# DEFINING SPATIAL VIOLENCE. BUCHAREST AS A STUDY CASE

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**Abstract:**
The paper looks at the spatial manifestations of violence, aiming to define the category of *spatial violence* by focusing on the recent urban history of Bucharest; it establishes links with the longer history of natural and inflicted disasters that defined the city, and it explores the spatial, urban, social and symbolical conflicts that occured during the last 25 years, pointing at their consequences on the social and urban substance of the city.

**Keywords:**
Urban conflict, spatial destruction, disaster, gentrification, violence, Bucharest.

## Introduction

*…we can state that as a rule, the city is a dissimulated graveyard. Lying underneath the perceptible layers of urban consciousness, the city´s double (the original sacrifices) is a reminder of an anxiety that must have been constantly appeased by the continuous offering of scapegoats.* [1]

The aim of this study is to investigate the ways in which the concept of violence can be retrieved in the spatial developments at the urban level. The paper will look at several ways of defining the concept of violence, in order to focus on the particular relation between violence and space, and to identify correspondences with the historical reality of Bucharest.

While interpreting recent urban history through the concept of violence, the research will cast a new light on urban developments of the 21st century. A reading of Bucharest through the traumatic ways through which the city has continuously rebuilt its urban identity could be a useful model for analysis for similar phenomena around the world.

[1] B. Kenzari, 2011, p. 153.



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Still, unlike elsewhere, the new dynamic of the postindustrial, global forces which play a significant role in the 21st century Bucharest are complicated here by the historical, legal and economic violence induced by the abrupt succession of opposite political systems - from pre-World War II capitalism to post World War II communist dictatorship and finally to the local post-socialist context after 1990.

**Violence and space**

Violence is generally understood as an imposition of force upon the will of other, resulting in an alteration of the *other´*s initial status, either by physical force or by psychological intimidation. According to Jean Luc Nancy[2], a minimal definition of violence would be the working of a force that remains exterior to the dynamic or energetic system upon which it is imposed.

In speaking about violence in the global world, cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek[3] makes a distinction between "subjective" and "objective" violence. For him, subjective violence is the most visible form of violence, the one performed by a "clearly identifiable agent" - acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict - but at its turn it includes two forms of "objective" violence, which are more generalized and invisible. First, there is the symbolic violence, which is embodied in language and is linked to the "imposition of a certain universe of meaning"[4]. Systemic violence, on the other hand, accounts for the "often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political system"[5]. The two types of violence (subjective & objective) are intimately related but cannot be viewed from the same standpoint. Subjective (visible) violence must be understood as an outburst generated by a background of permanent and invisible (objective, for Žižek) violence, a sort of "systemic dark matter" which enables and sustains all obvious signals of conflict[6].

[2]J.L. Nancy, 2000, p.6.
[3] S.Žižek, 2008, p. 2.
[4]In this respect, we may relate Žižeks understanding to Bourdieu´s classical definition of *symbolic violence*, as being inscribed in the very core of the social. For Bourdieu, symbolic violence is part of a larger family of concepts (symbolic power, symbolic domination etc.) which all contribute to the socialising of the subject.
[5]Žižek, 2008, *idem.*
[6]*Ibidem*.



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The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as "*the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation*"[7]. The addition of "power" to the physical force thus "*broadens the nature of a violent act and expands the conventional understanding of violence … to include threats and intimidation*." The "use of force or power" should then be understood to include neglect and all types of physical and psychological abuse". [8] Neglect will thus come up as a pertinent notion when further discussing the spatial manifestations of violence.

As a particular form of violence, *urban violence*[9] has generally been identified with street violence, civil unrest, conflict criminality, street gangs, organized crime or vandalism in urban space. Yet, more than the extreme forms of violence (crime, physical and psychological abuse, open conflicts, war etc.) which suppose a visible conflict, there are also invisible forms of violence (psychological, ethical, political and not in the least, symbolical) - harder to identify but no less harmful or with lesser consequences. In defining spatial violence, we are dealing with types of urban violence that evolve from the aggression against the physical space of the city, leaving perceptible and most often irreversible marks.

When targeting space, violence is always accompanied by a remodeling – most often radical - of the topographical or morphological qualities of space. There is no spatial violence without spatial transformation; while there can be spatial transformation without violence. Among the forms of violence that occur in urban space, this paper is interested in violence *upon* space, violence made visible through direct spatial transformation – an instance that will be further called s*patial violence*.

Investigations of the effects of extremely traumatic events have shown that trauma has been inflicted not only upon people but also upon space,

[7]*World Report on Violence and Health*, 2002, p. 5.
[8]*Ibidem.*
[9]Acts of violence in cities know an unprecedented growth, due mainly to the increase of the urban world. Today, more than half of the world population lives in cities. The UN Population Fund's 'State of World Population 2007' report speaks of the beginning, with the 21st century, of an "urban millennium". The high concentration of population in small areas often combined with poverty, social exclusion or improper living conditions are increasing the chances of everyday conflict between urban dwellers. Moreover, overcrowded areas are much more vulnerable to natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, fires, hurricanes).



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container of a spatial memory, which in this case becomes a traumatic memory that has to be overcome and healed. In discussing the dramatic events of 9/11, Edward Casey[10] speaks of the mourning of place, lost place: "*mourning was beginning not only for the human victims but for the buildings themselves. And not just for the buildings as such but for their real and symbolic place in people's lives. The wound, we might say, was to the body of the place of the polis. The trauma inflicted was on place as well as people.* "[11] More than being just a physical reminder, places play a central role in the preservation of public memory. Actually, the destruction of cities has often been equated with the destruction of memory, or even with the razing of history. [12]

In evoking the damages undergone by contemporary cities, Karen E. Till[13] uses the term "wounded city" in order to define not only the physical damage suffered by the urban architecture at a certain point in time and as a consequence of a momentary disaster or event in history, but rather as the result of a chain of events, that all come to structure and determine the physical and social space of the city.

The violent dynamics of spatial transformations will be further discussed for the particular case of Bucharest, a city where spatial violence has been consistent with its development. This history of violent chains of events will be sk etched for the 19th and 20th centuries.

Moreover, the demolition rhythm of the last 25 years in Bucharest can be inscribed in a continuity of spatial violence, always present during its history, but exacerbated with the massive demolitions of the 1980s for the construction of the House of the People and the civic center.

[10]Ed. Casey, 2004, p.40.
[11]*Ibidem.*
[12]Ever since the paradigmatic *Carthaginem esse delendam* (Chartago must be destroyed) attributed to Cato the Elder (234-149). (The authenticity of the saying is examined by Ch.E.Little, *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 29, no. 6, 1934, pp. 429-435).
[13]*I define 'wounded cities' as densely settled locales that have been harmed and structured by particular histories of physical destruction, displacement, and individual and social trauma resulting from state-perpetrated violence. Rather than harmed by a singular 'outside event', these forms of violence often work over a period of many years - often decades - and continue to structure current social and spatial relations, and as such also structure expectations of what is considered 'normal'*. K. E. Till, 2012, p. 6.



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**Bucharest – a guerilla territory**

As reflected by historical accounts, starting with the pre-modern period[14], Bucharest has had constant problems in defining and maintaining its identity as the center of political and administrative power. The geographical and geopolitical context was very problematic, and the ruling court was constantly on the move in front of invading foreign armies (Ottoman, Austrian, Russian); the urban fabric was constantly aggressed by those military moves and by the usual pests of the time: fires, epidemics, earthquakes.

The city of Bucharest has historically been under the sign of disaster, continuously alternating between natural and inflicted catastrophes. Great earthquakes and fires marked the 19th century, destroying a significant part of the buildings of the time: the "Great earthquake" (*Cutremurul cel mare*) of 1802[15], another important earthquake in 1838 was followed by the "Great Fire"[16] (*Focul cel mare*) of 1847, which burnt down 12 churches and 2000 residential buildings, being the largest fire accounted by historical documents. [17]

Another important earthquake of 1940 remained as a historical moment of distress, marked by the spectacular destruction of the Carlton building, the highest building made of reinforced concrete in Romania. [18]

The earthquake was soon to be followed by the historical bombing of the Bucharest in 1944, which left behind a desolated landscape of destruction – to name just a few of the significant buildings heavily damaged: the National Theatre, the main Railway station (Gara de Nord), the University building, the Romanian Atheneum, the Royal Palace. [19]

But probably the most important natural disaster of the century, psychologically and symbolically engraved in the collective conscience was the earthquake of 1977. The seism destroyed a large part of the city center and resulted in the death of almost 1500 persons in Bucharest alone.

[14]D.Papazoglu, (1891) 2005; Gh. Parusi, 2005.

[15] When the Colțea Tower – the highest monument of the time - is supposed to have fell, along with numerous buildings that were either entirely destroyed or severely damaged. The earthquake seems to have been the strongest that ever hit Bucharest (7, 5-7, 8 on the Richter scale). Cf. Parusi, 2005, p.110.

[16] Gh. Potra, 1981, p. 189.

[17] Gh. Parusi, 2005, pp.167-175.

[18]It is just after this cataclysm that were imposed the first seismic construction norms (1943).

[19]Gh. Parusi, 2005, pp. 225-228.



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What we can say about natural disasters is that they created a psychological framework that offers justification to politicians and developers to promote their own agendas.

It is what happened immediately after 1977: the idea of a gigantesque project that would turn the image of Bucharest into a center of monumental power started after the great earthquake. The project was publicly announced in 1984, symbolically seen as the 40th anniversary of the "revolution of social and national liberation"[20]. The inauguration of the building site was also supposed to mark the re-election of Nicolae Ceaușescu as the general secretary of the Communist Party. The whole project, that involved the erasure of a fifth of the historic Bucharest (6km$^2$) [21], consisted of the construction, along with the House - officially named the House of the Republic and popularly known as the House of the People - of a 3, 5 km long East-West axis, one that would originate at and be dominated by the House as the *locus* of Power. Anthropologists such as Ger Duizings[22]speak about this huge operation of destruction using Michael Herzfeld's concept of "spatial cleansing"[23]. Extending the concept, we might consider it also a social cleansing, one that resulted into a massive and traumatic destruction of the urban and social substance of the city. The House itself has been associated, more than once, with an architectural and urban *monster*[24], an anomaly connected to Ceaușescu's madness and delirious desires, or, as theorist Doina Petrescu puts it,

> "*a challenge to order, to architectural orders to urban order (s). It defies and exceeds. It carries the disproportionate measure of hubris and the violence of the hybrid. The hybrid is literally a product of a violation. In the present case, there is a violation of reason by a totalizing hubris of an ideology, a violation of the city by a strategic implantation, a violation done to architecture itself by disregard for its rules*. [25]"

Nicolae Ceaușescu exploited the disastrous consequences of the 1977 earthquake in order to promote his own political agenda: the reconstruction

[20]*Informația Bucureștiului*, September 26, 1984, 1, apud I.Tulbure, 2013, pp. 85-86.
[21]A. Pandele, 2009, I. Iosa, 2006.
[22]G. Duizings, 2011.
[23]M. Herzfeld, 2006.
[24]D. Petrescu, 1999, p. 190.
[25]*Ibidem.*



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of Bucharest, a Socialist Capital-city that would be envied by the whole world. The ruins of the earthquake were a pretext to create even more ruins, in an unprecedented demolition campaign. We may apply here Naomi Klein´s *doctrine of shock*: starting from the implications and effects of the Iraq wars, Klein demonstrates how cataclysms are often used by the political power in order to impose their will, taking advantage of the poor or inexistent immediate resistance of the general public.

> *"Believers in the shock doctrine are convinced that only a great rupture - a flood, a war, a terrorist attack - can generate the kind of vast, clean canvases they crave. It is in these malleable moments, when we are psychologically unmoored and physically uprooted, that these artists of the real plunge in their hands and begin their work of remaking the world."* [26]

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the above-depicted events are drawing a grim background picture for whoever looks at the history of Bucharest in search for a continuity of a positive urban development. As it will be shown in the following pages, the political changes occurring in 1989 - although apparently radical, did not change in a significant way the trend of spatial violence characterizing the city.

**Bucharest, after the 1990s. Direct urban violence and hidden patrimonial violence**

The 1990s is a complex decade defined by the inevitable turmoil of a transition from the dictatorial Ceaușescu regime towards the unclear and contradictory horizons of a so-called open market economy, which strived to define itself in the process. Belonging to the same background sk etched above, there are two elements that we would like to mention here:

First, the violent claim of various political factions over the geographic, urban and symbolic center of the city (University square): the political and civic groups opposed to the newly installed regime occupied the place in spring 1990, thus spatially marking an intense political struggle. This escalated into the unexpected and unprecedented invasion of Bucharest by the miners from Valea Jiului, called by the President of the time[27] "to defend democracy", call that resulted in the sacking of the buildings

[26]N.Klein, 2014, location 524.

[27]Ion Iliescu was the first President of Romania after 1989, and had three mandates: 1989 - 1992, 1992-1996 and 2000-2004.



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surrounding the area. 53 days of continuous demonstrations ended violently in June 1990 - a historical moment known as the "University square phenomenon", that definitively marked the square as an important public space and a place of memory. [28]

Second, the permanent and diffuse erosion of the built heritage, combined with intensified moments of spatial violence, could be seen as a combination of objective (generalized) and subjective (sudden outbursts) violence, in the terms of Žižek (that we have mentioned previously).

The last 25 years have been marked by a subtle, yet constant violence of the dynamics of spatial changes in recent Bucharest. This situation is due, on one hand, to the difficulties of the post-communist transition in Romania - translated into spatial and urban transformations resulting from an intensified gentrification that accompanied the retrocession of land and house ownership. [29] On the other hand, the definition and implementation of the heritage protection legislation[30], as well as the public acknowledgement of the cultural value of build heritage were long and slow processes that only enabled the fragile status of the latter. These conditions were often combined with a precarious physical status of the historical buildings and a growing real estate and land speculation, especially from the mid 90s until the mid-2000s. Moreover, the privatization of a large part of the State ownership – in most of the post-socialist countries – coincided with an accentuated decline of public resources, which often accentuated the urbansegregation and polarization processes.

A series of laws were meant to solve the retrocession process of the 90s. The first law about the restitution of nationalized buildings (112/1995) was a compromise: while it promised former owners refunds for their houses, it allowed actual tenants (many of which political tenants) to acquire their own homes from the State. Instead of being a moral and material compensation for injustices committed more than half a century ago, the law only accentuated or even generated additional conflicts issued in the

[28] For an exhaustive account of the University square phenomenon, see Al. Gussi, 2002, „Construction et usages politiques d'un lieu de mémoire. La Place de l'Université de Bucarest", in *Studia Politica*, Vol.II, Number 4, pp. 1057-1091.

[29] Abusively confiscated by the communist regime during the nationalization process that took place between 1947-52, and progressively retroceded after 1990.

[30] V. Marin, 2010.



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uncertain ownership status of the houses. Thus, a reparatory measure supposed to sanction violence had the opposite effect, that of stimulating conflict.

The changes induced by the progressive abandonment of the communist system implied a profound restructuring of the social relations, of the relations between the inhabitants of the city and the city space but also huge difficulties in managing the urban phenomena accompanying the transition. These changes have had an important impact on the whole public administration system, characterized by a gap between the rapidity of urban processes and the mentalities that are supposed to manage and govern them. As shown by some researchers[31], even public administrators that had not been active during communism tend to perpetuate corruption practices and institutional inertia, in spite of their own critique of the system and their declarations of modernity. This is an important aspect that describes the gentrification forces in the case of the Romanian post-socialist context, and more specifically when discussing the case of Bucharest. Unlike classical gentrification[32], determined by the influx of capital belonging to a managerial, educated middle-class, in most of the post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe, one of the main agents of gentrification is the State itself, administrator of a huge reserve of real-estate capital - either the result of former nationalization or belonging to the State reserves undergoing privatization.

As shown by scholars coming from the social sciences, such as Liviu Chelcea[33], we deal here with a reversed balance between the accumulation of financial capital (almost inexistent, especially in the early 1990s) and the ownership over urban space. In this case, ownership precedes and in most cases replaces financial capital, while the gentrification agents include public servants, real-estate agents, or well-placed political tenants. All these categories of actors take advantage of the complicated context defined by uncertain or conflicted ownership over land and buildings.

Starting with the mid-90s, the gentrification strategies began to diversify and become more and more sophisticated. To name a few: access to property based on former political connections and criteria; the design of new political instruments for real estate attribution; preferential and cheap acquisition of State owned buildings, the relocation of poorer tenants and/or the economical incapacity of the original owners or their descendants to

[31]S. Rufat, 2011.
[32] As defined by authors such as Neil Smith (1986) or Sharon Zukin (1987).
[33]L. Chelcea, 2000.



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maintain the houses. All those developments led to important mutations in the social structure of the residents, but also in significant spatial remodeling. [34] Many of these processes affected central or protected areas (where most of the previously nationalized houses were situated), involving historical buildings as well as an architectural heritage characteristic for the historical evolution and coherence of the urban tissue.

This already conflicted and complex context becomes further complicated by the arrival of corporate real-estate developers[35] (early and mid-2000s) - leading to a real estate and construction boom in the interval 2004-2007, as well as by the installation of the global economic crisis in 2008, with long-lasting effects on the construction industry. Starting with the 2000s, gentrification and relocation practices in Bucharest become more violent – through the accentuated ethnic[36] dimension of the relocations, but also by the emergence of a new type of corruption practices through the association between former owners (or fake claimers to ownership), restitution lawyers and employees of local administration, or even politicians. This phenomenon becomes more aggressive after 2005, a year marking the end of the 10-year period of interdiction to sell restituted properties[37], which prevented former owners to financially benefit from their assets. Before 2005, direct sell of restituted properties still occupied by state tenants was possible only through complicated legal artifices engineered by real-estate agents and lawyers. After 2005, the procedures were simplified and the exchange of property became easier, thus eviction proceedings and social remodeling around real estate became more violent.

If evicted historical buildings – already in a poor physical condition - could not be demolished, one way of cleaning the land for further development was to let them deteriorate until they reached a state of self-decay and thus either tear them down for safety or let them disintegrate by themselves. This is a recurrent strategy used by former owners and by real-estate developers that acquired historical buildings, but also by the Municipality itself, when it comes to old buildings in its ownership.

In stating the alarming situation of the built heritage in Romania, the 2009 *Report of the Presidential Commission regarding built heritage*[38] differentiates several types of aggressions that affect historical buildings:

[34]L. Chelcea et al., 2015.

[35]As opposed to the 1990s, when gentrifying agents were rather individuals than corporate developers. Chelcea & al., 2015.

[36] Evictions directly involving and addressed to Roma population inhabiting houses with unclear ownership status.

[37]Imposed by the restitution law 112/1995.

[38]*Raportul Comisiei prezidentiale privind patrimoniul construit, siturile istorice si naturale*, 2009, p.71.



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physical decay due to lack of maintenance, physical deterioration due to inappropriate and harmful (or unqualified) interventions, aggressive use and neglect resulting in decay and finally total deterioration, abandonment followed by criminal arson, squat or vandalism causing irreversible damage. Another type of situation would be the aggression by proxies, involving new buildings (different in scale, materials, colors, urban implantation) that significantly affect and deteriorate the image and functioning of historical/protected areas.

There is yet another very particular element that became more and more present towards the end of the 2000s – the growing implication of the Municipality in large scale regeneration or redevelopment projects that involved systematic and aggressive relocations of economically and socially deprived residents, who could not oppose any resistance to these processes. This was happening on the background of a psychological distance, acquired 15 years after the change of the political regime – from the trauma installed by the previous demolitions and redevelopments that had taken place in the 1970s and 1980s, in most of the Romanian cities. [39] This violent history, occurring at a national scale, compromised any attempt that would have been made immediately after 1989 in terms of municipal and state interventions in the urban development of cities. On the other hand, a shift in the local governance took place after 2008, when along with the new zoning regulations the state was allowed to use the eminent domain for the construction of local roads, thus allowing and encouraging the Municipality to expropriate land for the construction and rehabilitation of the latter. [40]

One example of such urban projects is the recent and very debated construction of the Berzei-Uranus Boulevard, a large re-development project involving an important protected area, developed mainly at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Started in 2010, the operation supposed the construction of a multi-lane urban express-way and in the process, it involved the clearing of 93 parcels, the expropriation of 83 buildings (all of which were situated in the area of protection of a historical monument) and the demolition of 13 historical monuments[41], together with the almost entire clearing of the North front of the Buzesti street, built in the period 1852-1911. According to architectural historian Hanna Derer[42], fragments of this front were some of the oldest continuous urban fronts in Bucharest, characterized by an exceptional historical and architectural value.

[39]But also in the country-side, redevelopment and actually erasure of entire villages completed the destruction of city centers in the name of „systematization“ that would contribute to the completion of the Socialist city.

[40] For a broad discussion concerning the evolution of urban governance, see E.Ion, 2013.

[41] Al. Bălteanu, 2011, pp.16-23.

[42] H. Derer, 2006.



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It also implied the eviction of 1000 residents, some in very aggressive circumstances (at night, in winter). Many of the demolished buildings were already in an advanced state of physical decay and inhabited by a poor population, some of who were squatting. These actions of the Municipality were met with an unprecedented wave of protests organized by the civil society[43] questioning the public benefit of the whole operation, the implication on the further development of the city, the destruction of architectural and urban heritage and finally the moral and human consequences of the evictions.

The specificity of the recent urban phenomena in Bucharest – gentrification activated by both private actors and Municipal projects - accelerated the disappearance of an important part of the built heritage that in the 90s was either in a poor physical condition or on the way to become so, thus contributing to an accentuated decay of the urban and social cohesion of significant parts of the city. The intensity and recurrence of these phenomena (neglect, decay, evictions) entitles us to include them in the concept of spatial violence.

Summing up the content of the above pages, we tried to make an inventory of the circumstances where urban spatial violence occurs, of the ways and methods through which it becomes manifest and of the consequences it had on the city of Bucharest. This may offer a new instrument for analyzing and qualifying urban development. While the processes described are slow and diffuse, framed by carefully designed legal moves, it is still about direct violence, practiced by private, institutional and public actors against buildings, against people who inhabit them and ultimately against the public spaces of the city.

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[43]More than 100 lawsuits intended by the NGO *Salvați Bucureștiul* (Save Bucharest) addressed the City Hall and were related to the legality of the evictions and the that of the demolition of historical buildings. For a detailed account of the Buzesti –Uranus case, see M.Duculescu (editor), *Cui i-e frică de cartierul Matache?*, București: Simetria, 2012.



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