

DEMOGRAPHIA



BUCHAREST: BIRTHPLACE OF SMART GROWTH

FAST FACTS		Similar to
Urbanized Area* Population	2,000,000	Fukuoka, Vienna, Denver
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	110	Canberra, Guangzhou, Helsinki, Brasilia
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	285	
Population per Square Mile	18,200	Jakarta, Manila
Population per Square Kilometer	7,200	

26 May 2004

Bucharest. Here is a place that must warm the hearts of urban planners. No one can call Bucharest unplanned, at least that part of it that was in place when dictator-planner Nicolae Ceausescu was unceremoniously ushered out of office (and life) in 1989, he and communism both having somewhat overstayed their welcome.

Here is the grand Vision. The central government palace --- reputed to be the worlds second largest building after the Pentagon. Today it houses one house of the Romanian parliament and a conference center. To build it required tearing down thousands of homes and churches in the capital. But it was all for the greater good --- all to build the dictator-planner's ideal city. There is reason to be concerned about the future of the edifice. Unlike other modern monstrosities, the workmanship appears to have been well below par here. Already the stone walkways are crumbling --- as fast as Mayor Rizzo's brick sidewalks did on the now defunct Chestnut Street mall in Philadelphia (another planner's Vision gone wrong, but not with such awful consequences).

The plan does not stop with the palace. On four sides and for some distance building was well underway on the Vision. To the front (east) of the palace lie the tastefully designed government buildings that form an entrance to the long grand boulevard. Further along the boulevard will be found uncompleted construction --- an impressive government building. It has been uncompleted since construction was interrupted shortly after the dictator's not premature passing. Its principal purpose at this point is to serve as a stand for a Volvo advertisement that probably would have been illegal 20 years ago. All over the city you see the same things. Tall, concrete shells, many graced by other advertising signs, part of the dictator-planner's Vision; shells that will probably have to be dismantled for want of any market to finish them. And there is a strong market in Romania. There has been much private construction, but seemingly the investors who risk their own money rather than the stolen funds available to the dictator-planner aren't interested.

To the west lies what was to become the Ministry of Defense --- again an impressive, tastefully designed building, much as Hitler's post-war urban plans for Berlin might have been pleasing to the eye until one learned their true social cost. This building was completed early and now houses Mr. Marriot's hotel. And a nice hotel it is. Further to the west, along the dictator-planner's new river (the planner's Vision sometimes requires rivers where they were so negligently omitted by the Creator), lies the impressive National Library. The cranes are still there. The empty shell's windows are all broken. Perhaps it should be preserved in its present state as a monument to the over-zealousness of urban planners. Preserved it will be. Or torn down.

To the south are other buildings from the dictator-planner's blueprint for what had been one of Europe's most graceful cities. The dictator-planner also saw to it that the city grew. To make sure it happened he destroyed villages around the country and forced people to move into Bucharest high-rises, that were as dreary as any that could be found the wrong side of what Churchill named the "Iron Curtain."

In a previous article, I evoked the ire of many U.S. urban planners when I suggested that Nicolae Ceaucescu was the "Father of Smart Growth" --- the philosophy that the values of urban planners must be imposed upon the city to increase densities and deny people the right to live how they like. They are often called "anti-sprawl" policies.

Little did I realize how apt was the title. I was to learn that if Ceaucescu was the "Father of Smart Growth," then Bucharest was its birthplace, however unwillingly. It was Nicolae Ceaucescu and Nicolae Ceaucescu alone that understood the dynamics of smart growth --- that to create the higher-density compact cities of their dreams and our nightmares, planners need to start by dismantling things. Thousands of homes and churches in the capital is a good start. Villages and suburbs need to go as well. Advocates of anti-sprawl policies who don't understand this are either naïve or intellectually dishonest, or both. There is sort of a "smart growth with a human face" faction that would have us believe that the compact city can be achieved without forcing densities to be much higher. But to achieve any measurable results, things have to be torn down. To believe that the compact city can be achieved without dismantling the suburbs is like believing that omelets can be made without breaking eggs. And break eggs the dictator-planner did.

I was in Bucharest for an international transport conference (CODATU XI). I had been asked to do a training seminar on transport and urban planning. The conference was held in the dictator-planner's palace, and the local organizing committee and other local contacts could not have been more welcoming.

Fortunately my presentation was scheduled after I had been in Bucharest for a few days and seen a few things. I had intended to suggest that one might classify cities based upon their transport systems. There was the walking city of pre-public transport times. Then there was the public transport city. Now there is the automobile city. In each of these, of course, elements of the previous incarnations remain. But Bucharest inspired me to suggest that there is a fourth kind of a city --- the disfigured city. The cities that the planners, in one way or another, have disfigured

to be less than they could have been, while imposing great costs on their residents and economies.

There are actually a number of disfigured cities in the world. There is London, where well meaning elites have consigned suburban (actually exurban residents outside the Green Belt, who represent roughly half of the Southeast England population) residents to long drives, limited employment opportunities and lower incomes in an urban area that has long since become too dispersed to be called an urban area. American planners visited disfigurement on their own cities, where Stalinist housing blocks were raised to house people in poverty who were forced out of their own homes that the planners found inconsistent with their Vision. Now they are being razed.

There is the evolving disfigurement of Portland, where residents have begun to put some brakes on the ardor of that city's planners for buildings completely out of neighborhood character. Portland's disfigurement is evolving block by block. Bucharest's is in the center and could not be less obvious.

Outside the core are dozens of square miles of Stalinist high-rise apartment buildings that seemingly house the majority of the population. While it is disfigured, the three historical phases of the city are more obvious here than elsewhere. Horse drawn carts will be seen, alongside trams and cars. In my drive on the ring road, I was pleased to see an East German Trabant (western aficionados who didn't have to live with them called them "Trabi's"), with its legendary blue smoke. These communist built cars were so bad that it was hard to find them in East Germany a few years after the Khrushchev-Brezhnev Wall was dismantled.

The city of Bucharest itself has begun to lose population, despite having much green field space. The growth is occurring on the ring road, most of it outside the city. Here, on the west side is a large shopping center, anchored by the world's second largest retailer, the French Carrefour (whose stores I have also seen in the suburbs of Shanghai and Brasilia, and throughout Western Europe). Here, unlike much of Western Europe, people are free to shop on Sundays.

Carrefour's hypermarkets typically have 72 or so check-out registers and can be of a size that can make a Wal-Mart super center look like a 1950s A&P (the pre-supermarket grocery stores of the United States). For people with other things to do with their time, there is only one way to get to this shopping center ---by car. There is bus service, but no rail service. But Carrefour has also built large, big box stores for the convenience of those living in the city and dependent upon transit. The English language business newspaper announced what it referred to as yet another new shopping mall to be built while I was there. Meanwhile, the suburban center on the west side is a pioneer. There are no large tracts of housing nearby. In this regard, the urbanization of the Bucharest suburbs is taking a different road than has been the case in North America and Western Europe. There, the houses came first, and then the commercial development. Here, the commercial development is starting much earlier.

But there are new residences both inside and outside the ring road. Romania does not yet have a large middle-income population. But those who have made it and better are building new houses. They are big houses and attractive. Concurrence seems, however, not to be required. Most are

located on gravel alleys that would be illegal to build on in North America or Western Europe. But building they are --- especially outside the ring road and the city to the west and inside the ring road and city to the north, in leap-frog developments that urban planners given to apoplexy would best avoid.

To the east, beyond the urbanization and inside the ring road, downwind as in most places, will be found the industrial parks and suburban commercial centers.

Bucharest's public transport system is another story. There is a metro, which is to be expected in any city of such high density, surely higher than any in North America except perhaps New York. But the dictator-planner decreed that stations should be too far apart. This puts a substantial burden on the bus and tram systems, which must try to serve the expanses of urbanization between the stations. Financial resources are more limited in Romania than most places, and there is much transit dependency due to low income. As a result, buses and trams are hideously crowded, a crowding that will surely accelerate motorization, as people opt to buy cars even before they can afford them to avoid conditions of crowding that would not be permitted in US cattle trucks.

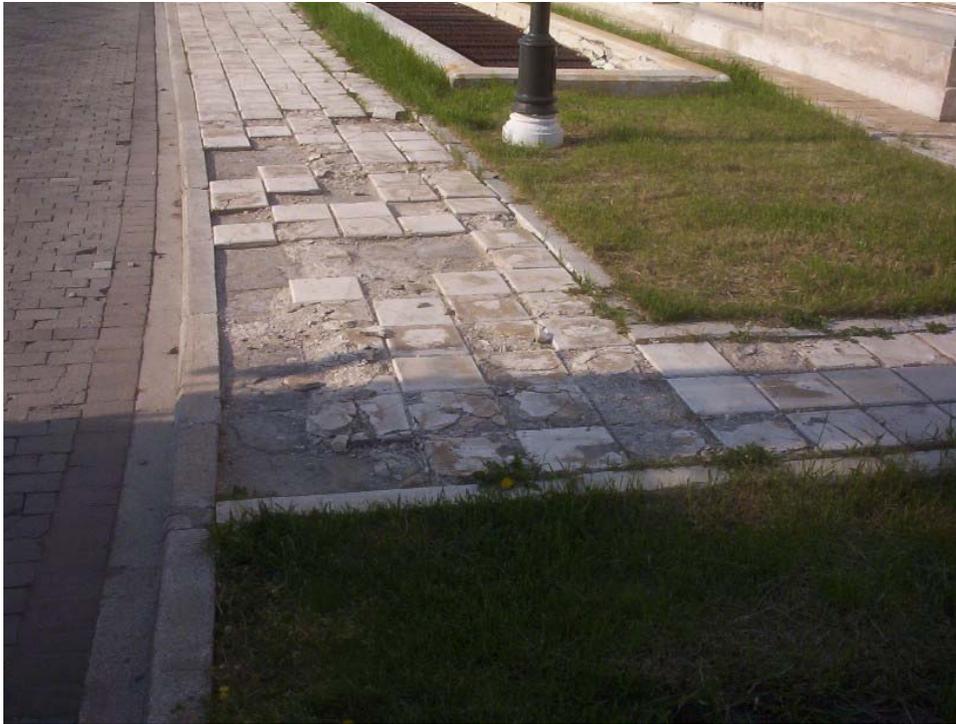
Romania is scheduled to join the European Union (EU) at the next enlargement, in 2007. It will be, by far, the poorest nation ever to join the EU. But membership cannot come too soon. The economy is so bad that many of the nation's young people are moving, legally and illegally, to other countries. Romanians are an industrious and intelligent people. Their language skills and entrepreneurial talents will make them successful. For Romania, however, it would be better if they can stay home to help bring the country out of the economic abyss that is the legacy of the dictator-planner.

The dictator-planner is dead, and so is his plan. But the damage he has done will not heal for decades or more. There was no reason for the dictator-planner to do what he did --- no imperative for denying the right of Romanians to live their lives as they wanted. And this is what "wrong" is all about --- not allowing people to do what they want for no good reason.

Ceausescu's Vision was not enough to avoid doing wrong and harm. Nor is the vision of North American and Western European urban planners who would substitute their tastes for those of people denied their own choices to build cities of their own God.



















PICTURES

Dictator-Planner's Palace
Dictator-Planner's Palace and River
Dictator-Planner's "Grandes Boulevards"
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Old Bucharest, Before Disfigurement

By Wendell Cox

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