

New residential areas in Bucharest Metropolitan Area – location, type and characteristics

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1 ABSTRACT

Bucharest is a city whose development had been extremely confined in space during communist era, mixing indiscriminately inside it all kinds of industries and residential areas, storehouses, parks, schools etc. Land price was not a factor of influence at that time (state owned almost all real estate), but it is reshaping Bucharest and its surrounding territory right now.

The residential areas are sprawling rapidly, changing the land use, creating new neighborhoods and affecting traditional rural ones. Only pure economics reasons being taken into consideration when building those residential areas, there are all sort of negative impacts: traffic congestion, bad zoning, deforestation. Our study is aimed at identifying where such residential areas are being built, what their structures and features are, how they fit into the existing system.

The study is conducted in the framework of a research project concerning Bucharest Metropolitan Area, financed by the The National Research Council.

2 INTRODUCTION

Bucharest has known in his recent history (the last 50 years) some extremely profound periods of changes. A short history of those changes is most relevant. At the beginning and during the first years of the communist era, the city had a specific type of urbanism, with low density population and built space, large green areas, a manufactory industry, the large extension of private property. After 1959 started the biggest transformation the city ever suffered, with substantial increase in population, surface, built surface, industry. All the buildings and land was designated as state property. The most visible part of this transformation was the rise of large block of flats residential areas to accommodate the work force necessary for the city's developing industries (heavy and chemical industries were the largest employers). Between 1966 and 1977, Bucharest's population, including the surrounding district of Ilfov, grew from 1 596 457 to 2 094 977 (23,8 %) (National Institute of Statistics - INS data). After 1989, with the change from communist to free society and market economy, another wave of transformation took place. The most important factor was the restitution of property from the state to private persons. Even the blocks of flats built during the communist era were bought by their lodgers. After so many years of living in uncomfortable state own apartment buildings, the inhabitants of Bucharest beggin to desire individual houses around the city. The land price, not important during the communist era, was now again reshaping Bucharest and its surrounding's residential areas. As the margin profits were extremely attractive and the demand high, along house building done by individuals, institutional investors were set to fulfill the population's expectations.

The confined territorial development of Bucharest during the communist era was replaced after 1989 by a uncontrolled urban sprawl type expansion. The side effects are more on the negative side. A non regulated metropolitan area emerged. Political indecision still holds Bucharest without a full functioning metropolitan area, despite a handful of projects available through the scientific community work. Considerind this chain of events and the present situation regarding the new residential areas of Bucharest, it is of most importance to try to analyse the phenomenon, its spatial configuration, the quantitative and the qualitative side of it, the negative side effects on the present infrastructures and natural resources.

3 LOCATION OF NEW RESIDENTIAL AREA IN BUCHAREST METROPOLITAN AREA

The new residential areas of Bucharest are located both inside the city, further increasing the high population density and outside the city, in his proximity. Land price is extremely important as it represents 20 to 50 % of total price of the property, taking into consideration position, type of building, acces and infrastructure utilities available (electricity, water, sewage etc).

Inside the city, the new residential areas find quick access to roads, public transportation and infrastructure utilities. In the beginning, most of these residential areas inside the city were located towards the north of the city, an area with better natural premises (green areas, lakes). As the obsolete industries of Bucharest were declining, their large surfaces provided the needed space for new investments projects, mostly commercial and residential ones. In fact, commercial uses were preferred, as Bucharest was lacking the entire system a modern free market economy needs: logistical networks, warehouses, commercial centers etc. The second domain real estate investors took into consideration was the residential. As more land became available through industrial relocation or reorientation, the residential spread more evenly inside the city.

The criteria used for choosing the location of new residential projects inside the city were the natural amenities and lower pollution levels, land price, the social characteristics of the neighbourhood with special appreciation for under the average crime rate, quick access to city center and commercial areas. The development of the housing building activity was related to the development of Bucharest society as a whole. In the beginning (1992-1996), only the wealthier social classes could afford a new home, were able and disposed to pay for something that was to be found in such small numbers. The residential areas of this period were located in the north side of the city. As the number of real estate investors grew and the population increased its revenues, new housing became more and more affordable and many projects were started all over the city.

Building residential areas inside the city has numerous advantages, most important being the quick access to public infrastructure. The same advantage can turn into a disadvantage, Bucharest being already a city with chronic traffic congestion problems.

For larger lots and lower prices, the investors had to consider building in the proximity of Bucharest. Still close enough to Bucharest in order to have quick access to roads and some public transportation, these residential areas were in most situations built in an isolated way, not having connections with existing small villages or towns, also, consequently, most of them lacking any other functions beside residential one. Some of these residential areas, consisting of single family high quality units, were classified as gated communities. The new residential areas outside city limits are largely found in Bucharest's north side. As it becomes more and more expensive to build in the north side, investor also consider building in other areas around Bucharest. Many new projects are to be located in the north-east or even eastern part of Bucharest (Fig. 1). The criteria used for choosing the location of new residential areas outside Bucharest are proximity to road access, land price, presence of natural green and water surface (see Tab. 1).

| Building residential areas inside the city | Advantage | Disadvantage |
|---|--|--|
| | Quick access to city center Quick access to public amenities | Traffic congestion Pollution Higher land prices Smaller building lots available |
| Building residential areas outside the city | Slower access to city center No pollution Green and water landscapes Lower land prices Larger building lots available No close public amenities | Traffic congestion Slower access to public amenities |

Tab. 1: Advantages and disadvantages when building residential areas inside/outside Bucharest

Although the advantages are more numerous when considering building residential areas in Bucharest metropolitan space, the major factor of influence still remains the proximity to city center. When affordable, despite problems of pollution (air pollution, noise pollution), the inside city residential area is the first option.

Due to the fact that city traffic is still considered to be a major problem in the next years, the proximity to city center will remain a major advantage in the near future. The residential areas outside the city represent at

the present the main source of traffic congestion at city entry points, along with commercial areas. As the city traffic will improve and the traffic speed will increase, probably even more residential areas will be build outside the city. This incipient form of sprawl it's impossible to avoid and the effects must be studied carefully in order to better assess the phenomenon (Bogart, 2006) and to learn to cope with the negative consequences.

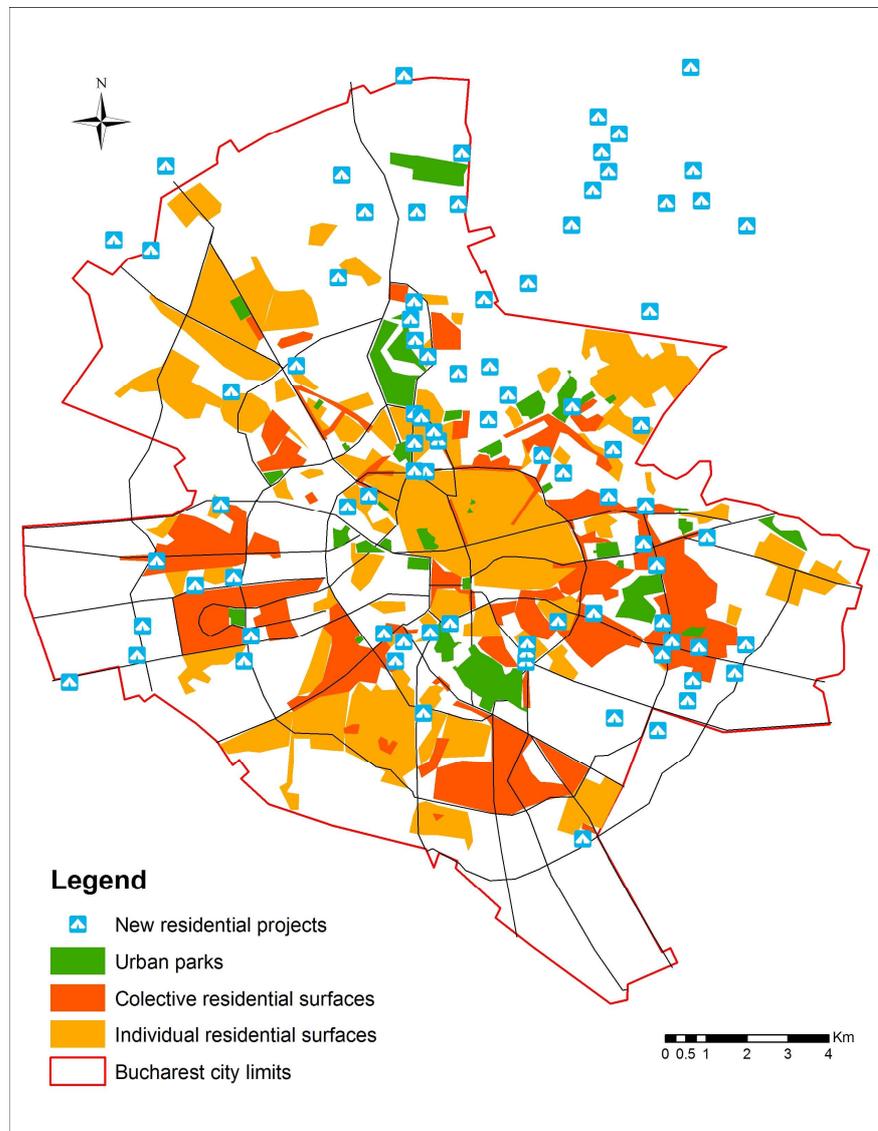


Fig. 1: Location of new residential areas in Bucharest

4 THE NEW RESIDENTIAL AREAS - TYPES AND CHARACTERISTICS

Bucharest had in 1992 a number of 779 000 housing units, classified as natural evolution urban housing (7,05 %), planned urban housing with- lot type (2,56 %), planned urban housing – street side type, planned urban housing – multiple family type (80,86%), planned rural-urban housing (3,2 %) and natural evolution rural-urban housing (1,94 %) (cf. Bucharest Urban Master Plan, 1998). It must be underline that most of the urban planned housing – multiple family type was designed according to the communist era standards. It consisted in large block of flats areas and street side alignments. This situation is changing at very slow pase. Still, the new residential areas are the start of a long process of replacing the communist era buildings.

Also, it very important to notice that in Bucharest metropolitan space the majority of the homes are of private ownership (the majority of Bucharest inhabitants live in houses owned by themselves). From the large majority public owned residential before 1989, the situation turned completely in just 10 years (see Fig. 2). This odd situation has a number of explanations, but two are decisive. First of all, the romanian population has historically a very strong sense of ownership. The second reason is that after 1989, the romanian

gouvernement decided to get rid of the expenses this immense property involved and sold at low prices the housing units to their individual tenants.

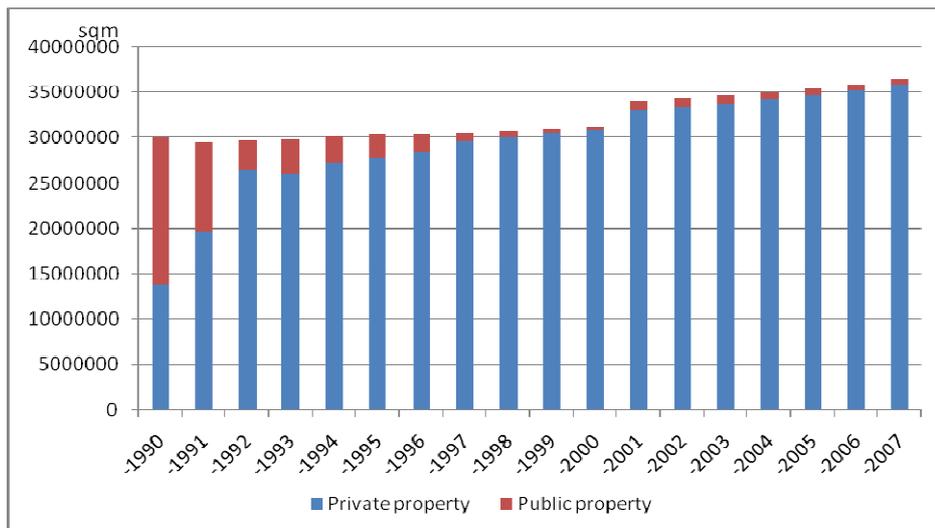


Fig. 2: Number of new housing units in Bucharest and Ilfov District (data source: INS)

Between 1945-1989 the public administration was building almost everything from residential to industrial sites. The residential areas were planned in detail with special attention paid to resource savings and less to comfort or life quality. After 1989, the process of building residential areas switched hands and in present days the public administration only builds social housing (small numbers and with private contractors). The residential units building by private investors is on a steady ascendent trend since 1997 (see Fig. 3).

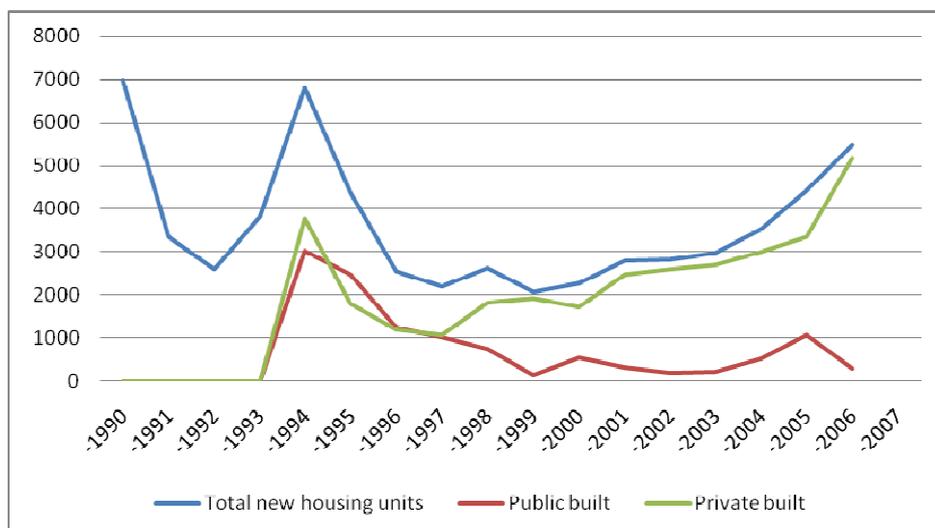


Fig. 3: Number of new housing units in Bucharest and Ilfov District (data source: INS)

Inside the city, the new residential areas are formed by high buildings (up to 20 storeys), somewhat resembling the communist block of flats. Probably the most important difference is the better insulation, due to stronger energy efficient regulations. Often, beside the residential building there is a commercial area.

The high land price makes single family housing a presence only in small residential areas towards the city peripheries.

Outside the city, the typology is more diverse. The built space expansion is not regulated and it's done in a chaotic way, probably the first phase of the urban sprawl some cities experienced years ago (Garreau, 1991; Miceli and Sirmans, 2007). There are some multiple family housing new residential areas, but the majority is single unit housing. In this conditions there are numerous side effects on the environment (Ioja, 2008), the most important being direct ones, as deforestation and habitat fragmentation.

The most frequent new residential areas around Bucharest are consisting of single family units with low residential density. The size is of extreme variety, as it's architecture and design.

In the last years, high building residential areas are increasing in numbers outside Bucharest. As the land is cheaper, the investor are trying to speculate the high buying prices the market offered until 2008.

Different forms of gated communities are also present. Gated communities are residential areas with controlled entrances and in some cases enclosed by physical protective elements (Blakely and Snyder, 1999).

Some of the first residential areas built after 1989 were gated communities (Satul Francez – The French Village for example). This type of residential areas is extremely expensive in Bucharest and in his proximity. Only the middle upper class and upper class can afford it. This way, it's an active process of social segregation.

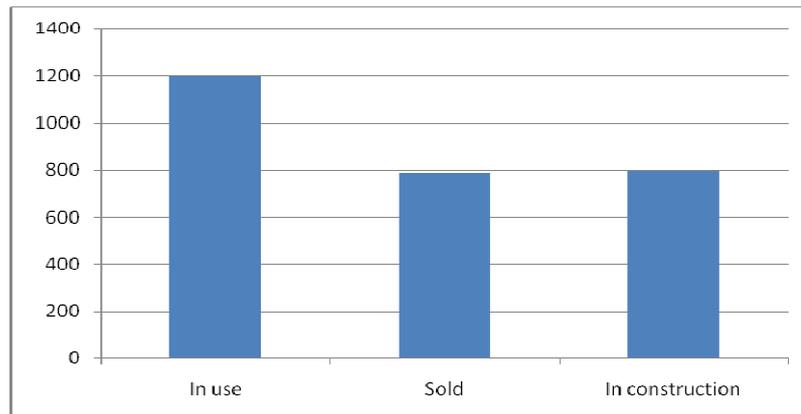


Fig. 4: Number of housing units in gated communities in Bucharest, 2004 (estimated by Samuel Rufat, 2003)

As the middle class becomes larger, so does the demand for gated communities increases (see Fig. 4).

5 CONCLUSION

The land price inside the city is extremely high and the investors are building densely to maximize their profits. Given the weak law enforcement by the public authorities, these new residential areas are not well integrated into the fabric of the city and are most likely to cause in the near future traffic congestion, the same as the innercity commercial areas already do. Also, the majority of them lack any other functions, beside residential and sometimes commercial ones. Green space, educational facilities or even parking are viewed as luxury items, if not a waste of space. Being inside the city, they use the existing infrastructure adding more stress to equipments that already exceeded their capacity and/or life-span.

Outside the city, the new residential areas are adding pressure to natural resources (forests, water) and also to existing infrastructure, where available.

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