totalitarianism the tragic execution of the utopian dream. Only the distance that separates a dream from its realization seems to stand between the two.

– Frédéric Rouvillois
*Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*¹

¹ Frédéric Rouvillois, "Utopia and Totalitarianism" in *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World* (New York City: New York Public Library, 2000) 316.

Introduction

The so-called “Free World” of capitalist democracies in Western Europe and North America has long been contrasted against socialist regimes in Asia and Eastern Europe. Long since the fall of communism, the political game continues. The two forces are represented in western media as if locked in a battle of good vs. evil: the so-called freedom and tolerance of western ideas vs. the so-called isolation and intolerance of foreign places without “free and fair elections” like China and Russia. The conventional narrative of architectural history contrasts the two worlds: the glass-walled and transparent skyscrapers for international corporations that pierce the skies of European and American cities vs. the massive geometry in stone for Soviet ministries with opaque and Orwellian sounding names like the Central Union of Consumer Cooperatives. Students are told the two worlds built in different styles and used architecture for contrasting ideological purposes.

What this political narrative leaves out is the “mirroring game” between regions. Leading civil engineers like the Swiss-born Robert Maillart and architects like the Swiss-born Le Corbusier traveled to and built government projects in Moscow. Russian architects admired the tapering limestone mass of New York City’s Municipal Building and adapted this form with few modifications for the shape of the prototypical Soviet skyscraper. The widespread demolition and rebuilding of cities that utopian architects proposed sometimes found a more receptive audience in Eastern European cities than in the capitalist cities of Western Europe that were anchored to tradition and private property. To analyze the mirroring game and to break down the false dualism of the “free” vs. “un-free worlds” is too much for one essay.

Instead, this essay will analyze the “mirroring game” between two cities. This article will compare the urban form of Paris – that imperial and industrial capital of the nineteenth century –

with Bucharest. As a form of endearment, Bucharest's residents nickname their city "Paris of the East" because of the quantity of French-inspired art and architecture from the nineteenth century. What interests me is less the old buildings of Paris and Bucharest because both cities are rich in neoclassical civic buildings and bourgeois apartment houses inserted into the late medieval fabric of streets. What interests me more is the twentieth-century history of these cities where they took divergent paths.

In Paris, massive urban renewal plans for modernist style "towers in the park" were made in Le Corbusier's 1925 Plan Voisin. The un-built proposal would have demolished all of central Paris to carve through a superhighway lined with tower apartment blocks. This linear city was to be the capital of the new French state, which Le Corbusier hoped would be governed by a technocrat elite instead of fickle elected politicians. Le Corbusier's plans for Paris would have produced a landscape devoid of the features people like most about Paris: its crooked and narrow corridor streets, pedestrian boulevards, and diverse building types built in the uniform earth tones of limestone. Paris would have lost all this.²

In Bucharest, comparable plans were realized in the 1980s during a brutal process that demolished a quarter of the central city. Over 40,000 people were displaced in the largest peacetime destruction of a capital city in European history, second to Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris. Dozens of churches were smashed and thousands were relocated, often with a day's notice and with requirements that they sign and pay for the demolition of their own homes. In its place, Romania's dictator carved through a French-style boulevard wider and longer than the Champs-Élysées that was lined with parking spaces and tower apartment blocks.³

² Robert Fishman, "Plan Voisin," in *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier* (Boston: MIT Press, 1982), 205-212.

³ Maria de Betania Cavalcanti, "Totalitarian States and Their Influence on City Form: The Case of Bucharest," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 9, no. 4 (1992): 275-86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43029085>.

The comparison of Paris and Bucharest is richer than just an analysis of “the distance that separates a dream from its realization.” The differences between the two programs of urban renewal are just as revealing as their similarities. At the formal level, the rebuilding plans for Paris and Bucharest have little in common. The “towers in the park” on the outskirts of Paris have all the attributes of modern structures: horizontal bands of windows, concrete walls, flat roofs, and an aversion to ornament of any kind. By contrast, the 1980s urban renewal apartments and government ministries along Bucharest’s main boulevard are anti-modern. Although built with modern technologies, their external architectural language parodies antiquity with arches, columns, cornices, and limestone. Because of superficial differences between Paris and Bucharest, the comparison of their urban renewal plans has never been made. Nonetheless, the comparison reveals the modernist streak behind Ceaușescu’s built urban form, as well as the oppressive streak behind Le Corbusier’s unbuilt urban form. Understanding the mirroring game between Paris and Bucharest presents the utopian and totalitarian states as mirrors of each other, where one is “the premonition of totalitarianism” and the other is “the tragic execution of the utopian dream.” Which city is the utopia and which is the dystopia is, however, a false dichotomy that will be deconstructed.

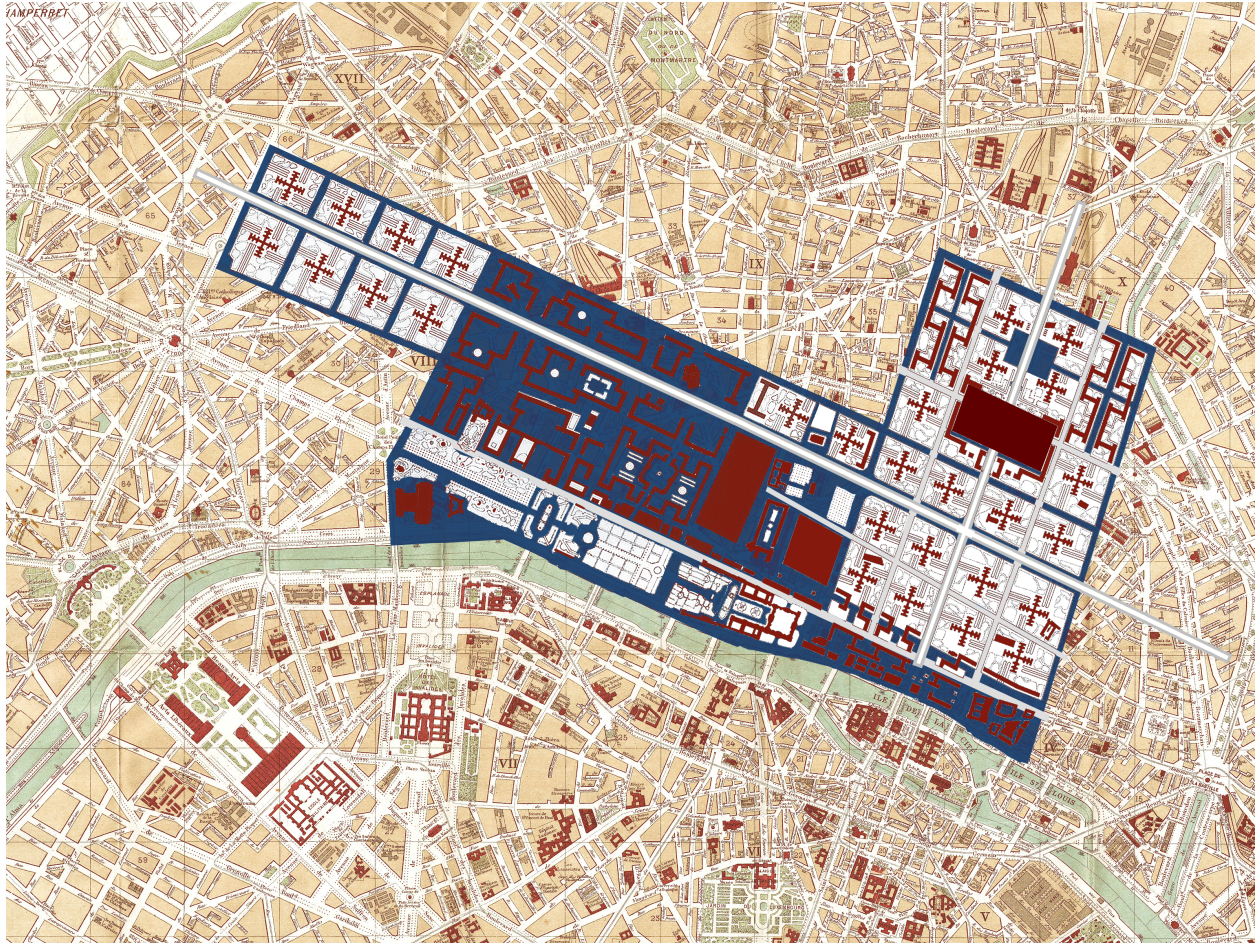


Figure 1: Plan Voisin: The red cross-shaped buildings were 60-story office towers for elite administrators of the French state. The smaller red-shaped buildings set on the blue background were three to five story apartments for workers. A road network designed for different speeds of traffic cuts through the new city, as if to form the linear spine holding urban life together.

Plan Voisin

An artist turned architect made a startling proposal in 1925 to demolish all of central Paris. The entire two-thousand-year old city between the Arc de Triomphe to the west and the Bastille to the east was to be cleared of buildings and rebuilt with 28 concrete and glass towers of 60 floors each. From their towers, workers would survey Paris rebuilt as a park. They would, to quote from the artist's description of his project, "behold a dense mass of trees swaying beneath

them. The stillness is absolute.”⁴ Surrounding these towers, elevated highways stitched the city together in bands of concrete and asphalt. At the new city center, two highways converged at a vast subterranean shopping mall and transportation center with airport above. In no uncertain terms, he described his proposal’s sublime beauty: “When night intervenes the passage of cars along the highway traces luminous traces that are like the tails of meteors flashing across the summer heavens.”⁵

No details were provided for the subways, sewers, or water supply critical for the 400,000 residents living in this rebuilt Paris. No specific plans were made for the churches, libraries, theaters, or civic gathering spaces needed to support the cultural life of Paris either. This was an artist who, after all, fashioned himself an engineer and scientist but whose formal training extended little further than engraving watches in a Swiss village. This was an artist who looked down on trained architects and city planners, called for all professors at the École des Beaux-Arts to resign, and thought that Rome was “all the horrors”⁶ and had built no worthwhile architecture in the four hundred years since Michelangelo’s death. “Architects,” he wrote, “live within the narrow confines of what they learned in school, in ignorance of the new rules of building, and they readily let their conceptions stop at kissing doves.”⁷

The artist was Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, better known by his *nom de guerre* as Le Corbusier. The project was called the Plan Voisin, which evolved into his proposal for the so-called Radiant City of the future. The public backlash against the Plan Voisin was swift and immediate. Alongside Albert Speer’s plan for rebuilding Berlin as Hitler’s world capital

⁴ Le Corbusier, “Plan Voisin, Paris, France, 1925 (Extract from Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, *Oeuvre complète*, volume 1, 1910-1929),” Fondation Le Corbusier.

<http://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr/corbuweb/morpheus.aspx?sysId=13&IrisObjectId=6159&sysLanguage=en-en&itemPos=2&itemCount=2&sysParentName=Home&sysParentId=65>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Le Corbusier (author) and Jean-Louis Cohen (introduction), “The Lesson of Rome: Rome and Us,” in *Toward an Architecture*, (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 211-12.

⁷ Ibid., “Eyes that do not see,” 149.

Germania, the Voisin Plan is among the most ambitious and well-known un-built proposals for a European capital city.

In the Athens Charter of 1933, Le Corbusier again described the ideal city in a list of proposals: Urban life and streets should be designed around the car. Urban centers should be depopulated of buildings, railroads, and industries for building parks, towers, and segregated roads with different speeds of cars. Urban forms should be shaped by an elite group of technicians, scientists, and planners. Most of all, cities should be systematized and reorganized around motor vehicles to reflect the new political, social, and economic structure of modern society. Le Corbusier hoped the transformation of urban life would become a vehicle for the larger transformation of society. As Le Corbusier concludes in words reminiscent of socialism: “Private interests should be subordinated to the interests of the community.”⁸ Who defines the “interests of the community” is a question Le Corbusier leaves unanswered – the people themselves or the technocrats who know best?

Le Corbusier’s plan was designed for the wrong place, at the wrong time, and in the wrong political climate. The taciturn French state in the 1930s lacked the political will and motivation to follow through with so controversial a plan. Le Corbusier, in turn, interpreted resistance to his proposals as justification for political change. Elections and the messy business of democracy produced a negotiated urbanism of private vs. public that balanced the rights of individual property owners with slum clearance projects, highways, and new parks that represented the public good. What Le Corbusier needed in the 1930s was a central state that could overrule the interests of property owners and urban residents to plough through a new vision of urban life: his vision. In frustration at the challenges of his own career and with the

⁸ Le Corbusier, “Charter of Athens,” *The Getty Conservation Institute*, 1933.
https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/research_resources/charters/charter04.html.

failure of the French state to resist German invasion in 1940, Le Corbusier turned to the anti-Semitic, anti-Communist, and pro-Nazi Vichy state for employment. If democracy could not realize his urban visions, then perhaps other systems could. It was Hitler, after all, who had the power to build motorways and ambitious public works projects for the German people, and it was Le Corbusier who was often accused in the 1920s of building in a style too “Germanic.”⁹ However, the Vichy made no attempts to ever follow through with Le Corbusier’s idea, and so his proposals for Paris remain paper architecture. Le Corbusier’s modernism was compromised by his tendency to align with any political party and system that promised to execute his urban visions.

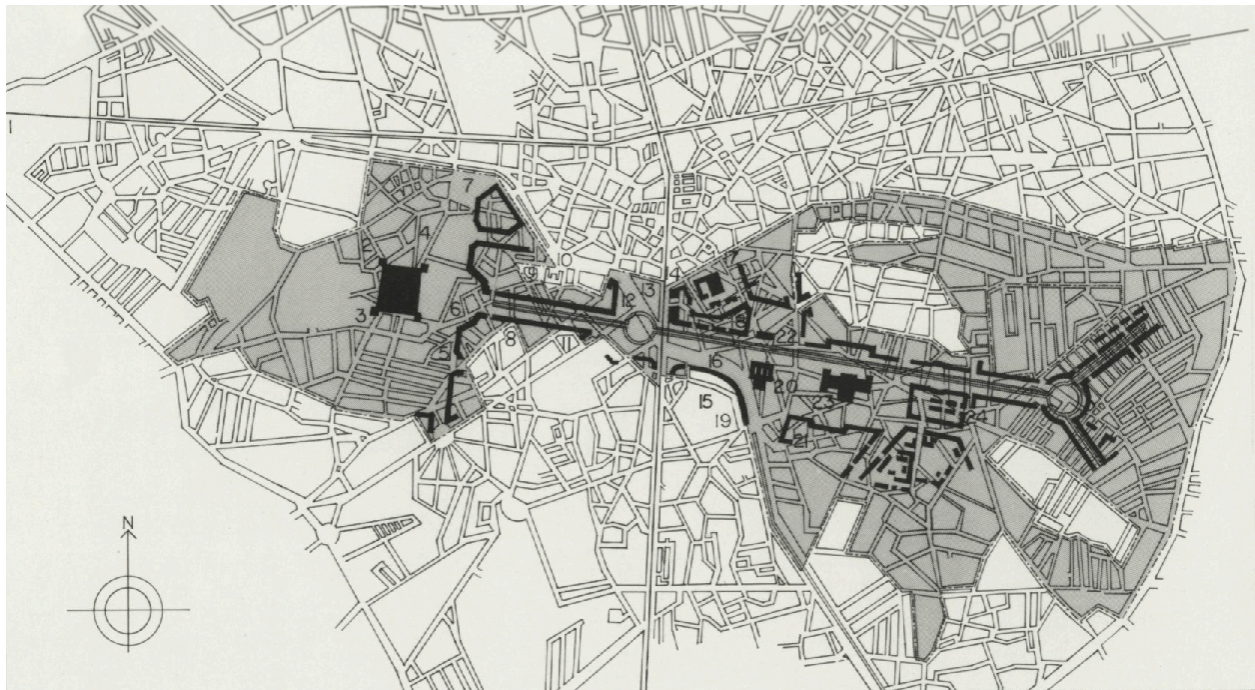


Figure 2: Ceaușescu’s plans for Bucharest overlaid over the bulldozed urban fabric. The areas in gray were cleared of buildings to erect the new buildings in black. The Victory of Socialism Boulevard slices through the new city. The building at left is the Palace of the Parliament, the heaviest building in the world that consumes as much electricity, light, and heat as a medium-sized city.

⁹ Fishman, “Quest for Authority / Vichy,” in *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century*, 235-252.

Bucharest

The irony is that visions of total urban demolition and reconstruction came closest in the communist states that the Vichy and Nazis were allied against. Granted, public housing projects in places like New York City or the Pruitt-Igoe houses of St. Louis have all the attributes of Le Corbusier's urbanism: car-centric urban superblocks and cruciform shaped towers set in landscaped parks. But the urban renewal projects of Western European and American cities still represent a negotiated urbanism of new vs. old, preservation vs. replacement. No American city was ever demolished in its entirety for a *tabula rasa* urbanism, although the scale of destruction in places like Detroit comes close.

Instead, the wholesale destruction of cities in post-WWII Eastern Europe was an opportunity to rebuild cities on fresh ideological lines. Most of Warsaw, Moscow, East Berlin, Dresden, Belgrade, and Bucharest were destroyed first during WWII and then by the Soviets who erased much remaining architecture associated with monarchy and the bourgeoisie. In Warsaw, for instance, medieval buildings were deemed as symbolic of Polish identity and were therefore meticulously restored. Warsaw's nineteenth-century bourgeois apartment blocks in the image of Paris were more likely demolished, even if they had survived the war intact. In both Eastern and Western Europe, the rebuilding of cities was part of an effort to write urban forms in service of postwar society.¹⁰ In western cities like Rotterdam, for instance, the medieval city of canals was entirely bombed in WWII and rebuilt around the car and highway as primary modes

¹⁰ Liliana Iuga, Two Meanings of Reconstruction, in "Reshaping the Historic City under Socialism: State Preservation, Urban Planning and the Politics of Scarcity in Romania (1945-1977)," PhD diss. (Central European University, 2016), 67-77.

of transport. As George Orwell writes: “Those who control the present, control the past and those who control the past control the future.”¹¹

Bucharest’s construction from 1977 to 1989 stands out for the degree to which the demolished and rebuilt city reflects the egomania and aesthetic tastes of an all-powerful master builder: Nicolae Ceaușescu, dictator of Romania from 1967 until his 1989 show trial and execution on allegations of genocide. Ceaușescu was no Le Corbusier and never encountered Le Corbusier’s work during his no-more than middle school education that ended at age eleven. Le Corbusier’s exposure to Romania was also brief, amounting to more than a few sketchbook pages from his extensive European tours. But the irony is that despite Le Corbusier and Ceaușescu knowing nothing of each other, the urban plans they produced overlap in an unconscious ways: Le Corbusier the architect who wanted to become a dictator vs. Ceaușescu the dictator who wanted to become an architect. Utopia and dystopia claim to have nothing in common but, on closer looking, are distorted fun house mirrors of each other.

Having introduced the two plans and their ambitions, this essay will break the comparison of urban forms into three parts. Firstly, the nineteenth-century urban forms of Paris and Bucharest will be compared. Secondly, the proposals in both places to build linear cities will be introduced. The failure of both linear cities to respond to and fit into the existing and ancient urban fabric will be then described. Thirdly, both urban forms will be analyzed as political statements about their respective societies.

¹¹ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949).



Figure 3: Les Halles, the central marketplace of Paris, was a metal-framed building with walls of glass resembling a greenhouse. Built in the 1850s in the image of London's Crystal Palace, the site of Les Halles would have stood at the geographic center of Le Corbusier's plan and was therefore proposed for demolition. Parisians consider the 1970s demolition of Les Halles an architectural and cultural loss.



Figure 4: The Bucharest marketplace near present-day Piața Unirii was a metal-framed building with walls of glass in the image of Les Halles. It, too, was demolished for Ceaușescu's urban renewal plans. The distant construction cranes are assembling the new city. The French connection is no coincidence. Engineers like Gustave Eiffel built bridges and hotels in Romania, while the Eiffel Tower's iron and steel are sourced from Romanian mines.

1. Nineteenth-century city

Traditional urban forms are centered on the street. For centuries, the streets of European cities developed in piecemeal fashion, gradually filling out the open land in a chaotic jumble of streets. Buildings rose straight up at the property line with the street, thereby producing a dense and vibrant urban culture of narrow streets. With buildings so close to the street, and with windows looking down onto the street, public space became an outdoor room of sorts.

Surrounded by buildings and activity on all sides, the street was open to all. But with the coming of the modern age, the narrow streets of European cities became crowded with the noise and fumes of traffic. The public street that belonged to all social classes was now privatized for car owners. This produced what Le Corbusier condemned as the corridor street. As he writes: “*Il faut tuer la rue-corridor*” (We have to kill the corridor street).¹²

¹² “Reflecting on the concepts of streets,” *Urban kchoze*, December 18, 2014. <http://urbankchoze.blogspot.com/2014/12/reflecting-on-concepts-of-streets.html>.

The boulevard was the nineteenth-century response to perceived problems with the corridor street. Haussmann carved dozens of straight, wide, and tree-lined boulevards through the narrow alleys, winding streets, and crowded neighborhoods of medieval Paris. Haussmann's projects brought the appearance of medieval Paris into the nineteenth century, transforming the old architecture of Paris into a modern capital of the French nation and colonial empire. Miles of boulevards had new tunnels beneath for the city's water supply, sewers, and subways. Along these streets there also rose new apartment buildings of uniform materials, floor heights, and neoclassical architectural style.

Rather than a contrast to the corridor street, the boulevard is an extension and improvement on earlier streets perceived as dangerous and crowded. Haussmann's boulevards were carved through Paris to ease the movement of people and delivery of city services. At the same time, boulevards produced the urban culture of the café, department store, park, and the pedestrian (also known as the *flâneur*). The boulevard is a public place to see and be seen. In equal parts, the boulevard and traffic circle frame views of defining symbols of urban culture, such as the Arc de Triomphe in Paris and the Arcul de Triumf it inspired in Bucharest, both of which are limestone arches celebrating military victories and set in traffic circles. In line with this military theme, the boulevard can also be read as an attempt to rationalize urban growth and to control the city's population. Boulevards built after the 1871 socialist uprising known as the Paris Commune were *allegedly* sliced through neighborhoods where political dissidents lived, so as to facilitate armies marching into the city on the broad, flat, and long expanse of the new streets. In theory, a barricade is harder to erect on a boulevard than on a corridor street.

The nineteenth-century boulevards inserted into the street network of Bucharest were never as extensive as those in Paris. Nonetheless, the map above does show two French-style boulevards lined with apartment buildings. One street travelling north to south called ____ and the other east to west called ____ intersect at the city center (top center of map). Occasionally, other Bucharest streets radiate from traffic circles in the image of Paris. Along many of Bucharest's old city streets there rise limestone and stucco apartment buildings in the French Second Empire style. The varying floor height, varying amount of ornament on each floor, and mansard roofs on Bucharest's nineteenth-century buildings all express externally the class divisions of upstairs vs. downstairs and masters vs. servants these buildings contained internally.

The Second World War destroyed large swaths of Bucharest, while Paris was spared despite Hitler's orders to bomb the city and leave it "as a field of ruins."¹³ As the Soviets swept through Bucharest in the closing months of WWII, they installed communists in power and began the process of destroying symbols and confiscating property linked to the nineteenth-century monarchy and French-speaking bourgeoisie that governed Romanian society. Walking through Bucharest, the change in political system is imprinted on changes in architectural style. In parts of the bombed out city center, Parisian style apartment buildings stand side by side with postwar socialist towers. The new towers lack ornament and have uniform floor heights and window sizes, as if communicating outside the equality of residents inside. The architectural style of Bucharest changed from the ornament, curves, and craftsmanship of the Art Nouveau to the pre-fabricated concrete geometry of new buildings, as if symbolizing Romania's transition

¹³ "Historically, the loss of Paris always meant the loss of France. The Führer repeats his order that Paris has to be defended. [...] The strongest measures to quell insurrection inside the city must be taken. [...] The bridges across the Seine are to be prepared for demolition. Paris must not fall into enemy hands except as a field of ruins." Adolf Hitler, 1944.

from the Western European to Soviet sphere of influence, and from nineteenth-century romanticism to twentieth-century modernism.

However, what Le Corbusier and Ceaușescu proposed for Paris in the 1920s and Bucharest in the 1980s were above and beyond ambitious than the boulevards and apartment houses of the nineteenth century. To be fair, both saw themselves as following and expanding on the earlier tradition of Haussmann. Yet the point was not to become Haussmann or to interpret the urban fabric through new buildings. Rather, the point was to outdo and to overwrite all that had come before. Builders and planners like Haussmann had only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, was to change it.¹⁴

2. Linear City

Le Corbusier's demolition proposals for Paris re-focused the new city around the highway. All buildings were pulled back from the street and surrounded by gardens. Buildings turned away from the street, and by extension society turned away from the street as the organizing principle of urban life. Le Corbusier expands in his typo-rife list of recommendations that condemn traditional urban forms:

51. The existing network of urban communications has arisen from an agglomeration of the aids [sic] roads of major traffic routes. In Europe these major routes date back well into the middle ages [sic], sometimes even into antiquity.

52. Devised for the use of pedestrians and horse drawn vehicles, they are inadequate for today's mechanized transportation.

53. These inappropriate street dimensions prevent the effective use of mechanized vehicles at speeds corresponding to urban pressure.

54. Distances between crossroads are too infrequent.

55. Street widths are insufficient. Their widening is difficult and often ineffectual.

56. Faced by the needs of high speed [sic] vehicles, present the apparently irrational street pattern lacks efficiency and flexibility, differentiation and order [sic].

¹⁴ "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." – Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845

57. Relics of a former pompous magnificence designed for special monumental effects often complicate traffic circulation.¹⁵

The new superhighway that cut straight through Paris in no way corresponded to the existing street system and was opposed to traditional urban forms centered on the sidewalk and street. Le Corbusier insisted that streets were only for cars. As he writes: “the alignment of housing along main traffic routes should be forbidden.”¹⁶ The Plan Voisin contrasts with traditional corridor streets and boulevards. The public and multipurpose functions that the street once served – as traffic artery, as sidewalk, as park, as play space, and as framing device for “relics of a former pompous magnificence” like the Arc de Triomphe – have all been segregated in the Plan Voisin to different parts of the city. One area is for industry, another for wealthy, another for parks, another for play, and still another for the working classes. The main thing that links these disparate parts together is the linear form of the highways, on which these different elements of urban life are strung together like beads on a necklace.

Ceașescu also saw urban life as an unwieldy force to control and to regulate. Instead of the superhighway Le Corbusier proposed for Paris, Ceașescu desired a French-style avenue called the Victory of Socialism Boulevard that was a few meters wider and a few meters longer than the Champs-Élysées. Unlike the real Champs-Élysées that became a fashionable open space and shopping street, the Victory of Socialism Boulevard had no luxury shops to speak of along its length. Bucharest residents saw their boulevard in an unfashionable light. As if expressing the boulevard’s anti-urban quality on land that displaced thousands of people overnight, residents renamed it the Victory over Bucharest Boulevard. The nickname expresses discomfort with the boulevard’s vast scale, wide streets, apartment superblocks, and dimensions that are out of place

¹⁵ Le Corbusier, “Charter of Athens,” *The Getty Conservation Institute*, 1933.

https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/research_resources/charters/charter04.html.

¹⁶ Ibid.

with the rest of Bucharest's granular urban fabric. Rather than enhancing urban life, the boulevard's scale could provide a backdrop for military parades of soldiers and tanks, that is, a different kind of "mechanized transportation" from what Le Corbusier described.¹⁷

Ceaușescu was himself uncomfortable with the culture, business, and unpredictable quality of urban culture. There is in Ceaușescu's vision of Bucharest a desire to systematize and control the greatest sources of discontent and the middle class intellectuals who inhabited the area of the city he demolished. Le Corbusier desired and called for all scholars in the École des Beaux-Arts to resign, but he had no power to fire them.¹⁸ Ceaușescu did have that power, and his rule was marked by the arrest, torture, imprisonment, or firing of any person who objected to his demolition of Bucharest and cult of personality.

Ironically, French monarchism is the cultural reference behind socialist Bucharest's rebuilding. The Champs-Élysées terminated at a public square called the Place de la Concorde, beyond which was the palace of the Louvre set in the landscaped Jardins des Tuileries. Bucharest's Victory of Socialism Boulevard ended at a vast public square of dozens of acres, in which over a million Romanians could assemble before the nation's capital building, called the People's House. From his viewing stand at a balcony in the exact center of the building's facade, Ceaușescu hoped to view the assembled crowds and to survey the city down the length of his boulevard. The balcony and chambers behind the balcony are modeled after rooms in Versailles and the Opéra Garnier. They are the point of convergence around which the entire city plan and state revolves; all is visible from the center. The rhetoric and place names speak of socialism, but the visual imagery is of Louis XIV, the Sun King of the City of Lights and the descendant of the Capetian kings. Ceaușescu, too, took after the image of nobility through the royal scepter he

¹⁷ Darrick Danta, "Ceaușescu's Bucharest," *Geographical Review* 83, no. 2 (1993): 178.

¹⁸ Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, 211-12.

brought with him and his chosen honorific titles: “genius of the Carpathians,” “source of our light,” and “treasure of wisdom and charisma.”¹⁹ Incidentally, both Ceaușescu and Louis XIV were short men with double chins and chose in later life to mask their age through requiring all official portraits to show them in the strength of virile youth. In media appearances, Ceaușescu was quick to delete any instances of his lifelong stutter appearing on camera. This is not so much to say that Ceaușescu saw himself as Louis XIV as much as to imply that external opulence of the urban form compensates for deeper insecurities. That the People’s House was never finished and is now empty of people and activities, a fitting metaphor for the failed Romanian state.

In reorienting the city around new visual axes and reorienting society around new cultural institutions, both plans marginalized the traditional centers of urban culture. The area cleared for Ceaușescu’s Bucharest consisted of churches, monasteries, schools, and the range of all businesses and housing types for different social classes. The new city he built was monolithic in land use and function: a boulevard lined with identical housing blocks and government ministries set in geometrically landscaped open areas. The largest of these open areas was two hundred acres of flat and roughly landscaped open space that surrounded the People’s House, land that was once home to thousands but now served only to elevate and frame the center of power in splendid isolation. Monuments in Ceaușescu’s Bucharest are like pieces in a museum display case, surrounded by empty space and set in isolation to be viewed from all sides.

For all the demolition and displacement of thousands of people his project would have involved, Le Corbusier described his plans as, in fact, enhancing the urban form by preserving a select few monuments of old Paris. The Garnier Opera House, Palais Royale, National Library, National Archives, Élysée Palace, The Louvre, Grand Palais, Petit Palais, Place Vendôme and a handful of Gothic churches like the Church of Saint Augustine and Church of Saint Laurence

¹⁹ Danta, “Ceaușescu’s Bucharest,” 174.

were saved. In old Paris, these monuments were part of the urban fabric and of the neighborhoods that surrounded them, visual and cultural focal points for urban life. In Le Corbusier's proposal, these monuments sat in isolation and were cleared of all surrounding buildings, which in so doing saved individual buildings but destroyed the neighborhoods and urban culture that produced those buildings. Driving down the highway through the new linear city, the monuments and churches of old Paris would have been visible on either side of the road. Set back from the street, they would have risen in splendid isolation like large road signs, each stripped of all deeper meaning and reading only "I am a monument."²⁰ In the Plan Voisin, churches have become like trailer homes that can be rolled away and placed anywhere.

Bucharest's Orthodox churches and institutions were the centers of urban life; their spires were the symbols of tradition in the urban skyline. But religion had no place in Ceaușescu's vision of a socialist and atheist society. For instance, under the pretext that the 1977 earthquake had damaged landmarks and made preservation impossible, Ceaușescu proceeded by every means possible to weaken and dismantle history. Văcărești Monastery, built 1716-22, was the largest monastery in Romania, once home of the largest library in Southeastern Europe, and ornamented with hundreds of frescoes and stone carvings. While preservationists were in talks to save the monastery, Ceaușescu proceeded under cover of darkness and with no public records to strip out the windows, demolish the steeples, and later still to use the building as a stage set for a WWII reenactment film with live munitions. Ironically, WWII did not destroy the monastery and left Bucharest's urban form intact, but Romanian soldiers dressed as German soldiers destroyed their own city decades later. This rendered discussions to save the building a mute point before

²⁰ Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas Book* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972).

historians could even develop plans. Plans to build an amusement park here never materialized, and the land at the former monastery remains a barren field adjacent to the People's House.²¹



Figure 5: Weighing 9,000 tons, the Mihai Voda Orthodox Church and its standalone tower were rolled 289 meters.



Figure 6: Church of Saint John the New 1986, near present-day Piața Unirii



Figure 7: And again today, now wedged between two Soviet-era buildings that hide and belittle the religious architecture

²¹ Alexandru Dumitru, "Destroyed Bucharest," *Bucharestian*. <http://www.bucharestian.com/Destruction.html>.

At least eighteen other churches and monasteries were destroyed under armed military guard, but a few were saved. With local tourists and onlookers from the United Nations, a dozen churches weighing thousands of tons were jacked up and rolled away on railroad tracks to new locations out of the way of the new boulevards' paths. In their new locations, taller and Soviet-era buildings encircled the churches, hiding visibility of the old architecture from the main streets. Like Le Corbusier's proposals for Paris, the parts of old Bucharest that were salvaged became isolated monuments decontextualized of the neighborhoods and streets that once gave them meaning.

In an ironic twist of fate, Bucharest is now building the People's Salvation Cathedral. Situated next to the detested People's House, it is the world's largest Orthodox church. The new church will be taller than the People's House in hopes to reframe the focal point of Bucharest's skyline. Other proposals included erecting a wall of capitalist skyscrapers around the People's House so as to block all views of it, as if inverting against Ceaușescu the very methods he employed against the church and private property owners. Architecture is a response to trauma. The urban landscape again becomes a political landscape for competing ideologies.²²

The demolition and dislocation of Bucharest's stone churches is an uncomfortable comment on the instability of culture. Churches, hospitals, and grand public buildings are inter-generational monuments that are supposed to outlive us and provide aesthetic vehicles for us to communicate with history. When they are demolished, the experiences of nearby urban residents and their connections with history are severed. The plans in both Paris and Bucharest to demolish this history reveals how deep the efforts of Le Corbusier and Ceaușescu were to sever society from past ways of thought and to rebuild society from the ground up. That the new city should

²² Roann Barris, "Contested Mythologies: The Architectural Deconstruction of a Totalitarian Culture," *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 54, no. 4 (2001): 229-37.

coexist with the old churches and monuments was not enough; history must be erased for the new society. The urban form becomes a political statement, in which case the wanton destruction of history is justified on both economic and ideological grounds.

3. Urban form as political statement

National leaders have long realized the importance of buildings as symbols of larger political projects.

Inspired by French principles of urban planning, Washington D.C. was measured out in 1791 on the uninhabited, desolate, and swampy banks of the Potomac River. The street network is as ambitious as Paris, but it was for a young nation with population four million. The plan symbolized the imperial ambitions of young America to settle the west and conquer nature. More than a century of urban growth and new construction would be required for these ambitions to become reality.

Inspired by the linear city of the Plan Voisin, Brasília was laid out in 1960 on Brazil's vast unsettled interior of dry and grassy plains. Streets were planned as if to form a pictogram from the air of a bird in flight (or is it an airplane, or some modern rendition of a Mesoamerican city?). Brasília's urban form was not designed for pedestrians, was rich in political symbolism, oriented around the "mechanized transportation" of the car, and symbolized the aspirations of the new government to colonize the vast nation's interior.²³

Canberra in Australia, Naypyitaw in Myanmar, New Delhi in India, Abuja in Nigeria, Nur-Sultan in Kazakhstan, Ankara in Turkey, Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, and Yamoussoukro in Ivory Coast are all political projects like Washington D.C. and Brasília, capital cities plotted out

²³ Valerie Fraser, "Brasília" in *Building the New World: Studies in the Modern Architecture of Latin America, 1930-1960* (Verso: New York, 2000), 212-72.

of thin air onto unsettled regions. The urban form was recognized as an active and necessary agent to bring about a new society. The construction of all these new capitals was justified on economic grounds (the existing capital city was too small or crowded for growth), political grounds (the new capital was better located near the geographic center of the country), and ideological grounds (the new capital would symbolize a reorientation in national values). In other words, the urban form of capital cities is aspirational and transformational, aiming to use urban planning to reshape public discourse.²⁴

Both Le Corbusier and Ceaușescu tied an architectural and planning project to the larger social project of reorganizing society. Yet what sets their projects apart from the traditional urban form of capital cities is that they proposed to build in the city center, right in the middle of urban life. All the other cities mentioned were either built on undeveloped land, or they were new additions at the edge of existing cities. For instance, the plan of New Delhi was created by the British Empire in the 1910s through 30s with hopes to solidify colonial rule over India. New Delhi's urban plan was as ambitious and symbolically rich as proposals for Paris and Bucharest, but it was built at the city edge of Old Delhi, effectively co-existing with the old city as an alternative to traditional urban forms. What Le Corbusier and Ceaușescu advocated through their architectural projects was a larger political project bordering on revolution. It was not enough that new society should inhabit new buildings; it should replace all previous urban forms that had existed for millennia. New ways of life and new means of production are needed in utopian society, and these goals require revolution against traditional urban forms.

²⁴ Although his book never mentions Bucharest, inspiration for the line of critique taken in this section of the essay is inspired from: Michael Minkenberg, *Power and Architecture: The Construction of Capitals and the Politics of Space* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

The choice of capital city is strategic because it would provide a model for the rest of the country. Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris inspired copycat projects in satellite cities like Lyon and Marseilles, as well as colonial capitals like Rabat in Morocco, Algiers in Algeria, and Tunis in Tunisia. Influence flows from centers of culture and power, along with new forms of art and architecture. The hope in both Paris and Bucharest was that, by rebuilding the capital city, the path for the rest of the country would become clear in an instant.

France was an undisputed colonial power in the nineteenth century, and Paris was the center of empire. The urban forms and boulevards of this capital city were as much practical projects for the movement of traffic and people as political projects to frame the monuments and institutions of French culture and governance. Paris is an imperial city with boulevards designed to frame views of, say, the Arc de Triomphe (a political symbol), the Madeleine (a religious symbol), the Gare de l'Est (a technology symbol), the Garnier Opera House (a cultural symbol), and the Louvre (a royal palace). Paris' urban form communicates who is in charge. In this way, Le Corbusier's project would have attempted to bring Paris into the twentieth century, as if to update the urban form so as to remain a relevant symbol of France's modernity. By the 1930, Hausmann's boulevards designed for the pedestrian and carriage would have symbolized an older political order and system. Le Corbusier would have replaced these older symbols with new symbols that represented the technocrat elite he hoped would govern French society.

By contrast, Romania was never a global power, but it had all the ambitions to reshape itself as one. Romania existed during the Cold War as a Soviet satellite state, within the Russian sphere of influence but never directly controlled by Moscow. Despite its Slavic neighbors, Romania looked to Western Europe to find, for instance, their first king from Germany and their national architecture with French Art Nouveau influences. Later, Ceaușescu had global

ambitions through foreign aid to Africa and close relations with Iran, the United States, and Britain. Despite Ceaușescu's numerous flaws, foreign policy was seen as one of his regime's genuine strengths. At the same time, he banned all abortions and contraceptives so as to force population growth through unwanted pregnancies, causing 500,000 children abandoned in Romanian orphanages. Rebuilding Bucharest was part of this larger political project. Bucharest's urban form copies the model of existing imperial powers, but it is above and beyond anything Romania would need. Seventy percent of the rooms in the People's House remain empty in anticipation of a Romanian state with millions more people that never came to be. Bucharest's urban form must be read as a political project well beyond in size and scale anything that the city needed. France, by contrast, has a capital city whose architectural size and ambitions align with the global reputation and power of the French nation.

Central to imperial and global ambitions is the desire to standardize and systematize language, arts, and communication so as to govern a large area that has a unified culture. Socialist Realism was itself a standardized aesthetic within the communist world. Dozens of Soviet-inspired skyscrapers for government ministries as far-ranging as the Sino-Soviet Friendship Building in Shanghai, the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, the Seven Sisters in Moscow, the Latvian Academy of Sciences, and the House of the Free Press in Bucharest are all variations on the same architectural tower type with silhouettes like wedding cakes. Ceaușescu did not create an international style of architecture that Romania exported abroad, but what he did promote in the last years of his rule was what he called systematization. This was a program to demolish every city and village in Romania. Seven to eight thousand villages were declared redundant, bulldozed, and their occupants moved to new pre-fabricated apartment

towers in concrete.²⁵ City centers were demolished and rebuilt as concrete shopping malls. Later, when food and funding ran out during Romania's economic crisis of the 1980s, citizens renamed the unfinished shells of these urban shopping centers as "hunger circuses." Estimates range, but by 1989, 85 to 90% of Romania's 29 largest towns were razed and rebuilt, with an additional 37 towns partially demolished. Government plans called for 90% of all pre-WWII buildings to be demolished for Soviet-style apartment blocks. The aim was to produce a homogenized built environment by the year 2000, the better to govern an obedient people.²⁶

Le Corbusier also believed in standardizing the world. He proposed a new international measurement system called the modulator, whose basic unit was the height and proportions of the human body, through which all other things in the world were measured with respect to. The International Style for buildings that Le Corbusier promoted, as well as the automobiles that would service Le Corbusier's modern city, have no cultural boundaries. His own career marks him as a French architect, but he was not restricted to France. The technologies of globalism are universal, consistent, and not adapted to local conditions. The skyscrapers that the World Trade Organization, Exxon, and the Trump Organization erect in cities around the world are near identical architectural forms, and symbolize the same globalist values in different cultural contexts. In other words, the popularity of McDonald's is that customers get the same thing wherever they go, and that consistency is key to both the company (which saves money through economies of scale) and the consumer (who knows what to expect). Our society does not measure things with Le Corbusier's modulator, but the increasing standardization of building components from places like Home Depot is very much in the same vein of creating a house that

²⁵ Per Ronnas, "Turning the Romanian Peasant into a New Socialist Man: An Assessment of Rural Development Policy in Romania," *Soviet Studies* 41, no. 4 (1989): 543-59, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/152536>.

²⁶ Dinu C. Giurescu, *The Razing of Romania's Past* (Washington D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1989).

acts like a car. Parts can be swapped out interchangeably. If houses are “machines for living” and cars are machines for movement, then by Le Corbusier’s logic, cities are machines for social engineering and require new urban forms that make social engineering possible.

* * *

The comparison of Paris and Bucharest should not be reduced to a simple morality tale of urban planning gone wrong. Bucharest might be an unconscious and twisted realization of megalomaniacal proposals like the Plan Voisin. The aesthetic similarities between Paris and Bucharest underscore the comparison of dream and reality, source and inspiration. However, to attribute the failure of Le Corbusier’s plans to the strength of private property and capitalism to resist urban renewal and the iron fist of the state is too simplistic.

Le Corbusier saw his plans as operating within the framework of market-driven and technocratic capitalism, not socialism. The Voisin Plan was for a future French society governed by syndicalism, a political system that glorified not a leader but the rational organization of modern life and its capacity for a liberating productivity. Hence, the plan tried to imagine what a beautifully organized modern city would look like. Like Haussmann’s urban renewal projects that paid for themselves, Le Corbusier hoped his city would be self-financing. The initial outlay of capital to acquire and demolish medieval streets for modern boulevards was paid for by the increased property values of buildings erected along these boulevards. Less discussed in Haussmann’s Paris is the extent to which urban renewal projects in the urban core displaced the urban poor to city edges, creating a circle of elites in the city center surrounded by less desirable suburbs. Many of those displaced in Bucharest were also moved to unfinished and desolate housing towers at the city edge. Like Haussmann, Le Corbusier hoped that corporations would pay for his rebuilding of Paris and would reap the rewards. This did not happen; thousands of

people were never displaced for urban renewal. However, the more recent process of gentrification has displaced many of the people and features from the central city that Le Corbusier would have found most objectionable about urban life: buildings without plumbing and elevators, crowded apartments, the smoke and noise of steam engines, and factories pressed up against residential areas. Although planners did not displace the population of central Paris, market forces remade the central city in the image of global capitalism and, in so doing, displaced the social classes that had lived there for centuries. Central Paris has the most AirBnB rentals of any city in the world, and the company is accused of giving apartments to the jet-setting elite that would otherwise go to actual residents. The recurring civil unrest in Paris is concentrated in the modernist “towers in the park” that surround the historic urban core, and which ironically Le Corbusier advocated for as the healthier alternative to traditional urban forms in the city center. The minorities and immigrants living here feel removed from their place of work, must commute to the city center, and are alienated from French society. Le Corbusier wanted to rebuild central Paris. His plans failed, but in a twisted sense his image of the city took root across the globe. The pencil-thin new skyscrapers of New York, London, and dozens of other cities have become playgrounds for the global super-rich. The club of corporate technocrats holds the real power in capitalist society, and they are supported by a precarious underclass of housekeepers, security guards, and gig workers. Like the syndicalists a century ago, tech leaders today promise that technology and the internet will liberate productivity.

The Romanian Revolution of 1989 toppled Ceaușescu’s dictatorship and left his plans for Bucharest in a state of partial completion. The new capitalism had little desire to finish these plans because of the communist oppression they symbolized to the Romanian people. At the same time, a more nuanced assessment would be that Ceaușescu’s Romania symbolized not

communism but, rather, the worst excesses of crony capitalism. In later years, Ceaușescu was buried in his own cult of personality, world of incalculable wealth, assets hidden in foreign bank accounts, and appointments of friends and family in high places. The Romanian people joked that everyone in Ceaușescu's inner circle had nepotism to go around that the country had "Socialism in One Family." As the 1980s brought economic hardship to Romania, and as the 1979 Iranian Revolution cut off oil supplies central to Romania's economy, Ceaușescu cracked down hard through surveillance, oppression, and torture on unions, strikes, and workers demanding higher wages. The crisis was worsened by his decision to pay off the country's foreign creditors and foreign debt through austerity measures and rollbacks in public services like health, education, and infrastructure. When workers dared to strike, Ceaușescu called in the military. No surprise then that one of the crowning moments of Ceaușescu's career was a state visit to meet Margaret Thatcher and the British royal family, where he, too, was treated like royalty in exchange for signing lucrative trade agreements. Among Soviet Bloc countries, Bucharest retained the most independence from Moscow and the "most favored nation" trading status with the United States. Presidents like Nixon and later Reagan were hesitant to condemn Ceaușescu's excesses and destruction of cultural heritage because they perceived Ceaușescu as a possible ally against the Soviet Union. Was the rebuilding of Bucharest in the image of socialism, or was it in the darker image of a technocratic oligarchy? At what point does Haussmann's vision of Paris become megalomania?

The entry of Romania into the European Union has resolved some instability like food shortages and lack of consumer goods, but globalization has introduced new instabilities to Eastern Europe. Since the collapse of communism, skilled and young workers have left Romania and other Eastern European countries. From places like the Gara de Nord, Bucharest's main rail

station, millions of migrant workers now stream to Western Europe, where a restaurant worker abroad can make as much as a doctor at home. In places like the Gare du Nord, Paris's main rail station and the busiest in Europe, ethnic groups like the Roma congregate and struggle on through begging and petty theft. As English-language rock music plays on local radio stations, Romania again looks beyond its borders for wealth and cultural influences.

The initial statement that Paris is “the premonition of totalitarianism” and Bucharest is “the tragic execution of the utopian dream” does not capture the full picture. In both cities, the rhetoric of Le Corbusier and Ceaușescu presented the pre-existing urban form as formless, empty, chaotic, and therefore needing the planner's light from above. The city of darkness justified creating the city of lights. In both cities, the creation of the city of lights produced a new darkness in the cultures that were lost, the people that were displaced, and the oppressive symbols of absolute power embedded in new urban forms. Which is the city of dark and which is the city of lights becomes ambiguous on closer examination. The two leaders were different in their approaches, intentions, and images of the ideal city, but there are shared and darker underlying similarities.

The dichotomies of Paris and Bucharest, capitalism and communism, modernist and postmodernist architecture, utopia and dystopia start to fall apart. Bucharest's urban form employs modern technologies but is built in a visual style that references monarchy and antiquity. In what era and ideological framework does this place Bucharest? Is Paris the utopian version of dystopian Bucharest? And, if Paris is a utopia, for whom is it a utopia? How could Ceaușescu's Victory of Socialism Boulevard, one of the worst failures of city planning, be inspired by Haussmann's boulevards that, we are told, get planning and public space right? Is the

unhinged force of capitalism or the oppression of Soviet Socialism more responsible for destroying traditional urban forms?

Analysis of Paris and Bucharest raises larger and more fundamental questions about the feasibility of realizing utopia through architecture and social engineering alone. Le Corbusier's vision for Paris emerged in the 1920s at a time when society had an unquestioning faith in progress and optimism in the technologies of airplanes, railroads, and science to advance humanity. Le Corbusier's architecture was shaped around and celebrated the emerging technologies of glass, steel, concrete, and the automobile. Technology, Le Corbusier believed, must be incorporated into architecture and used in service of building a new society, a new Garden of Eden. Yet the horrors of World War transformed the technologies of modernity, like airplanes, chemical labs, and freight railroads, into agents of humanity's own self-destruction and genocide. By the late twentieth century, the world had become skeptical of technology's promise of progress and of architects' promise that urban surgery to cities could further the project of democracy. Utopian projects Ebenezer Howard's Garden City, Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City, Le Corbusier's Radiant City, and Ceaușescu's Bucharest appear outdated to modern eyes.

In this context, Ceaușescu's Bucharest is a cultural outlier, a project completed in the 1970s and 80s at a time when most other planners had turned away from ambitious urban renewal projects. In the 1970s and 80s, American cities were abandoning the "towers in the park" and massive public housing projects in favor of improving urban neighborhoods through conservation, instead of demolition. At the same time, old Bucharest was being demolished and reshaped in accordance with the same urban planning principles that the planning profession had begun resisting in other countries. Before the wrecking balls and demolition crews had even

begun their work, Bucharest had become yesterday's city of tomorrow, a project completed in the 1980s that looked back to the 1880s. And yet, in the thirty years since the fall of communism, Bucharest's wide boulevards and empty fields are still haunted by yesterday's vision. City planners have yet to identify land uses for hundreds of acres that Ceaușescu cleared of buildings but never developed. Past, present, and future all blur together in the urban form.

What is today's vision of tomorrow, not just for specific cities and buildings but also for society as a whole? And if the so-called "creative class" of planners and intellectuals that have governed society since the fall of communism are unable to offer alternatives for the utopian city of the future, will society resurrect failed visions of urban renewal in the hope of making things great again, whatever "great" means?²⁷ Recent opinion polls indicate that if Ceaușescu were alive today and were to run for president, over 50% of Romanians would vote for him.²⁸ As the world sees a resurgence of nationalism, as China grows as a world power, and as right wing government take power in democracies around the world, there is still hope for Le Corbusier's visions of the future.

²⁷ Donald Trump, "Executive Order 13697: Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again," National Archives, December 23, 2020, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/12/23/2020-28605/promoting-beautiful-federal-civic-architecture>.

²⁸ Raluca Besliu, "Communist Nostalgia in Romania," openDemocracy, April 13, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/communist-nostalgia-in-romania/>.



Figure 8: Le Corbusier waved his hand above his urban renewal plans for Paris and declared: “The advent of the machine age has caused immense disturbances to man’s habits, place of dwelling and type of work [...] Chaos has entered into the cities.”²⁹ This chaos must be solved through new ways of living that use machines to restore harmony between man and nature.



Figure 9: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day. – Opening lines of Genesis³⁰

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³⁰ “Genesis” 1:1-5, New International Version.

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Figure 6: Church of Saint John the New in 1986: “Urbán Tamás,” *Fortepan, 1986*,
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Figure 7: Church of Saint John the New in 2019: image from Google Maps street view.

Figure 8: Le Corbusier with Plan Voisin: Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier* (Boston: MIT Press, 1982).

Figure 9: Michelangelo, *Sistine Chapel*, 1508-12, Vatican.

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