this place is pretty good
spatial engagement with Brăila's latency

LIFE IN A COMMUNIST STUDIO

BRĂILA CITY'S DESIGN STUDIO DURING COMMUNIST TIME IS A DESERTED PLACE. AND FOR MOST PEOPLE ROBOTS. TWO OF BRĂILA'S MOST ACTIVE ARCHITECTS REMEMBER HOW THE WHEN 30 ARCHITECTS USED TO WORK HERE THROUGH THE 70s AND 80s.

Calea Călărașilor 101 A, a short walk from the city hall stands the former architecture studio. At first glance it is just another building lining the street. Above the entrance, the sign is still hanging on the wall: "Proiectare". The door is open but few people pass through nowadays. From the opening of the office in 1970 until the revolution in 1989, this was the center of architectural production in Brăila. But it was not always so. Before 1969 the larger neighbouring city of ...ăti was the administrative ... of the region which ... of the building ... carried

for an urbanization program national ... to, among other things, house the new workers began to transform the city. As a result of these developments, the new county of Brăila was established in 1969 by the communist regime and Brăila city became the regional capital complete with full administrative authority.

GYM AND EVENT SPACE

- Polycarbonate panel cladding for the new addition
- New outdoor perimeter canopy portion
- New steel roof structure to provide adequate gym height
- New bleachers above change rooms
- New plan configuration
- Existing plan configuration
- Existing workshop building (not in use)

this place is pretty good

spatial engagement with brăila's latency

U sing the city of Brăila in Romania (a post-industrial, post-communist city with economic and population decline) as the field of operation, an international group of students and teachers have been exploring forms of operational capital that go beyond economy to develop architectural approaches. As such we have been working both in the studio in Bergen, Norway and on the field in Brăila to explore and ignite latent potentials derived from the particularities of the context such as latent potentials such as the creative potential of users, the undervalued Communist era heritage, new forms of micro-urbanisms, an abundance of space and building stock formed as a result of economic and demographic contractions to name a few examples.

As part of our field work, we have sought ways to test and calibrate the architectural approaches through direct actions, such as built interventions, participatory processes, interviews or presentations. And further looked to develop and anchor these approaches within the local communities, institutions and individuals that constitute the life of the city. Lastly, we have aimed to translate this work into strategic proposals of a long term and large scale capable of affecting structural change.

The following pages are an exploration into ways of thinking and doing architecture as a dialectical process of "how to" maximize the affects of latent capital using limited means as a way to evolve a city's future potential.

An introduction to our field of operation kicks of the book. Five projects exemplify the various approaches we have explored, forming the core material. They are paired up with complimentary texts, some of which have been previously published and others written anew, to provide a broader theoretical framework for considering the work. And a series of contextual fragments (postcards from Brăila and Dacia 1300 photos) are peppered throughout the book and provide further entry points into the richness of Brăila.

Această publicație reprezintă primul volum din proiectul colaborativ "LABORATOR BRĂILA – Abordări alternative ale periferiilor urbane în cadrul unui oraș cu creşterea stagnată (B-LAB)". Proiectul a fost realizat de Bergen Arkitekthøgskole (BAS), Norvegia, împreuna cu Universitatea de Arhitectură și Urbanism "Ion Mincu" – Facultatea de Urbanism (UAUIM), București, cu susținerea Primăriei Municipiului Brăila. Proiectul a fost finanțat printr-un grant acordat de Norvegia, Islanda, Lichtenstein și Guvernul României.

Lucrarea inclusă în acest volum este rezultatul cursurilor de masterat "Laborator Brăila: În căutarea unor abordări arhitecturale cadrul unui oraş cu creşterea stagnată (05.01.2015 – 29.05.2015) și a atelierului de vară din Brăila (22.07.2015 – 05.08.2015) susținute de Guillaume Eckly Andrea Spreafico și Cristian Ştefănescu pentru Şcoala de Arhitectură Bergen, în colaborare cu Cătălina Ioniţă și Angelica Stan. Materialele adiţionale culese din diverse publicaţii, expoziţii și conversaţii despre subiect, au fost incluse in volum ca fragmente structurale, cu ajutorul cărora lucrarea poate fi analizată și interpretată.

Conținutul acestei cărți a fost posibil datorită participării și contribuţiei generoase de care au dat dovadă Siv Aardal, Cecilie Andersson, Atdhé Illyrian Belegu, Siri Borten, Jessica Chang, Martin Hauge, Anton Huhn, Marian Ion, Ingrid Kvamsdal, Goda Lukšaitė, Rune Nautvik, Karl Emil Sødegren, Ingunn Tepstad, Tiina Johanna Teräs, Wei-Hsiang Tseng, Patricia Miho Tsunoushi, Sebastian Uthaug, Frede Vik, Winnie Sanna Sahara. Westerlund.

This publication forms the first half of the collaborative project "BRAILA LABORATORY - Alternative approaches to urban peripheries within a shrinking city (B-LAB)". The project has been carried out by the Bergen Arkitekthøgskole (BAS), Norway together with Universitatea de Arhitectură și Urbanism "Ion Mincu" – Facultatea de Urbanism (UAUIM), Bucharest and with the support of the Brăila Municipality. The project is financed through a grant from Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein and the Government of Romania

The work included in this volume is derived from the master course "Brăila Laboratory: In search of architectural approaches within a shrinking city" (05.01.2015 – 29.05.2015) and a follow-up summer workshop in Braila (22.07.2015 – 05.08.2015) - both carried out by Guillaume Eckly Andrea Spreafico and Cristian Stefanescu in collaboration with Cătălina Ioniţă and Angelica Stan for the Bergen Arkitekthøgskole. Additional material gathered from publications, exhibitions and conversations about the work has been included as structural fragments through which the work can be considered and interpreted.

The content of this book is made possible with the generous participation and contribution of Siv Aardal, Cecilie Andersson, Atdhé Illyrian Belegu, Siri Borten, Jessica Chang, Martin Hauge, Anton Huhn, Marian Ion, Ingrid Kvamsdal, Goda Lukšaitė, Rune Nautvik, Karl Emil Sødegren, Ingunn Tepstad, Tiina Johanna Teräs, Wei-Hsiang Tseng, Patricia Miho Tsunoushi, Sebastian Uthaug, Frede Vik, Winnie Sanna Sahara Westerlund.

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Brăila as significant port city at
the turn of the 20th century

B răila is a port city on the shores of the Danube River that
stretches from the Black Forest of Germany to the Black
Sea of Eastern Europe.

Situated in South-eastern Romania, the city has a total area
roughly the size of Manhattan (78 km²) and about as many
people live there as do in the 11th arrondissement of Paris
(160,000).

Brăila today

Brăila as Ottoman fortification
in the 14th century

FIELD OF OPERATION

B răila is a port city on the shores of the Danube River that stretches from the Black Forest of Germany to the Black Sea of Eastern Europe. Situated in South-eastern Romania, the city has a total area roughly the size of Manhattan (78 km2) and about as many people live there as do in the 11th arrondissement of Paris (160,000).

Brăila was founded as a small settlement on the Danube river in the 14th century. Two important growth periods coupled with two distinct global architectural movements have structured the city and given form to its concentric urban fabric. The first was its evolution into one of the country's most significant ports coinciding with the "city beautiful" movement at the turn of the 20th century. The second being the formation of a communist state following WWII and the development of the socialist city on the tenets of the international style filtered through a regional identity. If public life and space played a central role in the city's initial development, the addition of new housing neighbourhoods during the socialist period gave little attention to community life. Massive investments in industrialization, an agglomeration of people, as well as the ideological mechanisms employed to carry out these actions - standardization and new rules sought to obey a new political order – led to a concentration of the public life within designated and programmed places and events. Following the fall of Communism in '89, the city began to experience demographic and economic decline. A desire to escape the recent past combined with ad-hoc adaptation of "wild west" capitalism (could be considered neo-liberalism) has led to a shift from a collectively structured society to one of individual pursuit. This has made it difficult to reconcile the individual growing needs with the existing common conditions. In this context various forms of individual initiatives varying from the appropriation of former standardized shared spaces to innovative adaptations of one's dwellings or plots present new opportunities for the community to re-establish itself and grow from within using the survival tactics developed during this transition period.

INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE AS
OPERATIONAL MODEL

Economical and demographic growth serve as fundamental parameters upon which the future horizon of a city is set. This can explain the frequent presence of architectural activity within developing areas and metropoles. Yet these are not the only parameters that underpin and define the future of all cities. Other forms of latent urban capital can serve as foundations for a positive evolution, whether they are found in urban structures, natural conditions or the social web of communities, institutions and individuals. These other forms of latent capital, while relevant to most cities, become crucial in cases of demographic and economical decline.

The most relevant contribution architecture can give in such a context of scarcity is to circumscribe these other forms of latent capital, define their potential and find ways to make them operational drivers of a city's future well being. Reality is finally the only ground for dreams.

A reduced capacity for planned, centralized mechanisms to support a city's physical fabric and the life within has caused a vacuum within which individual initiatives have become the norm. Their groundings are often personal, opportunistic, of small scale and rely on the particularities of the situation. They are forms of survival tactics that rely on a clever, sometimes intelligent and optimistic approach of dealing with what reality offers. When considered as a whole, these singular acts come to form a critical mass that rivals, and often substitutes the affect of centralized planned initiatives on the evolution of the city.

In Brăila the prominence of individual initiative is most evident in the spaces where daily life unfolds: the housing block and detached house neighbourhoods which make up over 80% of the city.

THE MANIFESTATION OF INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE IN THE HOUSING BLOCKS

by Jessica Chang and Martin Hauge

This typology houses a large majority of the city's population. It is a product of the communist-era mass housing effort that coincided with the significant industrialization and urbanization efforts of the 60's, 70's and 80's. Since the early 90's, various forms of individual initiatives tied to larger structural changes have led to a multitude of transformations of the housing blocks and their surrounding areas.

MAP OF APARTMENT HOUSING BLOCKS IN BRĂILA

Progresul - Vidin

Islaz

Plantelor

Galați

Gării

Obor

Hipodrome

Danube

Brăila

Viziru III

Viziru II

Casari IV

Ansamblul Buzăului

Radu Negru

Viziru I

apartment block
neighbourhoods
in Brăila

a spatial engagement with brăila's latency

EVOLUTION OF THE HOUSING BLOCKS

PRE 1947
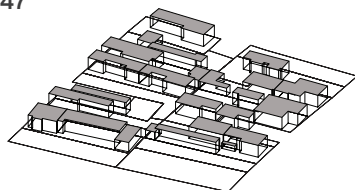
Existing neighbourhoods

Typical dwelling area with privately owned detached houses

1947 - 1989
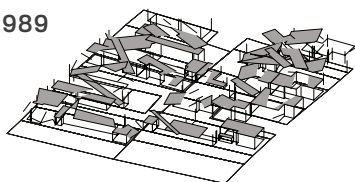
Expropriation and demolition of existing neighbourhoods

Residents were displaced from their homes for the demolition of existing neighborhoods.

Rezoning

These expropriations happened in the larger frame of re-zoning peripheral urban and agricultural land to make space to new housing blocks.


Systematization 1974

While housing block construction began in the '60s it is in the '70s, with the introduction of soviet residential construction protocols, that it registered a significant increase.
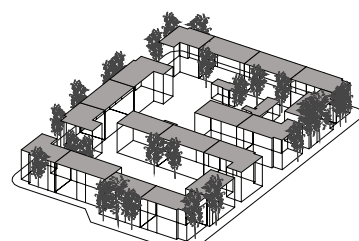
Administration

Immediate spaces surrounding the housing blocks where collectively planted and maintained by the municipality.
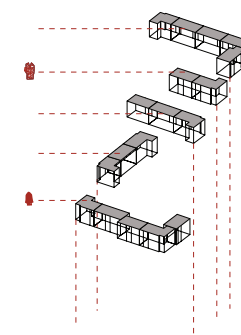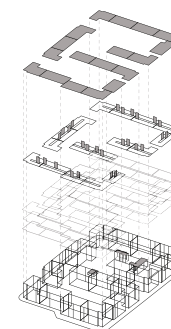

Landscaping

Each block unit had a designated resident who was responsible for administering the common areas, overseeing maintenance and collecting rent.
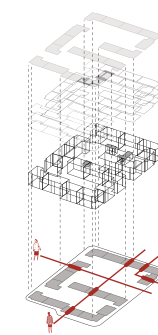
Porosity

The common area of the buildings were accessible by everyone (residents or not) making the staircase of the blocks an extension streets and courtyards.
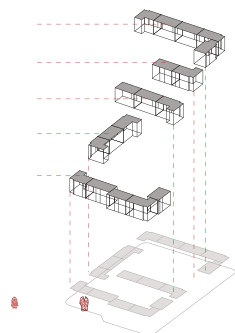

Uniformity

A centralized construction system meant a uniform exterior which also traced itself into the interior of the buildings. Entrance doors into each apartment were identical and often household furnitures and objects were the same in each unit.
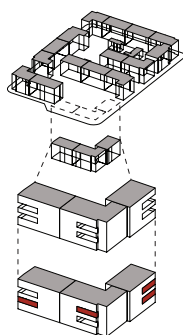
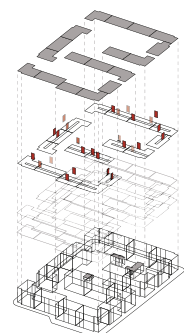# EVOLUTION OF THE HOUSING BLOCKS

1989 - PRESENT

Administration dismantling

Following the fall of communist regime in 1989, the administrative function was eliminated, leaving a vacuum as to how the common areas would to be considered and maintained Each apartment resident became owner of their unit.

Change of doors

One of the first changes to occur after the fall of communism was seen in the interior halls of the blocks. Residents began to replace their entrance doors opening onto the staircase.
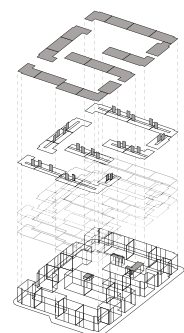

Enclosure of balconies

Apartments began to enclose balconies to expand climatized/indoor areas in apartments. This also occurred at the ground floor, where no balconies existed, people created their own enclosed balconies.


Commercialization and ground floor expansion

Ground floor apartments adjacent to larger streets began to be fully or partially converted into commercial units. At times this included new extensions being built.
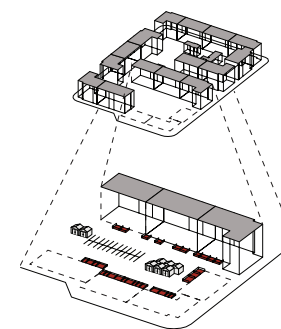

Appropriation of courtyard space

Block residents began to enclose portions of common courtyards and use them as private gardens. New entrance doors facing these spaces began to appear. Ground floor residents were occasionally establishing new doors for direct access to "their" garden.
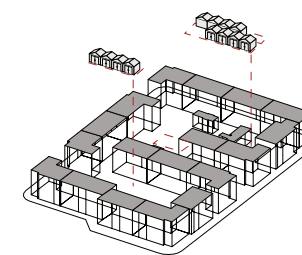
Prefabricated Garages

With the significant rise of car ownership pre-fabricated garages were sold by the municipality to address the absence of parking infrastructure. The lack of position regulation resulted in an unsystematic and disorganized placement of garages in the courtyards.
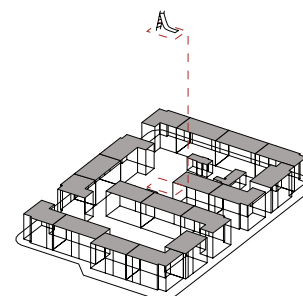
Common programs

Various common programs such as playgrounds and spaces for social gathering were progressively introduces by the municipality to ensure common use of the courtyards
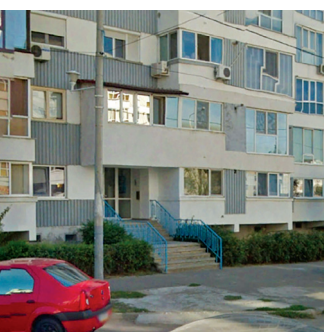
courtyard playground

ground floor
commercial space

exterior insulation
of individual
apartments on the
common facade

rooftop
extension

This is the first in a series of photographs of the most ubiquitous Romanian car, the Dacia 1300 found throughout the book. These photographs were initially collected by all members of the group as an internal joke: beyond the objective charm the car possesses, we were impressed by the amount of modifications that people could and did apply to it. Over time we realized that this collection is a living metaphor of an adaptable urban fabric that affords a dynamic unfolding of daily life thanks to a laissez-faire application of political, economic and legal structures. Having a mechanical and accessible engine that by now belongs to the shared knowledge of Romanian people, Dacia 1300s are interpreted and transformed in such a rich number of ways and manage to adapt to the most variegated contexts, ultimately defining de facto an open source system. Similarly to the Dacia 1300 that populates its streets, the urban hardware of Braila (such as buildings, open spaces and public infrastructure) survives despite little means for care-taking, by allowing (and giving meaning to) the spontaneous ad-hoc initiatives and interventions of its inhabitants.
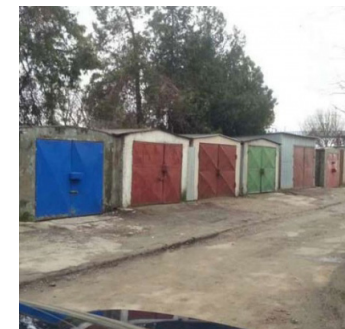

DACIA
1310

pre-fabricated
garages within
courtyard

appropriated
balcony above
entrance vestibule

housification of
the ground floor

former ancillary
heating station
converted into
men's club

covered space for
social gathering

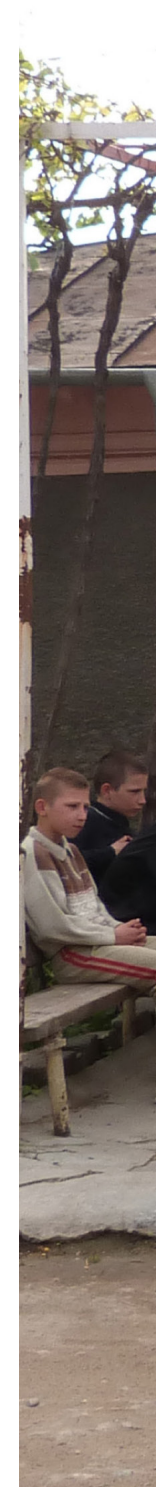DACIA
1310

THE MANIFESTATION OF INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE IN DETACHED HOUSES

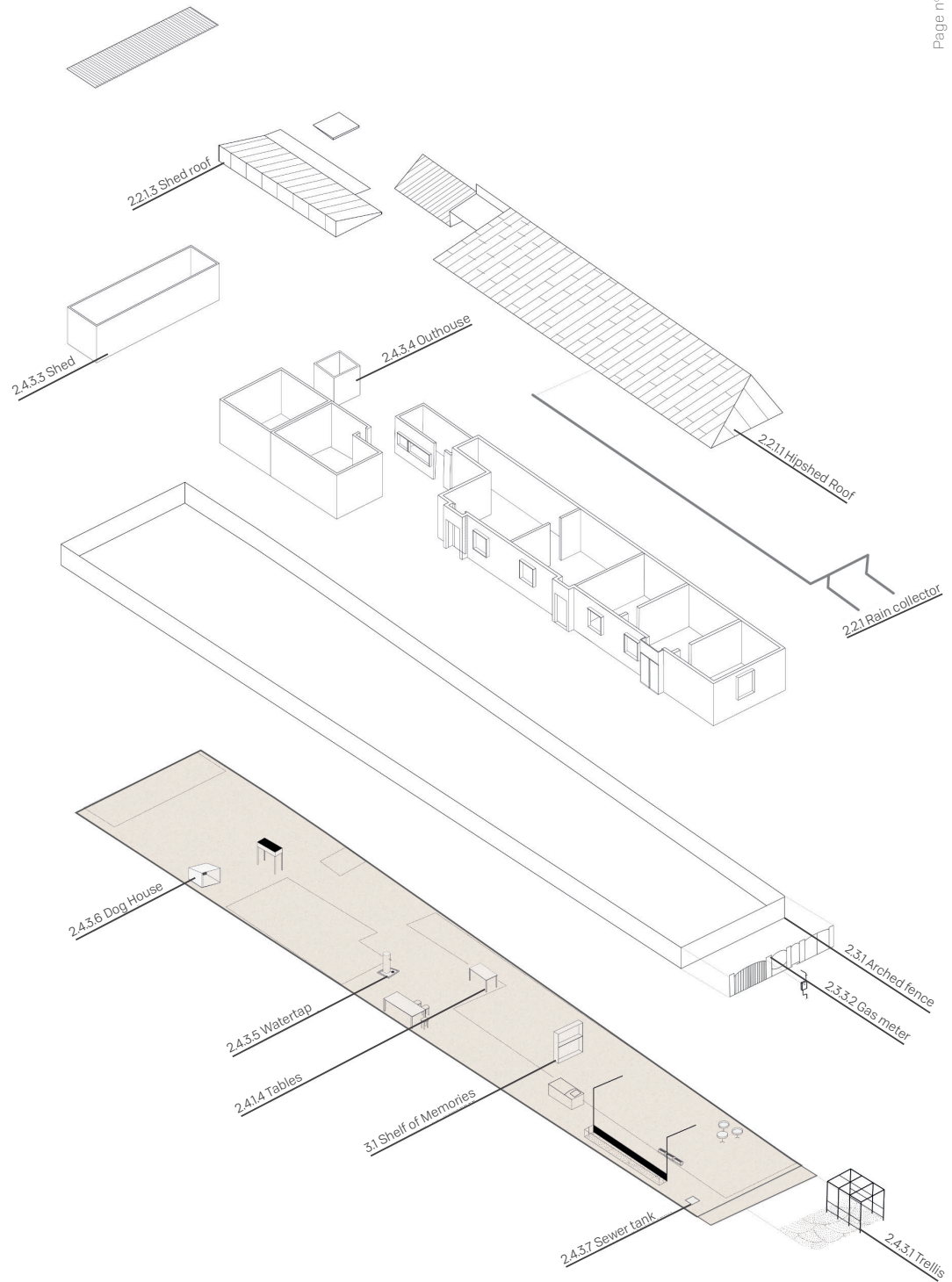by Patricia Tsunoushi and Winnie Westerlund

What we have chosen to call the Chercea typology is the most commonplace housing typology found throughout Romania. Within Braila it represents more than 50% of housing areas yet it is best exemplified within the Chercea neighbourhood (hence the choice of focusing on this particular neighbourhood as well as the typology name). The typology typically consists of detached, 1-2 storey working class houses, at times self built, primarily for single family living. They are located within linear plots east-west plots, have a wagon plan organization (room-to-room movement without separate corridor) and make clever use of local labour and material resources. They predate the communist period and have commonly housed various commercial activities of a formal and informal nature: mom-and-pop shops, cottage industry production and services in addition to backyard agriculture and livestock raising. These activities continued throughout the communist period and became more pronounced following the shift to capitalism and individualism after '89. During this period, a lack of housing affordability, relaxed planning and building regulations, a "wild" free-market economy and the loss of many industrial jobs led to the increase of small-scale commercial activities as well as multi-generational living. Throughout these various periods of change, the houses have proven capable of adapting and evolving to accommodate the dynamic, mixed-used, ad-hoc-ism that resulted and in doing so showcase a high degree of flexibility and adaptability that is exemplary.

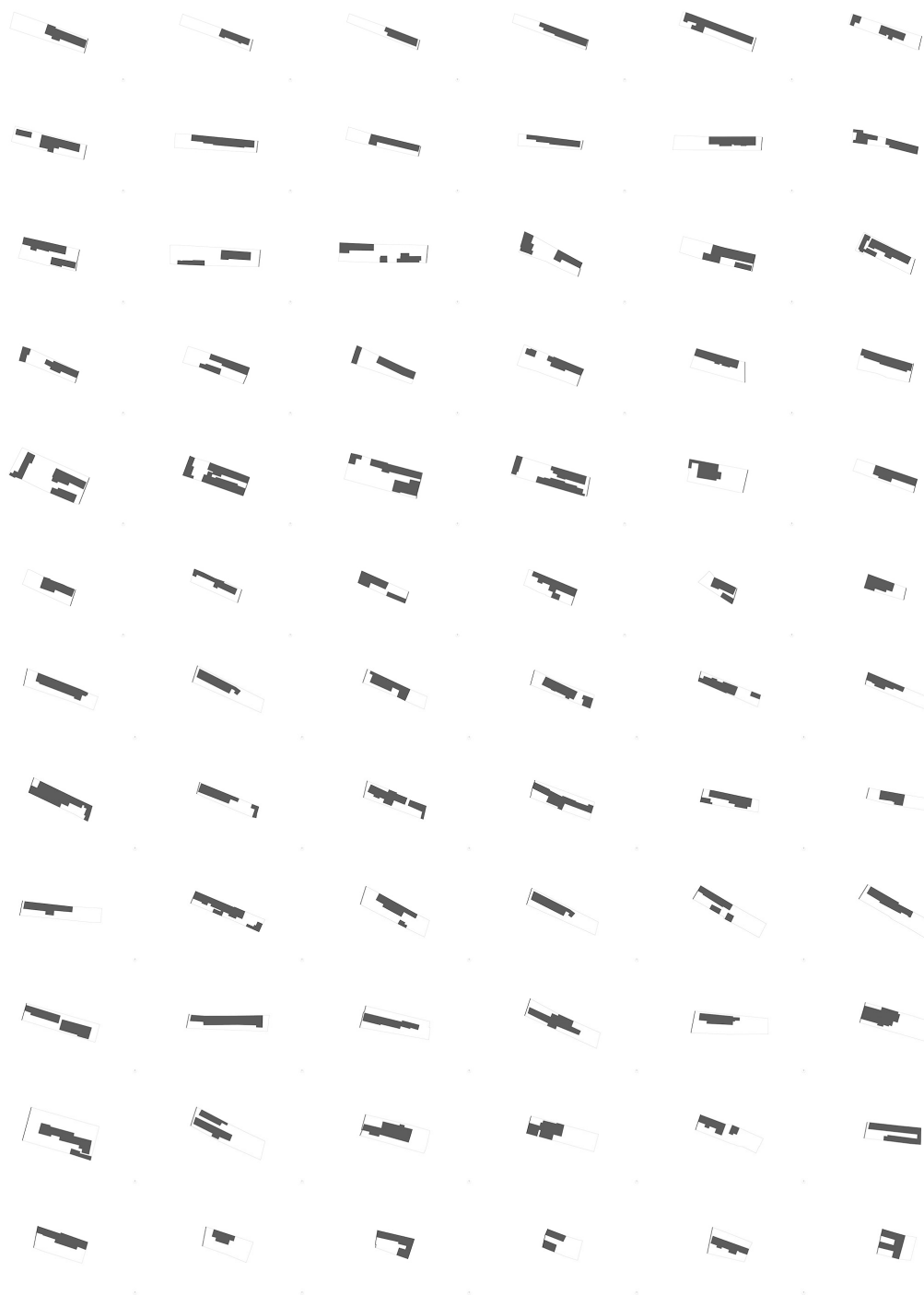*The following pages are excerpts from a larger study of the Chercea typology

2.2.13 Shed roof
2.2.11 Hipshed Roof
2.4.3.4 Outhouse
2.4.3.3 Shed
2.2.1 Rain collector
2.3.1 Arched fence
2.3.3.2 Gas meter
2.4.3.6 Dog House
2.4.3.5 Watertap
2.4.1.4 Tables
3.1 Shelf of Memories
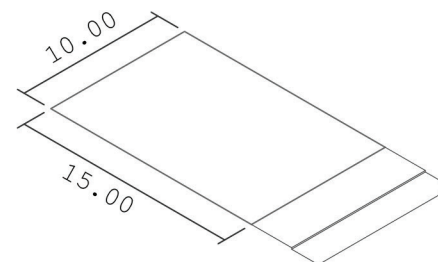2.4.3.7 Sewer tank
2.4.3.1 Trellis

Lot variations   1.1

Building regulations since 2000   1.2

Minimum area of the lot 150 sqm
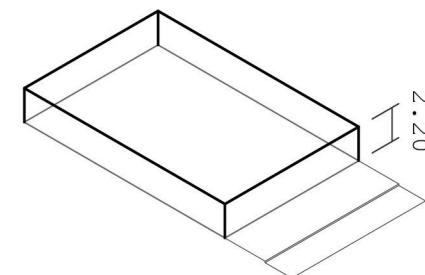
Fence height max 2.2 m
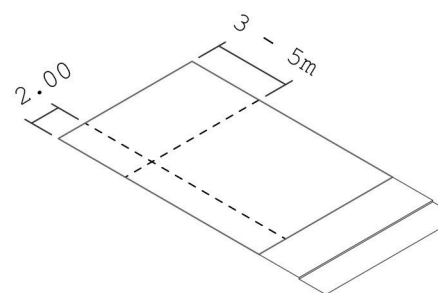
Minimum setback line
side yard 2m, rear yard 3-5m
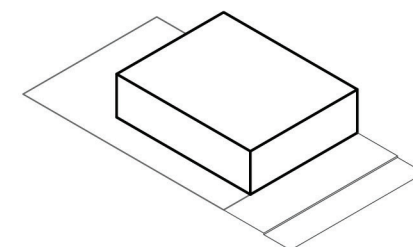
Buildable area 50% of the lot
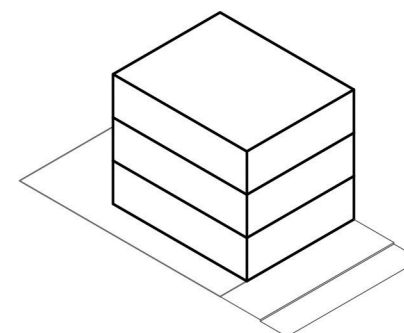
Building height max. 9-10m

Built volumes on lot   2.1

Basic   2.1.1

The basic house structure consists of a "train wagon" linear arrangement of rooms with the length running east-west. This core structure is adapted to various conditions such as the lot shape/position, social structures of the inhabitants and programmatic activities housed within.
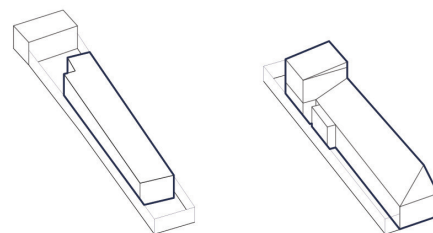
2.1.1.1 Retreated   2.1.1.2 Frontal

Evolution of the Basic   2.1.2
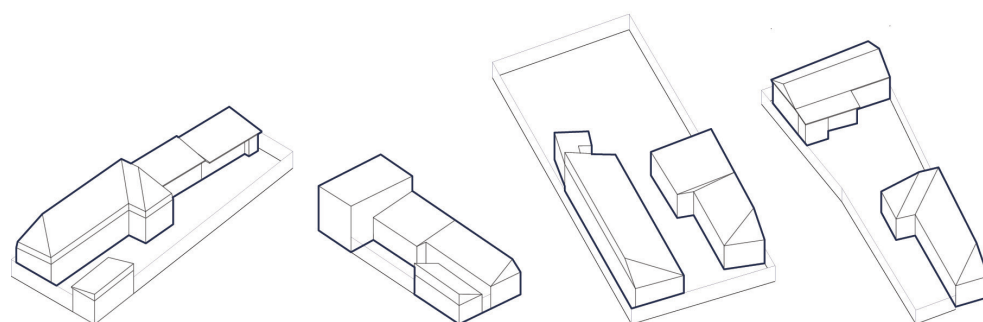
2.1.2.1 Stretched   2.1.2.2 Supplemented   2.1.2.3 Mirrored
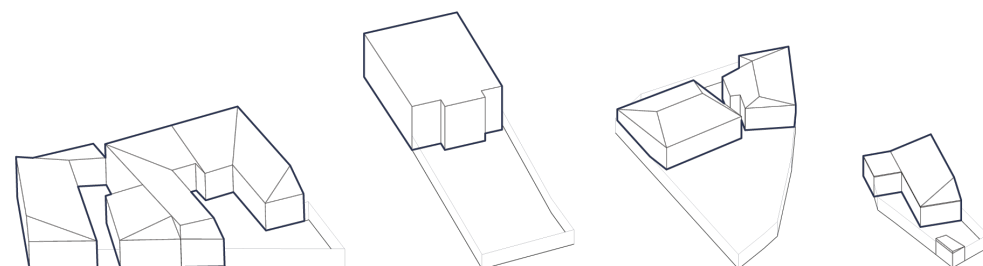
2.1.2.3 Unified   2.1.2.4 Back   2.1.2.5 Basic   2.1.2.5 Occasional

Fence   2.3

Basic structure   2.3.1

The fence serves as the main facade. It encloses, represents and "protects" the dwelling.
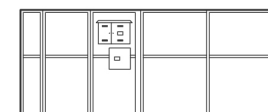
Metal framework with panel infill (various materials)

Masonry wall + Metal framework with panel infill
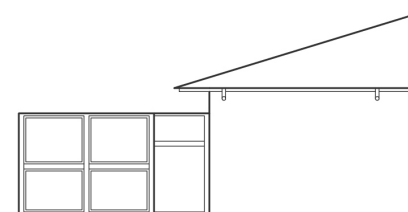
Metal framework with panel infill + House facade
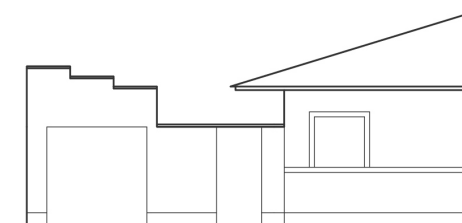
Garage Facade + Metal framework with infill panels + House facade

Yard   2.4

Inner Yard   2.4.1

The open space between the built structures and perimeter fence/walls which houses various activities such as agriculture, livestock raising and outdoor cooking and eating areas.

Yard   2.4

Additional elements   2.4.3
Trellis   2.4.31
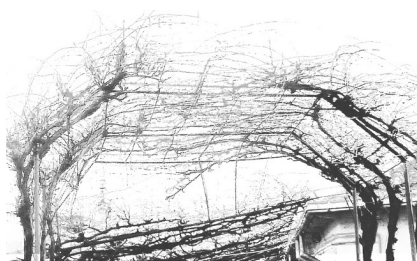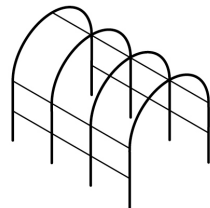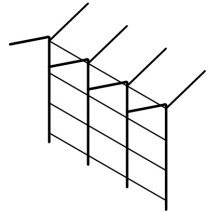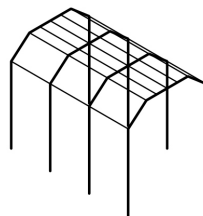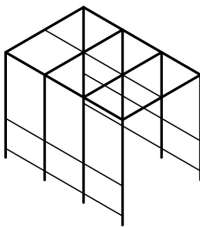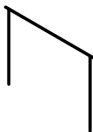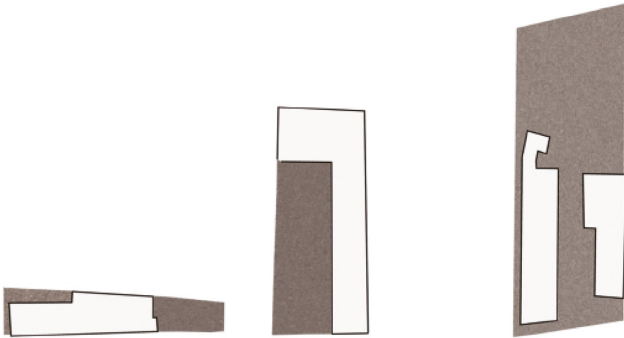
Yard   2.4

Front Yard   2.4.²
Main street   2.4.²¹

Sidewalks and front yard spaces, although
publicly owned, are often appropriated by
each house for various uses: flower and
food gardens, parking, storage, private and
commercial seating areas.
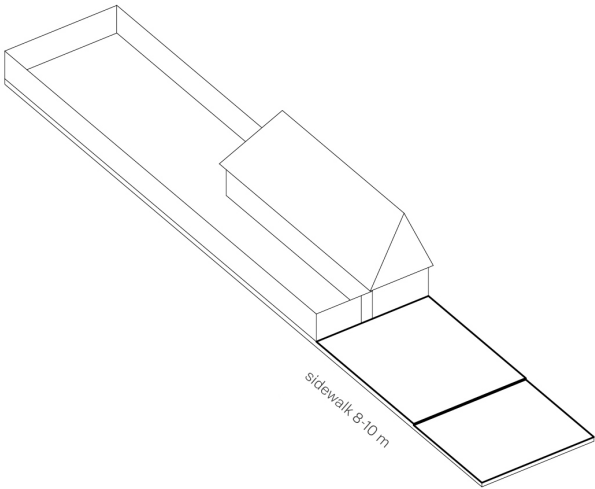
Yard   2.4

Front Yard   2.4.²
Secondary street: Non paved   2.4.²²

sidewalk 8-10 m

street 10 m
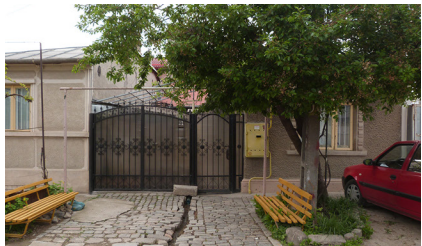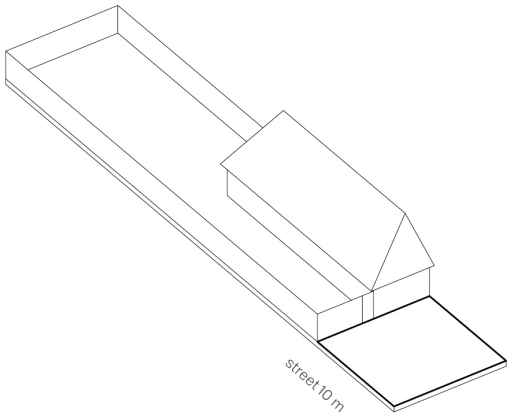
Yard	2.4
Front Yard	2.4.[2]
Secondary street: Paved	2.4.[2,3]
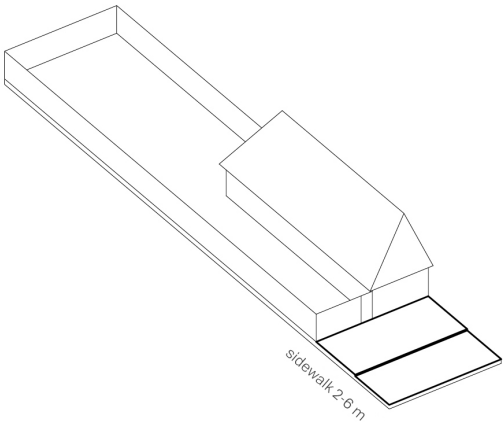
Yard	2.4
Front Yard	2.4.[2]
Railway	2.4.[2,4]

sidewalk 2-6 m

sidewalk 1-3 m
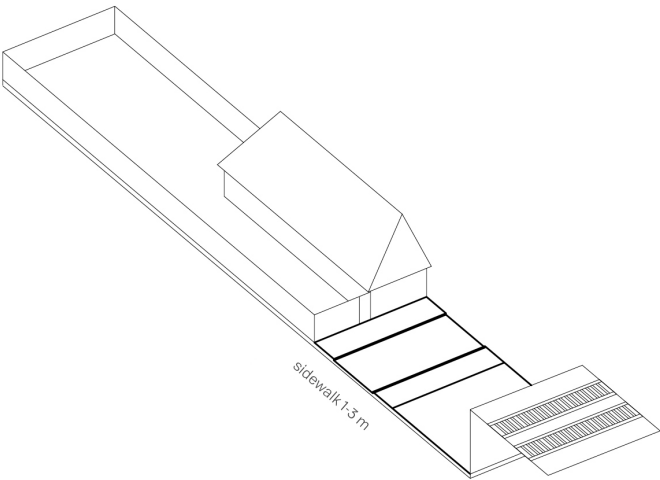
Housing + Grocery store + Wood workshop

Doubled structure
1940 - present
7 residents from 3 generations

Indoor corridor that leads
to the bedrooms on the
second floor.

The inner yard was
asphalted to accommodate
parking and delivery of
materials and goods yet still
accommodates the Sunday
afternoon barbecues

The wood workshop
consists of several shed
structures added over time

MIA'S FAMILY HOUSE

Wood workshop and
material storage

2-storey housing
unit consisting of a
living room, kitchen,
4 bedrooms and 2
bathrooms

parking, storage and
outdoor workspace

Grocery store

Housing

Supplemented structure

2 people

Wood and glass commode which holds
memorabilia and precious family artifacts.

Gardening is the couple's
main hobby/activity and
occupies the front and
inner yards as well as the
trellis structure.

CROITORU FAMILY HOUSE

The table in the yard functions as
the central focus of the lot.

Their children and their respective
families live in London, England.
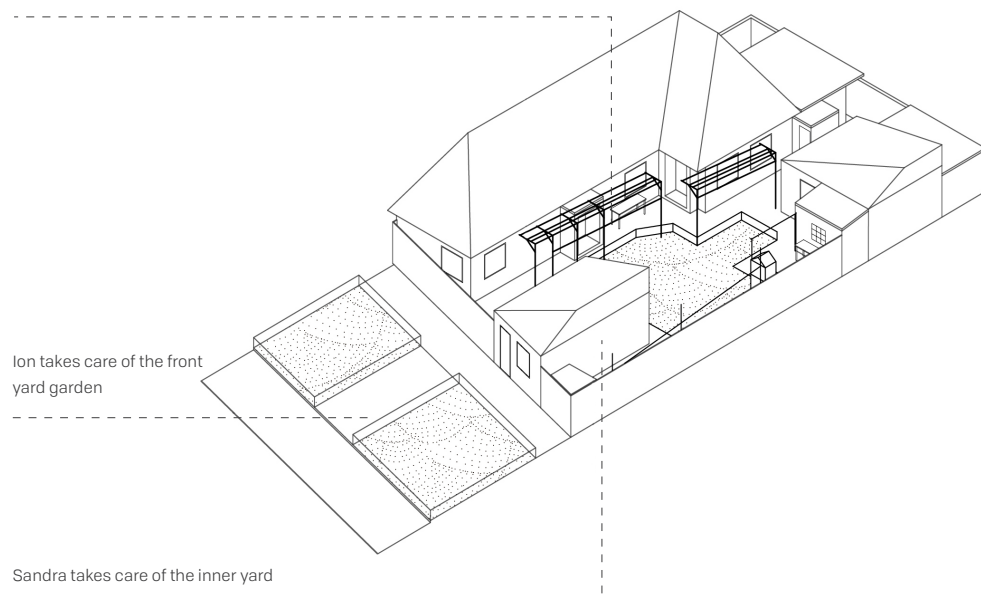
Ion takes care of the front
yard garden

Sandra takes care of the inner yard
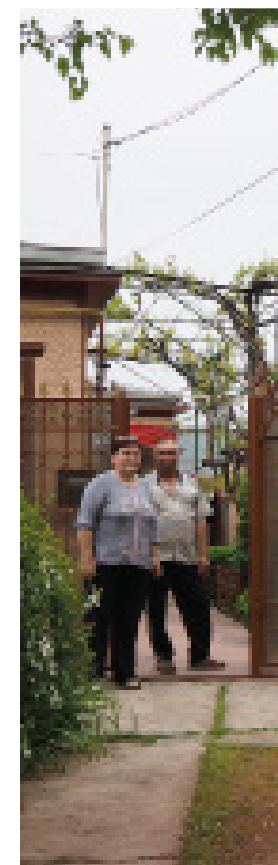
Housing + Dairy cows + Wine production

Basic corner lot + 1 Barn

1930 - present

5 people of 3 generations

The family has 2 cows which they keep in 2x2 m stalls

IRINA'S FAMILY HOUSE

Stable for 2 dairy cows and storage

Car Parking
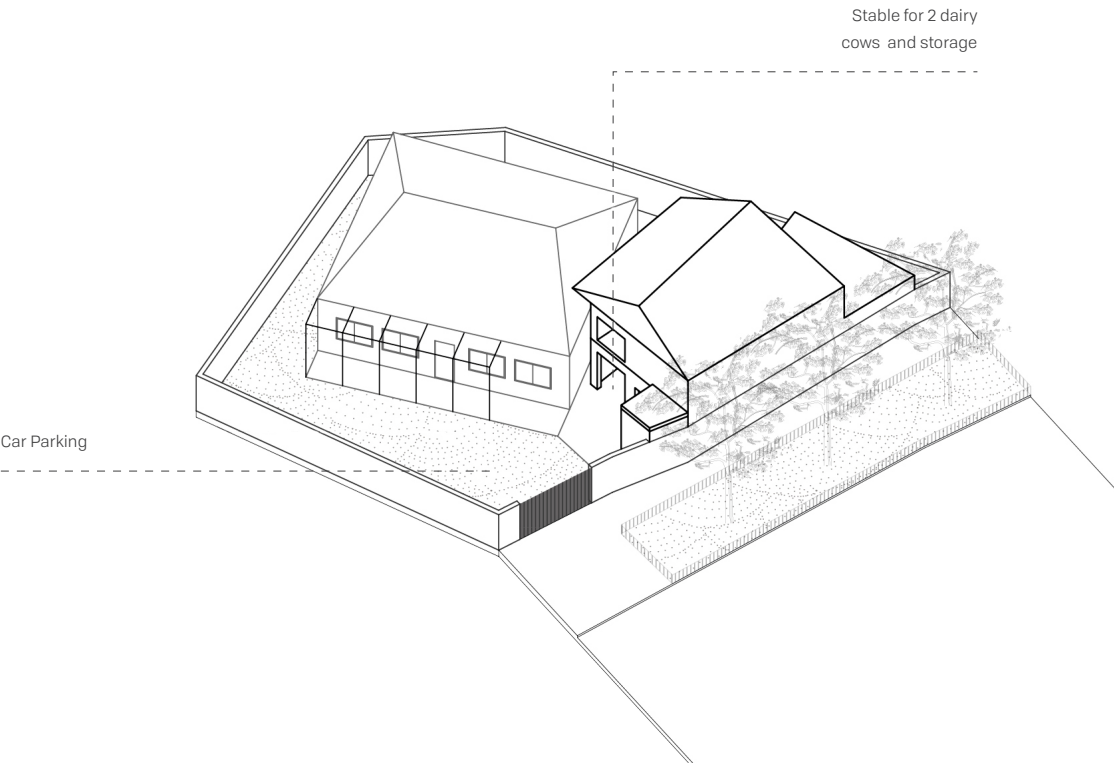
The practical table by the outhouse.

Besides the dairy business, Irina and her daughter produce wine and tuica (plum liquor) which they store in wooden barrels and sell in recycled plastic drink bottles.

POSTCARDS FROM BRĂILA

a spatial engagement with brăila's latency
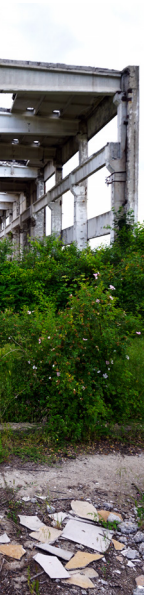
just one of several
industrial ruins ⌐

extraction of
scrap metal from
an industrial ruin ⌐
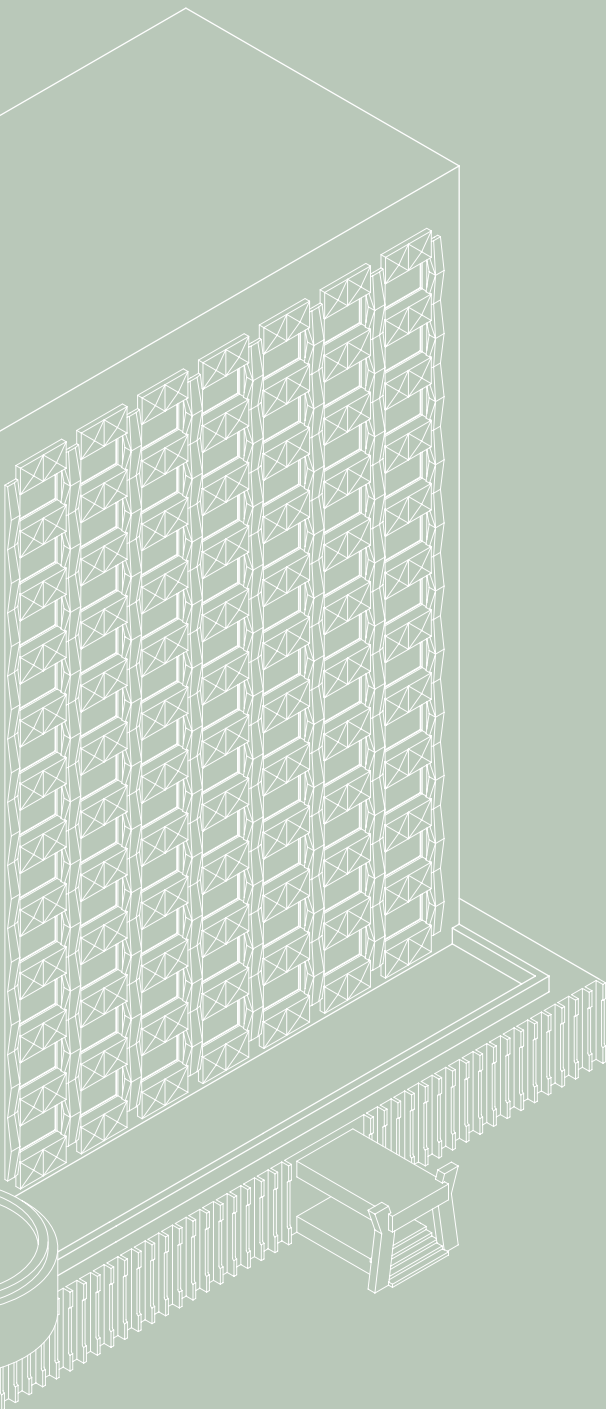
PAST IN THE PLURAL FORM

by Alina-Ruxandra Mircea

It could be that Brăila Laboratory's greatest strength – what makes it a truly pertinent exercise – is that the strategy it proposes is descriptive, before being prescriptive. Free from the local preconceptions and uncompromisingly oriented towards 'what it is, as it is, here-and-now', the project perspicuously identifies the city's genuinely dynamic areas, its ignored or, at any rate, unexploited potential.

At the same time – and owing to the same strategy, not lacking a certain sociological and anthropological dimension – the project tacitly identifies a surplus of memory that has become obstructive. To put it very briefly, this concerns the widespread habit of contrasting a past perceived as prosperous and full of prestige to a present sensed as precarious, incoherent and oftentimes downright embarrassing. I believe that that 'chiar'[1] ['actually quite']   in the project's Romanian title implicitly understands this inferiority complex – one which, I would add, becomes the more burdensome and paralyzing, the more intimately it is related to the image of a bygone prosperity, impossible to replicate today.

The restoration works carried out between 2008 and 2009 in the Old City Centre, the general tone of local cultural events and popular celebrations, the program that supports Brăila's candidacy to the title of European Capital of Culture[2] (to the extent that it can be discerned at this point), are all obvious, if not always coherent, attempts to retrieve the symbolic capital of Pre-war and Interwar Brăila, which to this day is considered to be the most defining feature of the local identity.

By comparison, Brăila's 'communist architecture' is perceived as being a foreign body, lacking historical and aesthetical legitimacy (in practice, the two are rarely dissociated). In spite of its quantity and even, in some cases, of its quality, 'communist architecture' continues to be understood in terms of aggression and disruption, and not in terms of representativeness and continuity. Both the polemic

surrounding Project no. 11 (the now famous 'garage turned into monument') and the puzzlement caused by the seemingly extravagant interest for the architectural heritage of the years 1960–1980 (Project no. 9, Brăila Box) are to be interpreted against this background.

By refocusing attention on the eccentric, but nonetheless vivid and representative, aspects of the city, Brăila Laboratory has the merit of detaching an alternative narrative of identity which, without necessarily aiming to compete with and even less so to displace the 'Brăila of the Good Old Times' narrative, can offer a more lucid and more nuanced perception of the city's history, evolution and qualities that can and qualities and can foster a more positive attitude towards both its present condition and its possibilities for development.

BRĂILA:

WHAT IT IS,

AS IT IS,

HERE-AND-NOW

1 The project's bilingual title allows for an interesting semantic cleavage. Although the English title reads 'This Place is Pretty Good', the Romanian title, 'Acest loc este chiar bun', translates more closely as 'This Place is Actually Quite Good', as though to contradict a less than enthusiastic received opinion.

2 At the time when this article was written (August 2015), Brăila was among the fourteen Romanian cities competing for the title of European Capital of Culture 2021.

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ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF THE 60'S AND 70'S

How to use the communist architecture of Brăila as a platfrom for a discussion on its value

by Karl-Emil Sødegren and Sebastian Uthaug

Coming to Brăila as a stranger from the West can really blow your mind. At least it blew our minds when we arrived as architect students February 2015.

What role can architectural knowledge ever play in a city that has been shrinking since the 1990s? Is a new master plan, a new building, a park or some form of intervention what the people of Brăila need to improve the quality of everyday life? Not knowing where to start, nor knowing much about the city, we went to a local in search of the local identity of Brăila. The "bomba" (typical name for local bars), was a good starting point as the people sitting there had interesting stories from their lives to share. It was impossible to be in Brăila without seeing the impact communism had on the city's built environment and how most residents disowned, ignored or at least tried to ignore this recent history. Yet these folks, who like many others grew up and lived during the hardship of Ceaușescu's regime, were speaking about it candidly. They became our gateway into this situation.

Why is the architecture and design from the communist era not acknowledged as part of the Brăila identity? It is not hard to see why many people look back at the time of Ceaușescu feeling relieved that it is over. But to deny the past is something else, because it affects the present.

We want to play out our role as architects in this field. Like the urban tissue, with its vacant buildings and empty lots, the public debate on this topic seems to have voids within it. We want to interact with people and then react using architectural tools to trigger a discussion. The goal of such a discussion was to reach a higher degree of awareness towards the post-war modernist architecture of Brăila. To focus the scope of our project, we have chosen 11 buildings in the city that have an exemplary architectural value and tried to represent this value within our contemporary time. To do so we represented each building using varied material such as historical drawings, anecdotal stories of its inhabitants and 3d printed models all brought together in a board game format - a precious jewel that can be equally played as a board game or unboxed as a public exhibition.

This format was intended to free the architectural value from the communist stigma, to "humanize" and bring to the surface the heritage buried inside of this problematic period in the country's history.

inside one of
the local bars
or "bombas"

DACIA
1310

view of Traian hotel, the sole modern building inside of the old city center

THE MOST INTERESTING CASES ARE THOSE CITIES WITH CONCURRENT IDENTITY, WHICH HAVE MANAGED TO CAPITALIZE BOTH A NEW CHARACTER IMPOSED BY COMMUNIST CONSTRUCTIONS AND ON THE OLD VALUES. ALTHOUGH LESS OBVIOUS AS YET, THEIR URBAN LIFE IS INTENSIFYING AND GROWING MORE ATTRACTIVE, OR AT LEAST MORE INTERESTING TO FOLLOW UP THAN CITIES DENYING OR BARELY TOLERATING THEIR COMMUNIST PAST OR THAN THOSE BUILDING EXCLUSIVELY ON COMMUNIST PREMISES.

The Would-Be City, Ina Stoian and Daniela Calciu, 2012

DACIA
1310

a spatial engagement with brăila's latency
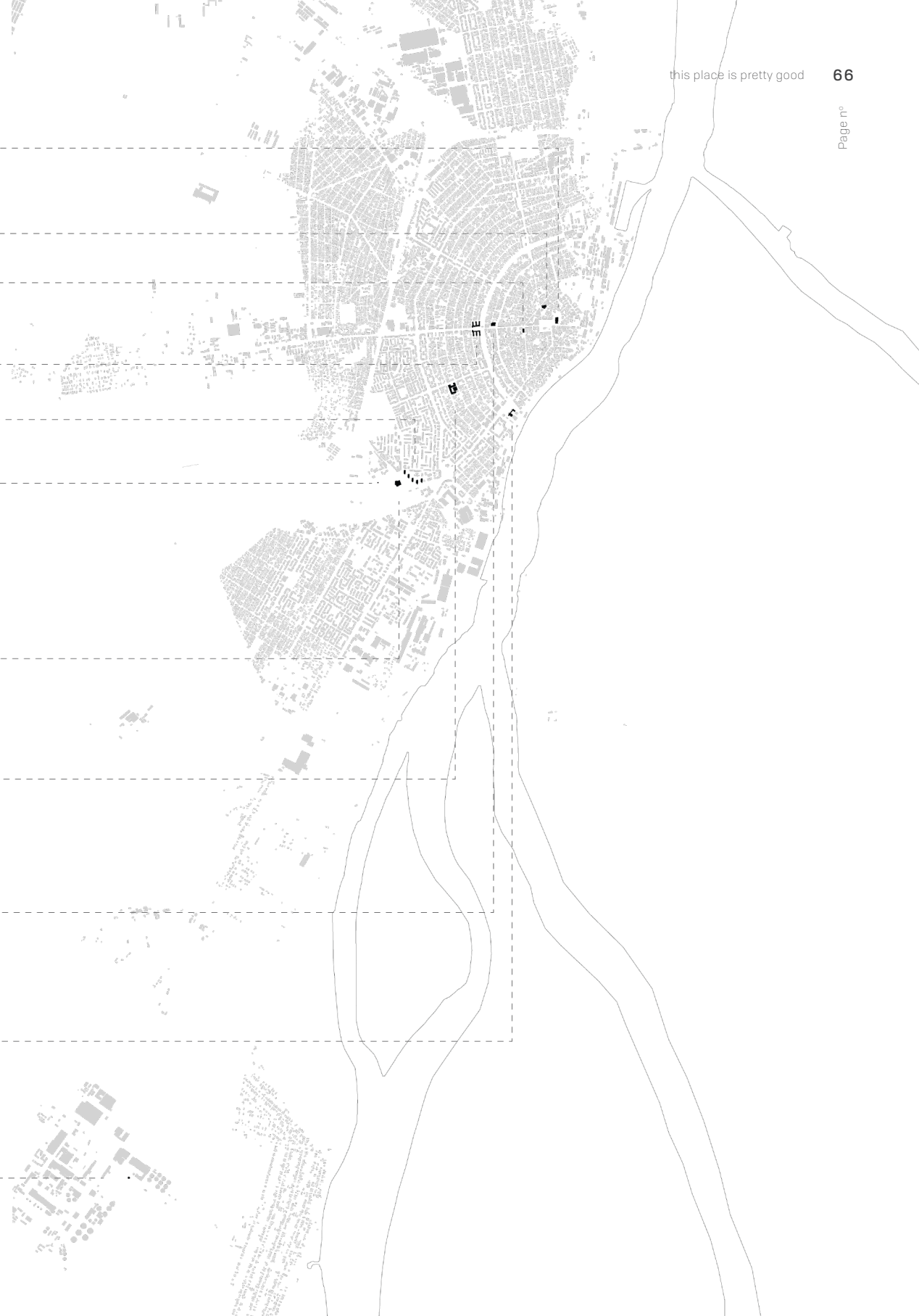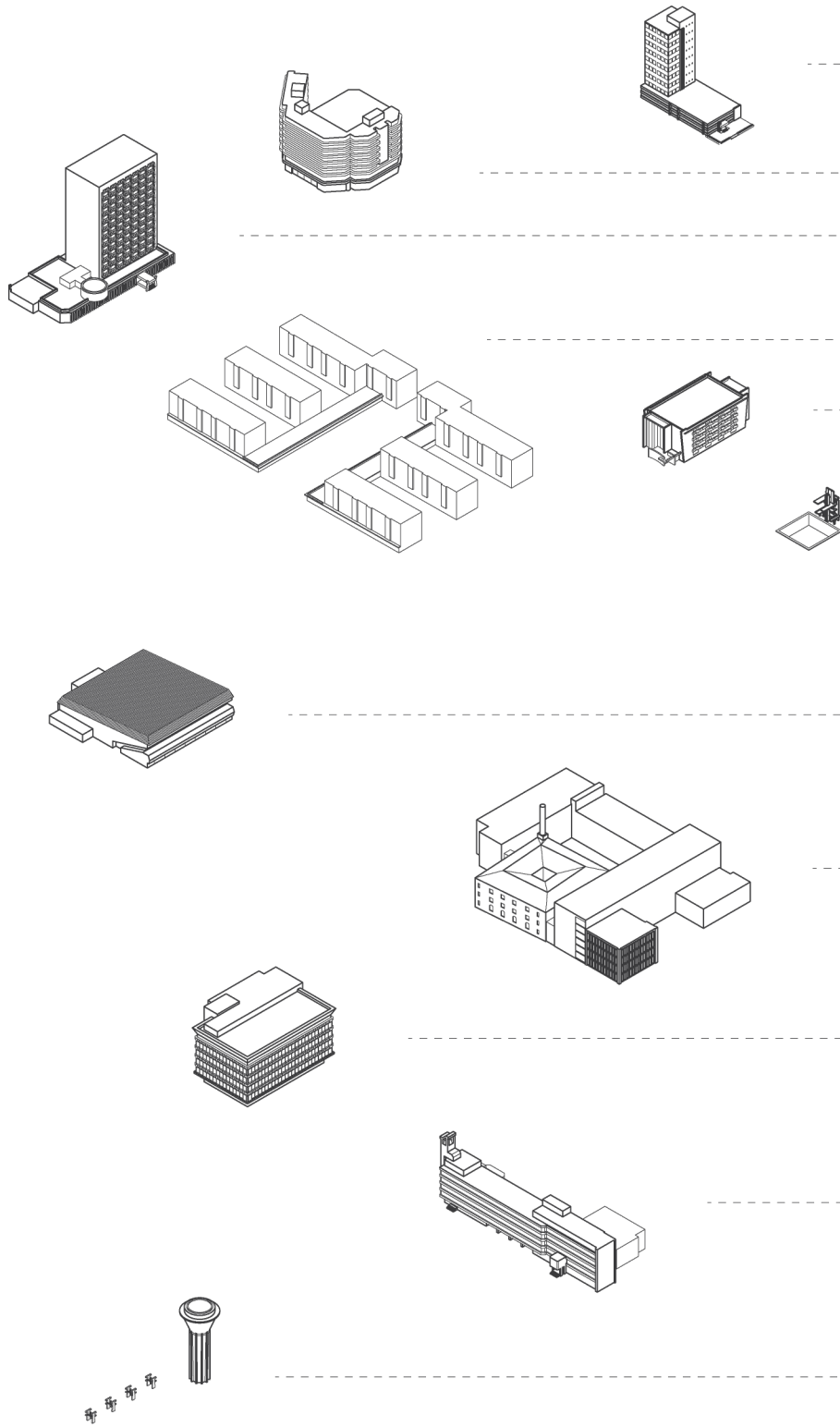
Building	"Casa de Modă"
	fashion house
Architect	Mariana Cocioabă
Completion	1974
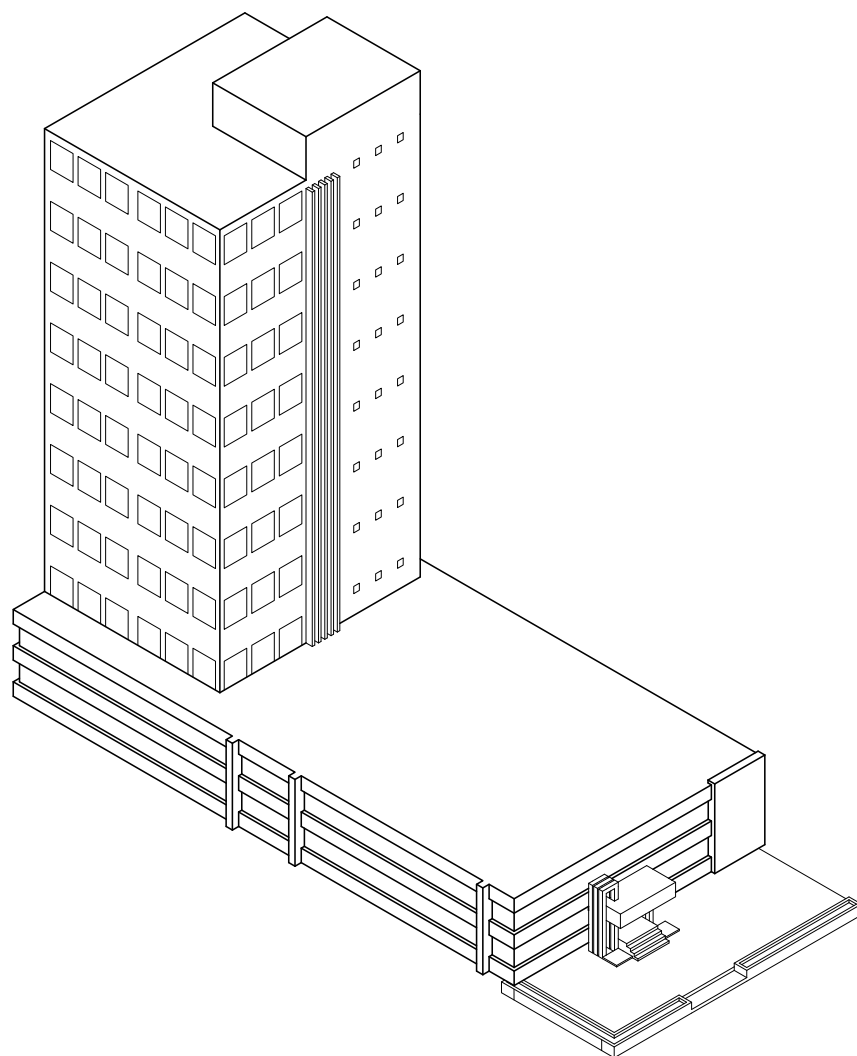
A COMMUNIST FASHION HOUSE

Through the 70s, many cities in Romania became hosts to new building typologies initiated by the state. Not only would each city receive new schools, housing blocks, workplaces, a city hall, hotel and culture house but also their own Casa de Modă, or fashion house. In Braila the fashion house, a tower and podium building, is situated in the oldest (and main pedestrian) street, named after the Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu. The ten storey tower was dedicated to the production of clothes while the double storey podium housed the showcase and store. Large street-facing windows would allow passersby a glimpse of the monthly catwalk events showcasing the newest designer collections. Today the catwalk is demolished, the cabinets where costumers used to try clothes are gone, but the production of clothes is still going on in the tower.

Building	"Cinema Central" movie theater + housing block
Architect	Nicoleta Mitrofan
Completion	1984

Iulian Vasiliu, 1969, has worked as a projectionist at the cinema since 2002. He has felt the drop in activity since the opening of a new cinema in 2011. Due to budgetary constraints only films a few years old are shown.
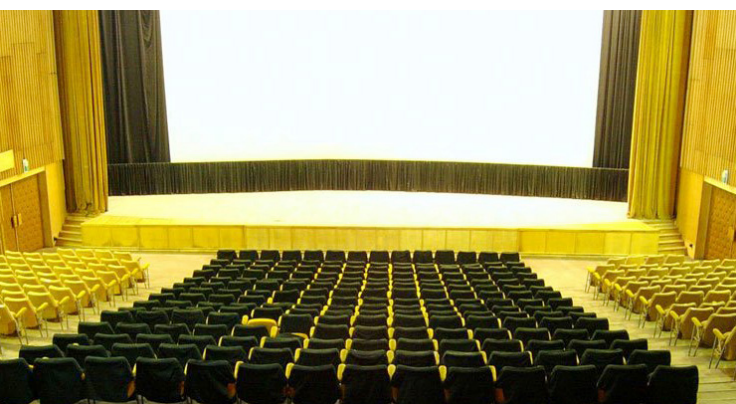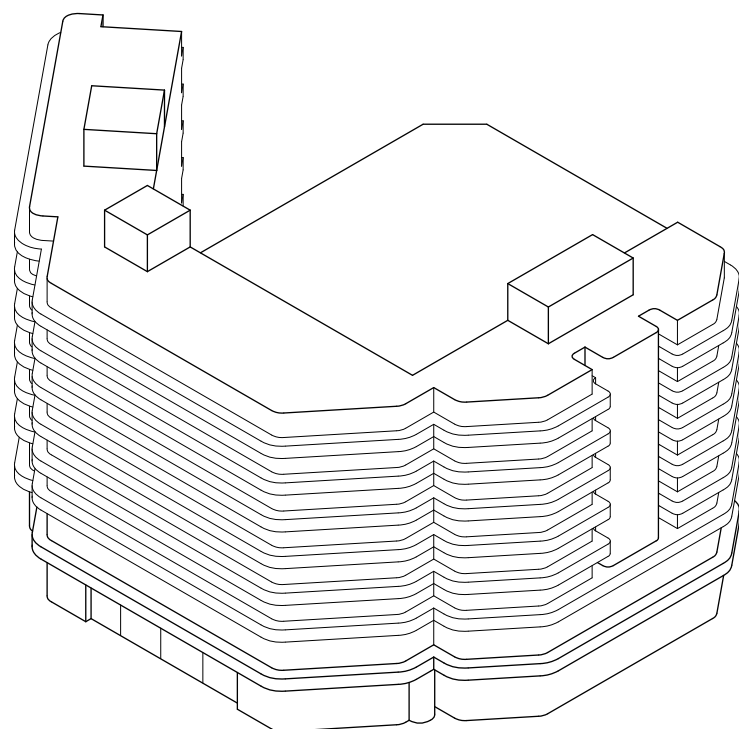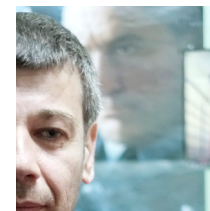
A FILM NOIR

There have been several cinemas in the city of Brăila through the years. In the mid-70s the process of building a new grand movie theatre with cafeteria, commercial spaces and several floors of flats begun. Several variations were proposed and drafted. In the start of the process, the name of the theatre was Cinema Dunărea. On August 23 1984, the new cinema opened with the name Cinema Central. The first movie to be projected on the screen was the Russian film, Squadron of Flying Hussars (Eskadron Gusar Letuchikh) from 1980, a story about a colonel by the name Denis Davydov, a Russian hero of the 1812 war against Napoleon. The most popular movie showed at the Cinema Central was Titanic in 1997. By 2010 it was the only cinema active in the city with around 2000 monthly visitors. In 2011, a new mall complete with modern cinema opened in the outskirts of town before the private cinema opened outside the city, there were around to the cinema monthly which led the number of guests to cinema central to drop down to a mere 50 per month.

Building	City Hall
Architect	Radu Tănăsoiu
Completion	1977

PEOPLE CALL IT THE WHITE HOUSE.
BUT IT'S NOT SO WHITE. IT'S MORE GREY.

Taxi driver

SHIP OF FOOLS

The architects who developed the plan for a new communist civic centre in Brăila designed not only the city hall building but also the public square in front and the adjacent stair promenade leading down to the Danube riverfront. The building is positioned with the long side facing the square to serve as the backdrop of the activity taking place in front while simultaneously blocking the view towards the river. The veranda where the political leaders would address the people is strategically elevated above the square. This is where the attention should be focused, not on the beautiful river. The process of creating the City Hall in Brăila started in the mid-70s. The construction was interrupted by the devastating earthquake of '77 and completed with two floors less than originally planned. Due to the change in the final design, the building's tower containing a covered veranda and a clock, appears awkwardly tall in relation to the main horizontal "ship-like" volume. In the '80s, the people of Brăila used to refer to the building as the "ship of fools". Another nickname of the building is the "white house". The building has an underground bunker where the political and administrative leaders can hide in cases of emergency. When the revolution started on December 22 1989, people gathered outside the City Hall to get information on what was going on. Official records say that around 50 people lost their life during the days that followed. Braila therefore bears the nickname: City of Martyrs.

Building	"Braiconf" clothing factory
Architect	Several
Completion in four phases	1950, 1960, 1970, 1980

CEAUȘESCU WAS NOT THE ARMANI-TYPE.
HE USED TO WEAR BRAICONF.
overheard during a tour of the factory

THE SHIRT FACTORY OF MEN AND DICTATORS

Braiconf was the first clothing factory in Brăila, operating since 1950. At its peak in the late '80's, 3,600 workers were producing men's shirts in three shifts around the clock. Most of the employees were women, something which remains the case to this day while the staff has shrunk to 400. It is said that the preferred shirt for the country's dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu was Braiconf. The main market for shirts made at Braiconf during the communist time, however, was Russia. To meet the heavy demand, the design was simple and straight, with a minimal number of pieces to sew together. Today the Braiconf factory mainly provides production services for other brands in Western Europe. The factory also has its own design department and its own brand of clothing, mainly men's clothes. These were earlier sold in a shop right across the street from the factory, but since 2007, the shop relocated to Mihai Eminescu Street in the old center. There are several Braiconf stores throughout Romania including one in Bucharest and in the neighbouring city of Galați. Depending on the pattern, it normally takes one person around 100 minutes to complete a single Braiconf shirt.
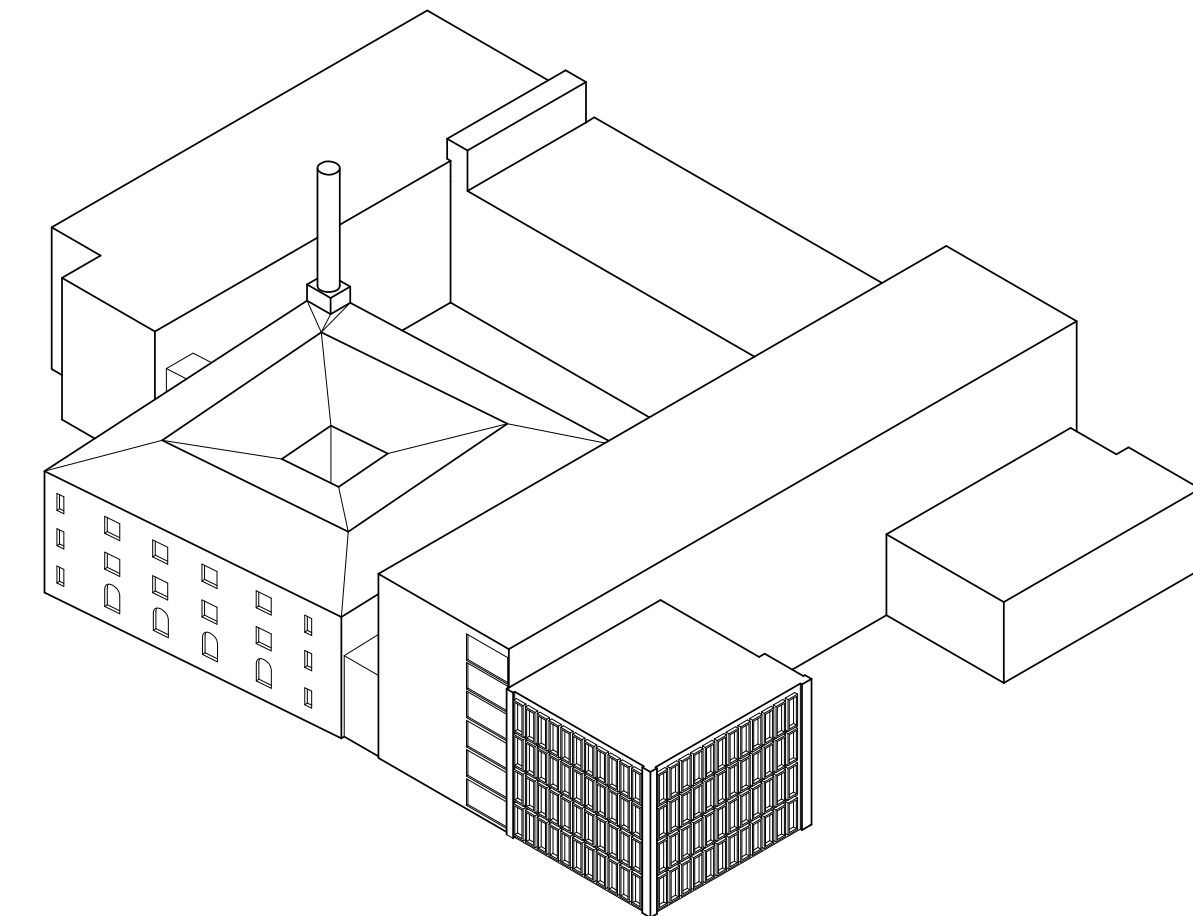
a spatial engagement with brăila's latency

Building	"Hipodrom" housing blocks
Architect	Ştefan Cocioabă
Completion	1970
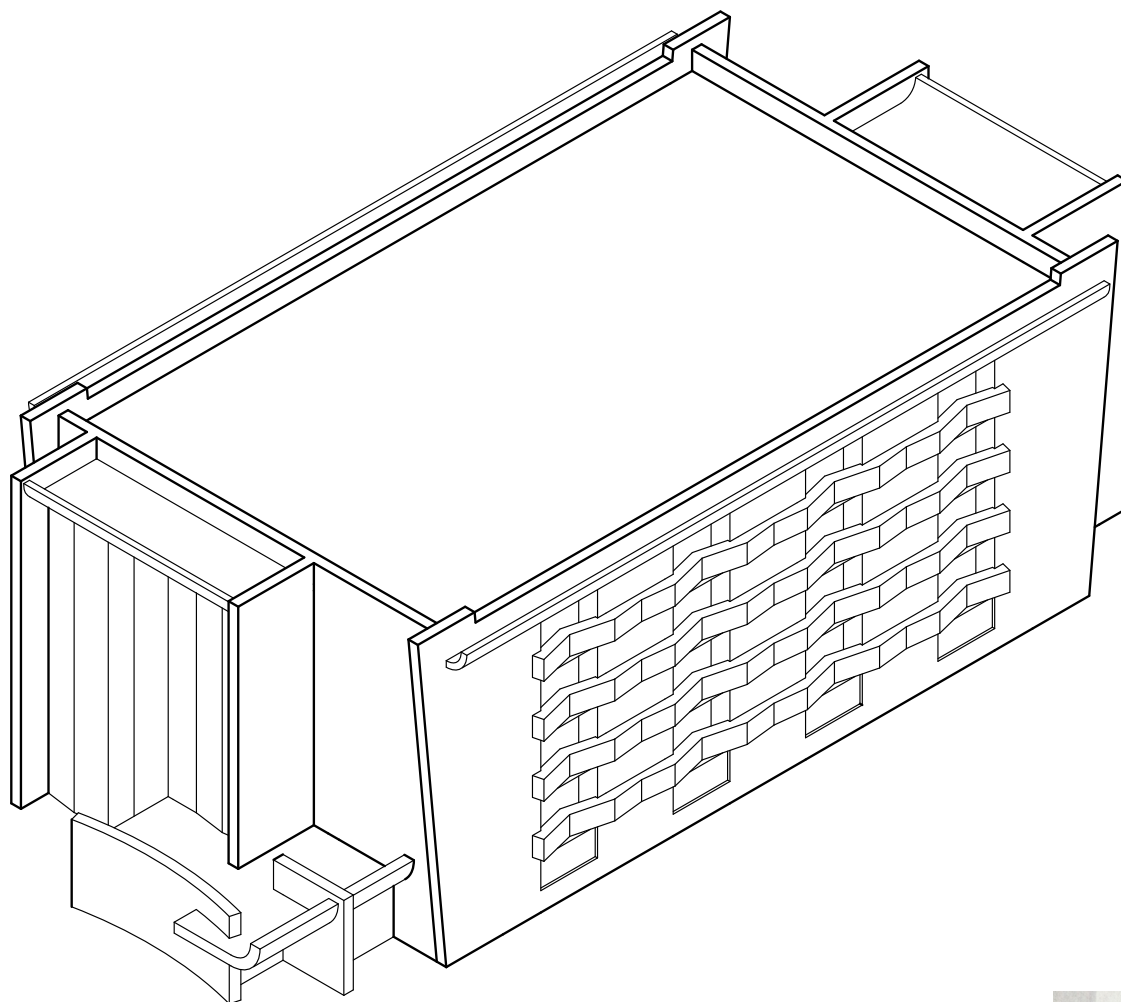
WHERE HORSES RAN

T he hand painted sings inside the housing block stairwells of Hipodrom tell a story of everyday life in the communist time. "Parents: watch your children." "Parents: Don't let the children play in the stairs between 14 and 17." The blocks in Hipodrom were built mainly for the workers in the Chişcani Combinat 2 km south of Brăila. The construction period for the approximately 100 blocks lasted nearly a decade, starting at the beginning of the '60s with the each construction phase given letters from A to H. The various typologies have unique attributes such as mosaic walls, curved entrances, angled windows, balconies with curvilinear forms and a star patterned entrance floor. Even the mailboxes were designed specifically for each block. The flats came in four variations; one-room, two-room, three-room and four-room, each with parquet floor. They were extremely popular among the residents with all buildings in use today. A large amount of the flats have undergone interior renovations since first occupation, however the exterior and the common spaces have not changed much apart from general wear.

Building	"Combinat" industrial complex
Architect	Several
Completion	various phases from the 1960's - 1980's
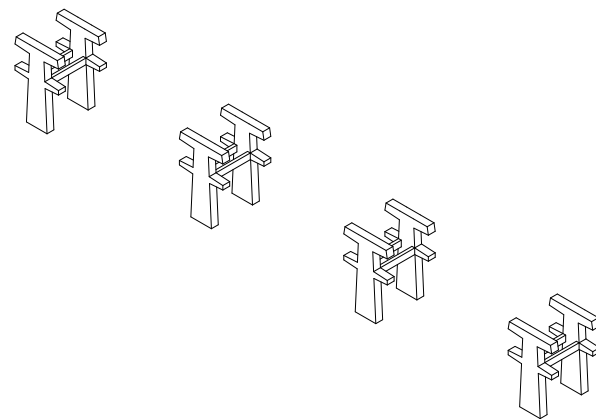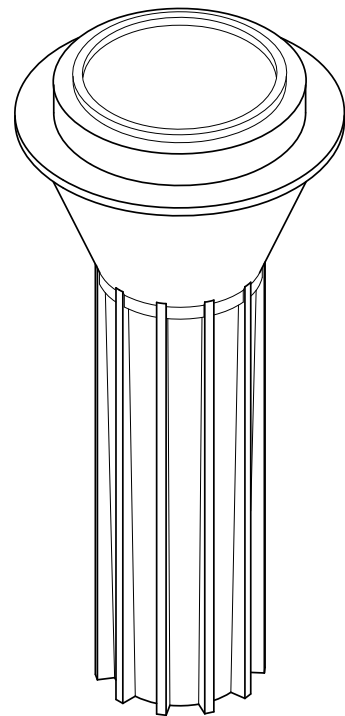
A THEME PARK OF DECAY

As part of the significant industrialzation program of the communist period nearly all major cities throughout Romania were positioned as industrial centers. As part of this program, Braila developed several industrial complexes of which the Combinat was the largest with 13000 workers at its peak. The production focused primarily on cellulose and plastics used for things such as books, newspapers, food and product packaging. After the '89 revolution the complex was privatized - split into parts and sold to private owners. Many could not compete on the open market and gradually began to lay off workers. This coupled with old machinery and manufacturing practices that became difficult to improve and further dismembering and re-selling of factory sections meant that most eventually had to close down and fell into disrepair. Over time the industrial complex became a full ruin, primarily due to scrap metal scavengers which have illegally removed all metal components from the buildings including structural members and even going as far as breaking through concrete to remove the metal reinforcements. Today only a few buildings are still operative. An unusually high number of the factory workers passed away at early ages, something which many believed was due to the exposure to high level of pollution and toxic elements although nothing was ever investigated nor proven. On warm summer days there is an unpleasant smell surrounding the enormous site which the wind sometimes carries into the city.
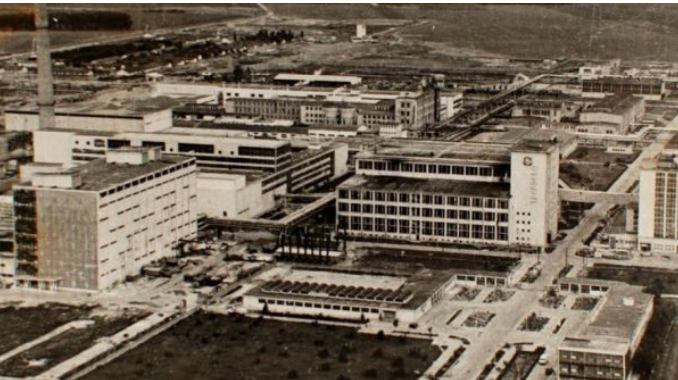
Building	Diving tower and pool
Architect	Nicolae Mitroi
Completion	1975
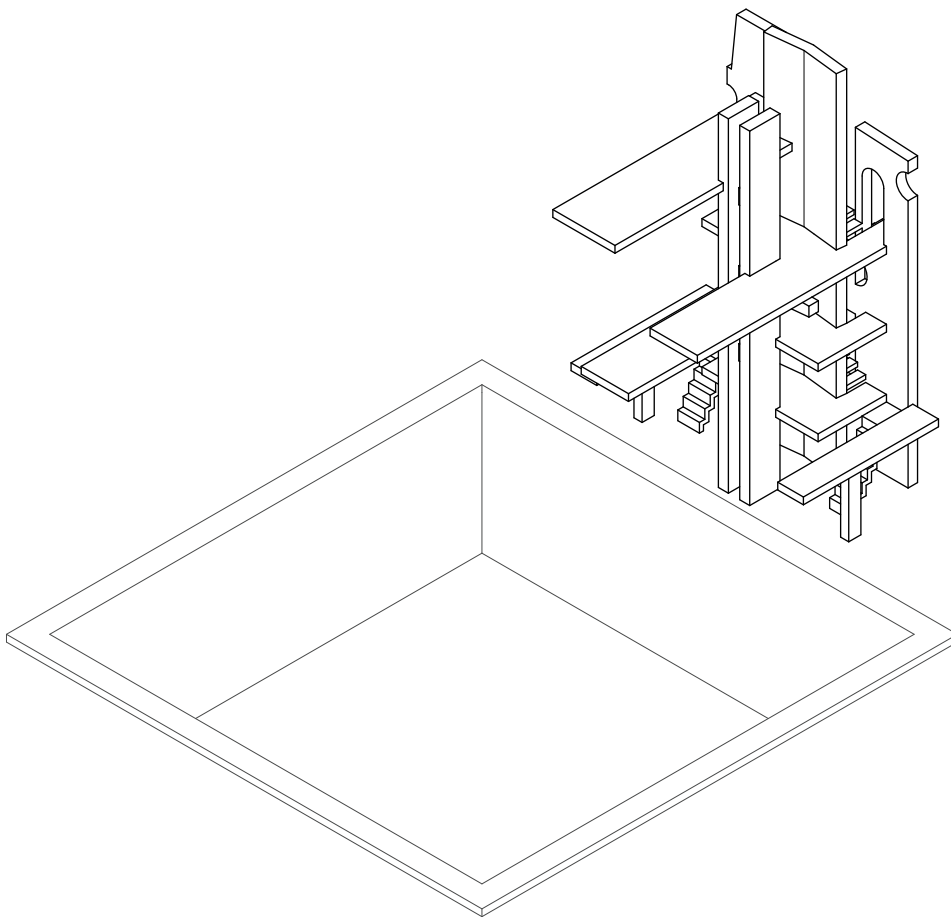
A POOL OF RAINWATER AND MUD

The diving tower is located next to the city's Olympic-size outdoor swimming pool. It's own five meter deep pool has, for nearly 30 years, been collecting rainwater, leaves and mud that has created a swamp-like ecosystem complete with frogs. The uncontrolled afterlife of the diving tower has arguably been more active and diverse than the life of the structure itself. The diving tower, pool and spectator bleachers were built in 1975. Two years later a flood destabilized the foundation and causing the diving tower structure to tilt leading to its closure. A single international sport competition took place during its two-year lifespan, a diving context during the Blakan Games of 1975.

a spatial engagement with brăila's latency

Building	"Hristo Botev" square
	and housing complex
Architect	A. Naiman
Completion	1960

A PLACE WITH MANY NAMES

One of the city's main intersections is the center of a long-time name confusion in Braila. In the early 1960's city planners aimed to establish a new civic center here via a public square framed by the construction of the first modernist housing complex complete with commercial podium. The center was given the name Hristo Botev after the Bulgarian revolutionary poet yet the name was nowhere to be found in the area nor on city maps. Ask residents about the Hristo Botev apartments or square and you are likely to get a puzzled look. Ask instead for the old department store "Romarta veche" which occupied the ground floor podium for many years and you are sure to get precise directions and possibly a personal story or two. This is maybe not a big surprise when taking into account that many of the streets and public spaces have seen numerous name changes as political shifts have marked their territory. Take for example one of the two main streets that intersect the Hristo Botev complex - underwent three name changes with the political shifts - from regal street under the monarchy, to republic street under the communist regime and to mihai eminescu (romanian poet) street since the '89 revolution. And since having multiple names for a single place can sometimes breed confusion, some have preferred to use more stable reference points for such places - be it physical attributes, uses or historic events - hence "romarta veche". In 2009 a statue of the poet complete with name plaque was introduced into the square.

Teodora Alionte, 1943, has been selling men's clothing from her shop Syldor in the Hristo Botev complex for many years. She has also lived in the above apartments since 1984.

Building	"Danubius"
	sports hall
Architect	Nicolae Mitroi
Completion	1975
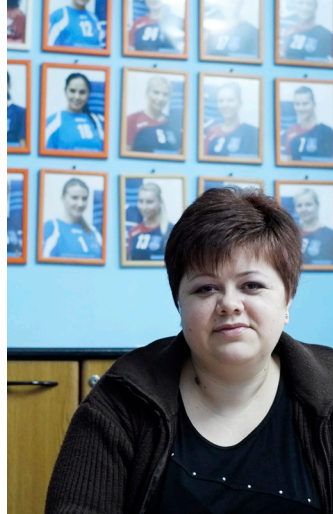
Cristina Liliana Buena, 1973,
has been the female handball
team accountant since 2006.
She is very popular among the
team and can often be found in
the stands at most matches.

A FIELD OF STRONG WOMEN

Formerly known simply as the sports hall (sala sporturilor) the complex was given the name Danubius several years after its completion. The complex houses a regulation size sports court for volleyball/handball and basketball with a capacity of 1500 spectators. Today the hall is home of the city's women handball team "HC Dunărea", often well ranked within Romania's top division. The team was founded in 1983 and as of 2015 three of its players were city natives: #13 Bianca Nicoleta Eşanu, #15 Cristiana Diana Axinte and #94 Gabriela Petrianu. The team have a large following and passionate supporters group which make home games an event to experience. About 90 percent of the supporters are men.
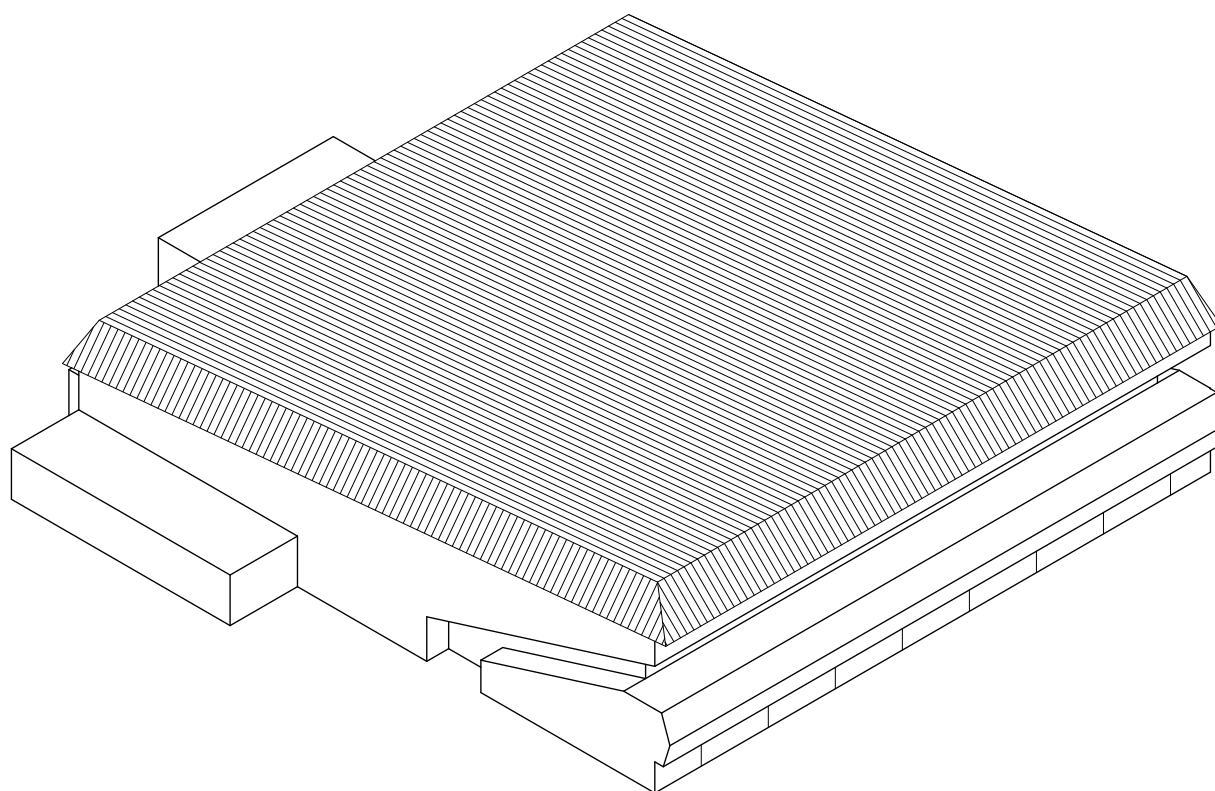
Building   "Dunărea"
                department store

Architect   Nicolae Mitroi

Completion   1975

LIVING THE COMMUNIST DREAM

The "Dunărea" department store ("Magazin Universal") was the first, and remains the only, building in Brăila to have escalators. They are centrally placed in the interior and take you all the way up to the sixth floor. The building was completed in 1973 and the department store was opened to the public two years later. At this time the Romanian communist dream was at its climax. The stores were full of products, the cafeteria served everything a person with money could desire and postcards with the department store depicted happy people walking by. During the 80s, the dream went into a downward spiral which left the stores with empty shelves and few food options in the cafeteria. No more postcards were made of the department store. The trees in front have survived the '89 revolution and over 25 years of capitalism while the building's facades and interior were not spared the same fate. Today, as in the start, six floors of shopping offer everything someone money can desire.

CURTEA DE SERVICIU
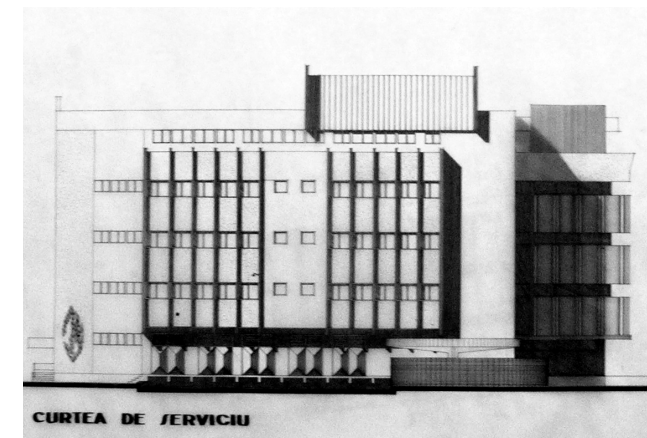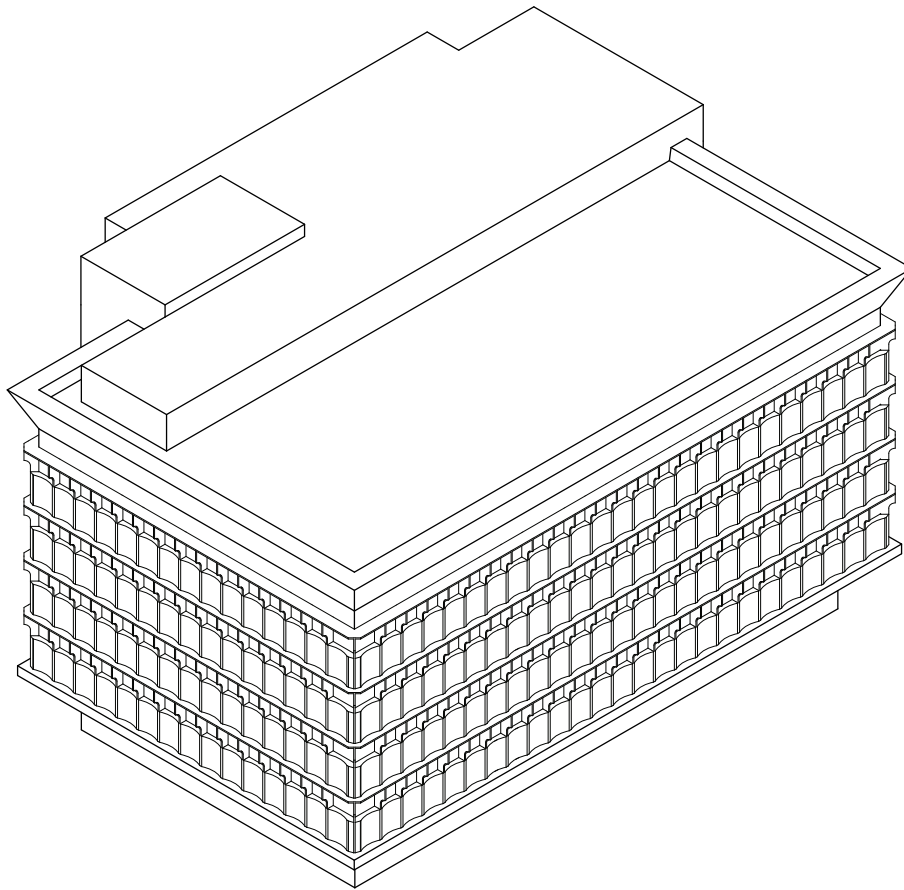
Building   Traian hotel

Architect   unknown

Completion   1969

I HAVE WORKED HERE FOR 22 YEARS, BUT I ONLY SLEPT AT THE HOTEL ONCE. THIS WAS BEFORE I STARTED TO WORK HERE. I WAS 18 YEARS OLD AND I SPENT ONE NIGHT AT THE HOTEL WITH A GIRL. I REMEMBER WELL THE ROOM. IT WAS 308.

mentioned during a tour of the hotel
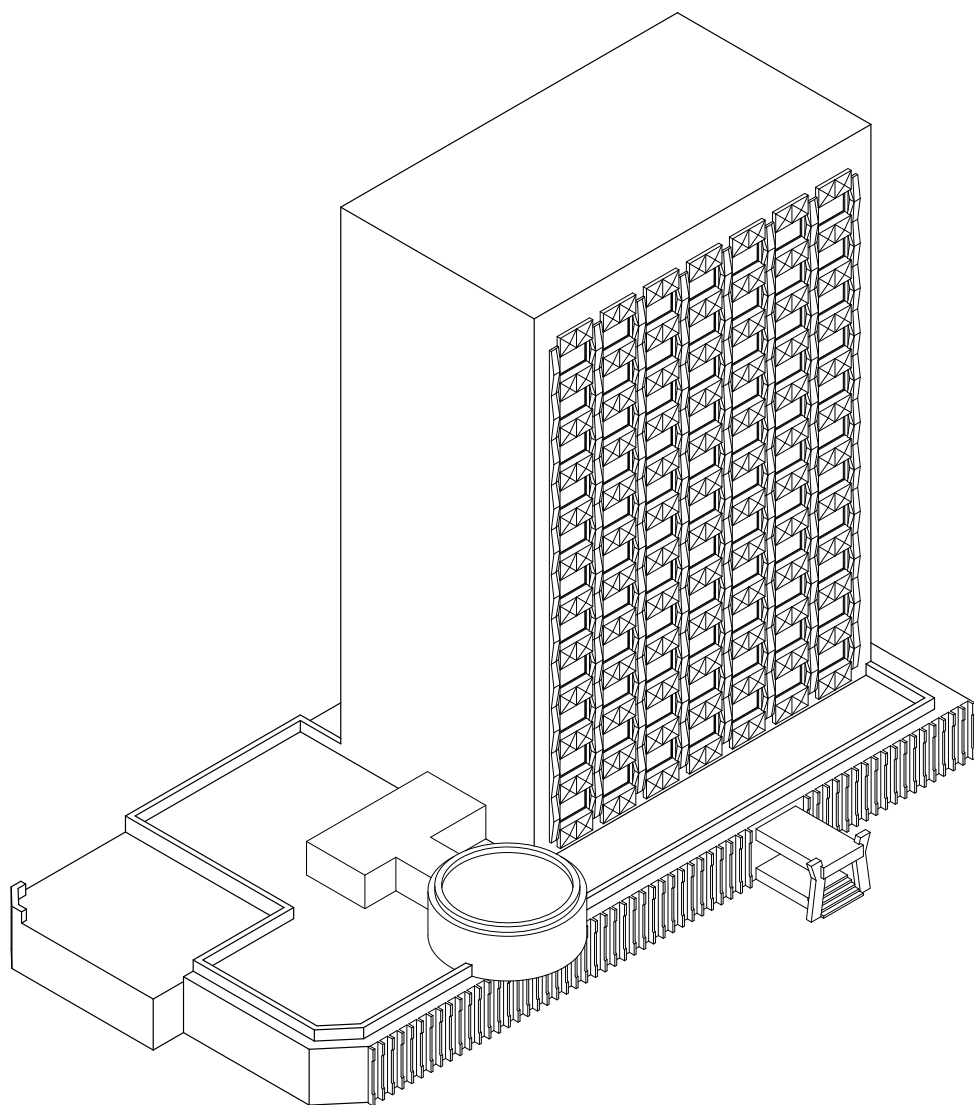
THE 12-STOREY HOTEL

The construction of Hotel Traian started in 1966 and finished three years later. On December 31, 1968, while the hotel was under construction, the Communist Party held their New Year's celebration here. On May 6, the hotel opened its 107 rooms, 2 restaurants, lobby bar and basement nightclub to the public. Today the restaurants and nightclub are sparsely used while the lobby bar has disappeared. On the 12th floor a penthouse suite was designed specifically for the communist leader Nicolae Ceaușescu. The suite faces the Danube river and Macin mountains in the background. A smaller adjacent room was made for his private guards. He never did use the suite which today is available for 270 RON (60 EUR) a night.

a spatial engagement with brăila's latency

LIFE IN A COMMUNIST STUDIO

BRĂILA CITY'S DESIGN STUDIO DURING COMMUNIST TIME IS A DESERTED, AND FOR MOST PEOPLE, FORGOTTEN PLACE. TWO OF BRĂILA'S MOST ACTIVE ARCHITECTS REMEMBER HOW IT WAS WHEN 30 ARCHITECTS USED TO WORK HERE THROUGH THE 70S AND 80S.

The two architects, Silva Medrihan and Nicolai Mitroi, became goods friends during the years at the Produmus design institute in Brăila. *(Private photo)*

Calea Călăraşilor 161 A, a short walk from the city hall stands the former architecture studio. At first glance it is just another building lining the street. Above the entrance, the sign is still hanging on the wall: "Prodomus Institut de Proiectare". The door is open but few people pass through nowadays. From the opening of the office in 1970 until the revolution in 1989, this was the center of architectural production in Brăila. But it was not always so. Before 1969 the larger neighbouring city of Galaţi was the administrative center of the region which meant that all of the building projects in Brăila were carried out by the Galaţi architecture studio in collaboration with the central building institute in Bucharest. Buildings such as Hotel Traian, the Hipodrom and Piaţa Hristo Botev apartment blocks are all a product of this pre '69 structure. By the end of the 60s Brăila consisted of a small historic city core surrounded by villages and few peripheral neighbourhoods. Yet the significant industrialization program initiated during this period together with a need

for an urbanization program to, among other things, house the new workers began to transform the city. As a result of these developments, the new county of Brăila was established in 1969 by the communist regime and Brăila city became the regional capital complete with full administrative authority.
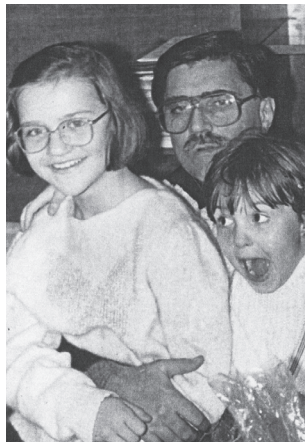
Mr. Mitroi, head of the Prodomus architecture studio with two of the staff 's children, Ana Barbu and Alina Medrihan. (Private photo)

Subverting regulations
At the turn of the 70s, the development of the city was largely planned, designed and executed locally under strong national regulations. Nicolai Mitroi and Silvia Medrihan, both architects during the communist era in Brăila, recall how it was to be an architect during that period. Mr. Mitroi, ten years older than Silvia Medrihan, was in charge of the studio, first on a municipal level and later in charge of architectural production in the entire county.
- It was interesting to be able to design so many new buildings of various sizes and uses. Still it was hard to be an architect in times of such strong control. Every project had to be approved by the Communist Party. Very often we subverted the national regulations. For example, if the regulations required that rooms should be 16 m2 we would sometimes draw them 20 m2, and write 16 m2 on the plan. This was dangerous. We risked our livelihoods at times, remembers Nicolai Mitroi.
- Did you have any contact with architects outside of Romania?
- In the studio we had international architectural journals. We looked through them but we were not looking to copy what architects were

From the happy days of the design studio in Brăila during the 70s. 30 young architects were engaged transforming the city. The employees describe an inspiring working atmosphere with a whole floor full of architects. *(Private photo)*

doing in other countries, Mitroi explained.

City builder
Many of the most significant and well-used buildings in Brăila today have the signature of Nicolai Mitroi. If they have bigger rooms than the building plans claimed, however, is not known. As the head of the office, he was in charge of the design process of buildings such as the "Dunărea" department store, today known as Winmarkt and the "Danubius" sports hall, the latter published in the national magazine Architectura upon

completion in 1975.
Many of the housing blocks and other buildings lining Bulevardul Călăraşilor were also carried out during his leadership. Mitroi was responsible for the urban plan of Bulevardul Independenţei- the main concentric boulevard in the historic city center. One of the apartment blocks on Str. Unirii has his mark as do many other buildings throughout the city and county.
One of the most distinct projects of Mr. Mitroi in Brăila is with no doubt the diving tower and pool nearby the city's sport high school and

largest park "Monument". Unfortunately the tower's foundation was damaged due to severe flooding only a couple of years after completion and it never really came into use.

Leader for 25 years
Mr. Mitroi was educated in Bucharest like many of the architects working in the Brăila office. He finished his studies in 1969 and started immediately to work in Galaţi but was only there for about two years. He was transferred over to the Brăila studio soon after its opening in 1969, once an apartment became available in the city. By 1980 he was in charge of the studio, a position he kept until his retirement in 2005. After 89 the office was privatized and continued to operate with far less projects, during which time Mr. Mitroi served as one of the main shareholders. In 2007 the studio was eventually shut down while a few private architectural offices have stayed on in the building. On a recent visit, Mitroi's office was exactly the way he left it in 2005.

Inspiring atmosphere

Silvia Medrihan is one of the architects who left the studio shortly after the revolution. Since 1994 she was engaged as head of the county's Urbanism Department. A few years later, in 2008, she founded her own private office in the city's historic centre. With a view of the former "Dunărea" department store across the street, she operates the biggest architectural firm in the city. At its largest, five people were employed including her own daughter, Alina Medrihan. "Doamna Silvia", as the employees call her, has many fond memories from her years in the design studio together with Nicolai Mitroi, and many of the other architects.

- What was it like to be employed as a young architect in the Prodomus architecture studio?

- I enjoyed it a lot. There was about 30 of us, both men and women. It was a good and inspiring atmosphere to be in. We had a lot of parties and celebrations. Back then, we were working together with the engineers against a common enemy, Medrihan says.

- And who was the enemy?

- Ceausescu and the Communist Party, of course, Silvia Medrihan states.

She was also educated in Bucharest and finished her studies in 1979. Silvia Medrihan was born and raised in Galaţi and wished to move there after her studies, but work and a place to live were only available in nearby Brăila. During her time at the design studio from 1979 until 1994, she was involved in a wide range of projects.

- I worked with everything from urban planning to interior design. The buildings we designed could be anything from apartment blocks to schools and commercial spaces. We decided where and how to place the buildings, how tall they should be, how many flats were to be inside, how they were organized and so on, tells Silvia Medrihan.

Doesn't like the changes

Nicolai Mitroi and Silvia Medrihan worked closely during their time in the studio. Silvia Medrihan currently lives and works in Brăila while Nicolai Mitroi, following his retirement, moved to Măcin, a smaller town on the other side of the Danube river where he spends his time with his wife and dog. He still sketches ideas from time to time for fun but is not practicing architecture anymore. What does the former head architect think about the fact that the buildings his generation of architects created are very often being changed over the years in the name of "modernization"?

- I do not like it. They don't respect the materials we used. Sometimes it's like putting new insulated plastic windows in a medieval cathedral.

In the basement of the architecture studio

The archive in the basement of the Prodomus studio contains thousands of drawings used to realize the "communist" city. The smell of dust, nicotine and drafting paper gets stronger as you walk down the stairs and into the basement. At the far end of the corridor a cloud of cigarette smoke slowly appears and dissipates from time to time. In the small office two men in their sixties are found guarding the archive of the architecture studio. Upon asking, they kindly provide access to the full archive and are helpful in finding specific drawings. The archive does not seem to be often in use. There is not a high level of organization. However, when we open one of the tubes containing drawings of the local department store Dunărea, built in the beginning of the 70s, every drawing sheet is intact. A breath of history pass as we unroll the first drawing. We have to hold tight to the drawings to prevent them from rolling back into the shape they have had for the last 30, 40 years. When the paper is stretched on the table, we see the building's elevations, sections and plans. It is clear from one look at the drawings that they are the product of a significant number of hours, blood, sweat and tears. It is also evident that they should be exhibited for the public of Braila to see. As historic documents of a dramatic epoch in the country's history these drawings posses an extremely high value.

Built with steel and concrete

Most projects designed by the architects at the Prodomus studio were constructed by the people in the next door building, the Concivia construction office. Adrian Mateciuc was the head of the construction department for a decade. He lives with his wife, Mariana, in one of the housing blocks on Str. Scolilor built by Concivia at the end of the 80s. As a matter of fact, he was in charge of the construction work of his own block.

- We have built all the major buildings in Brăila. Before the design studio opened in Braila, we got the drawings from other institutes. Since 1970 most of the projects came from the design studio, Adrian Mateciuc explains. One famous exception is the City Hall, which was designed by architects in Bucharest. Still is was the local construction department which built it. Hotel Trăian, the Dunărea department store and "Danubius" sports hall are among the many significant projects built by Concivia in the city. While the design studio has closed down, the construction department still continues to operate, however on a much smaller scale than before.

- We used to have more than 1000 employees when I was the general manager. Now the firm only has 100, explains Adrian Mateciuc, who was educated as an engineer in Iasi between 1965 and 1970 and served as general manager between 1990 and 2000.

- I started from the bottom as a builder and ended up on the top of the company. Those were good years, smiles Adrian Mateciuc.

B răila Box has been exhibited at the "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and the National Museum of Contemporary Art - both in Bucharest, Romania. It is now part of the permanent collection of the City Museum of Brăila.
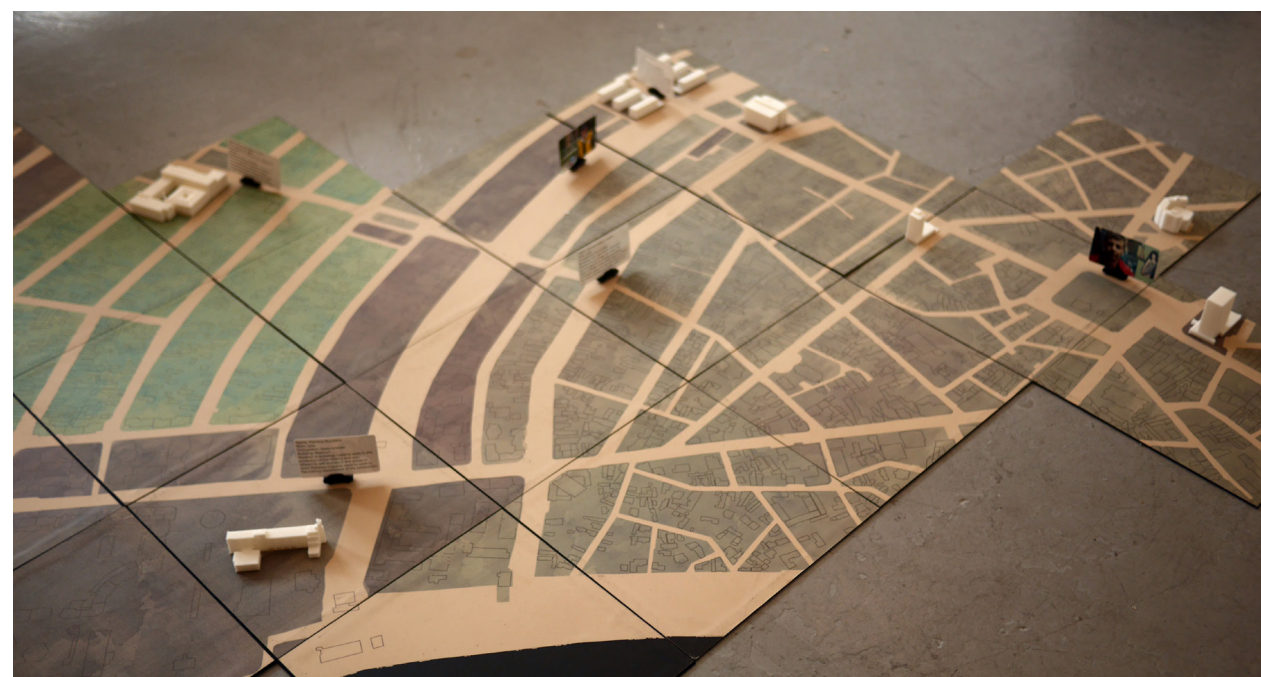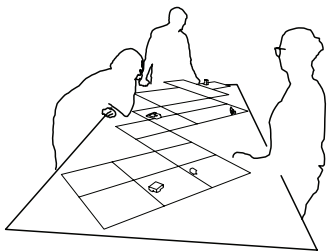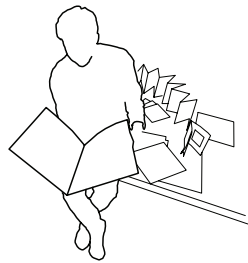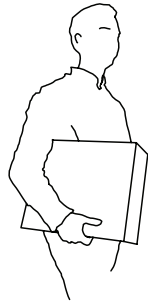
Interactivity

Through the making of the Brăila Box we have interacted with the people of Brăila in many ways. The aim of the box is still to interact. When we launch the box into the world the aim is to take part in a discussion about the "Golden epoch", the communist time in Romania. The content of the box is not the limit of the discussion. We have provided a set of tools, a collection of material that can be extended with more urban tiles, more buildings and new ways of exploring the communist city.

Mobility

Brăila Box is made to travel. In a box with the dimensions 320X320X150 mm, one can move the show of the architecture from the communist era from place to place. People don't have to go anywhere to experience the architecture of their city. It fits on the shelf for hand baggage on airplanes or under the seat in front of you. You can place it in your bookshelf or take it under the arm as you go to visit your friends.

"Brăila Box"
board game ⌐

Showability

Brăila Box provides a set of tools to discover, acknowledge and discuss the architecture of the communist period. Through a series of formats, you can set up a transportable exhibition. One can read the story of how the architecture was made, who worked in the design studio and how the drawings are stored today. You can easily make an exhibition of your favourite buildings and see them in ways you might not have done before.

Playability

Brăila Box has the rhythm of a board game. On the following pages we have suggested one way of playing which includes all the content. Drive through the city with the time specific machine, Dacia 1300 in search of relations between the buildings or find your own way of having fun with the box. When you do, tell us how you did it!

POSTCARDS FROM BRĂILA

DACIA
1310

DIY ferry

DACIA
1310

Danube riverfront
promenade

a spatial engagement with brăila's latency

a spatial engagement with brăila's latency

EPIMETHEUS, (ARCHI)TECT

Selected fragments from the writings of Dan Coma

Who was Epimetheus?

He was the brother of Prometheus, the rebel demigod who stole fire from the gods and gave it to the humans ignoring the warning to not 'play with fire'.

In Greek the word Prometheus means the one who first thinks then acts whereas the word Epimetheus means the one who first acts then thinks.

After the Greeks, humanity followed in the footsteps of Prometheus. We still live on his shoulders, if we may say so. Prometheus was, in some respect, the paradigmatic architect (at least in the post-Renaissance version), meaning the one who plans, who first draws up a project that he later realizes with the same ease and predictability that many relate to a linear and causal relation between cause and effect.

But what can you do with the (few) ones who think that the effect is the cause of the cause, and the cause is the effect of the effect? Meaning with the ones who have a 'mystical' inclination and who perceive the world in a 'circular' fashion, not linearly?

Epimetheus was spontaneous which, in the name of the post-Prometheus human determinism, was considered a great sin. How can you act 'without thinking' first?

Except that there is more than one way of thinking. Even in the case of an action that seems to be spontaneous, even 'irrational', there are 'hidden' motivations that don't make it 'without a cause'. However, the deterministic rationalism of the post-Prometheus present and past has not appreciated Epimetheus' 'carelessness'.

What if, as an experiment, we follow Epimetheus?

It would be a return to a sort of innocence, a primary joy of living and working without crippling premeditations, to the joy of spontaneity and the appreciation of anthropocentric values. There are already talks about a post-anthropocentric architecture.

What would it be? In fact, it would be an Epimetheic architecture where stone, plant, and animal (not to mention gods) could play a role more important than man's.

But wouldn't man benefit from it?

It may well be so. Indirectly, it would be a form of resurrection, relearning, rebirth of life. UNDER THE SIGN OF EPIMETHEUS.

Let us live and work spontaneously, instinctively and irrationally, like children who are happy to be alive. Let's become children again, after too many years of Prometheic 'maturity'.

It is in the name of life that Epimetheus must be remembered. Because in his modesty, he brings back to life innocence, spontaneity, the joy of non-planning. That is, he brings back an attitude vis-à-vis life that rejects CONTROL and the need for it.

He rejects power, in fact, thus showing a way of life that is very much the one promoted by the great Chinese mystic Lao-Tze, who says: and the humble will defeat the strong…

It has been said that the world is a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose periphery is nowhere… indeed…

although, we might need to define what a center is and what a periphery is… The center is connected, always, with power. And symmetrically, the periphery might infer weakness. But a mystic like Lao Tze foresaw power in weakness, strength in what only appears to be "weak."

Epimetheus is on the side of the weak, on the side of the "periphery"… that very "periphery" where "the other center" might be… the EX-centric center, the center forgotten, unseen, untalked about. Just like Epiemethus. But life palpitates there, genuinely. There is "another life" there, more quiet perhaps, less glamorous but more authentic.

What can we learn from Epimetheus…?

Everything. But starting perhaps with the uncomfortable thought (for us, human beings) that we might not be at the center of creation. Yes, maybe humans are not at all "the measure of all things." It would be, no doubt, uncomfortable such a thought since for thousands of years this is exactly what we thought.

A revolution…?

Maybe… the Epimethean revolution… the one that does not need fire because it is able to "burn" with water, if we are to express ourselves mystically.

Let's listen again to the blade of grass… to water… to those countless entities and beings and voices, unheard, unseen, yet existent. Let's see "the other side" of the story… let's take "the road not taken"…

Let's whisper the forgotten or forbidden name:
EPIMETHEUS.

And only then let's start anew to embrace the earth again, with the tenderness of a lover who does not want to control, who loves without the need to prove anything, who understands, as Lao Tze said, that the way to do is to be.

LET'S BECOME CHILDREN AGAIN,

AFTER TOO MANY YEARS OF

PROMETHEIC 'MATURITY'.
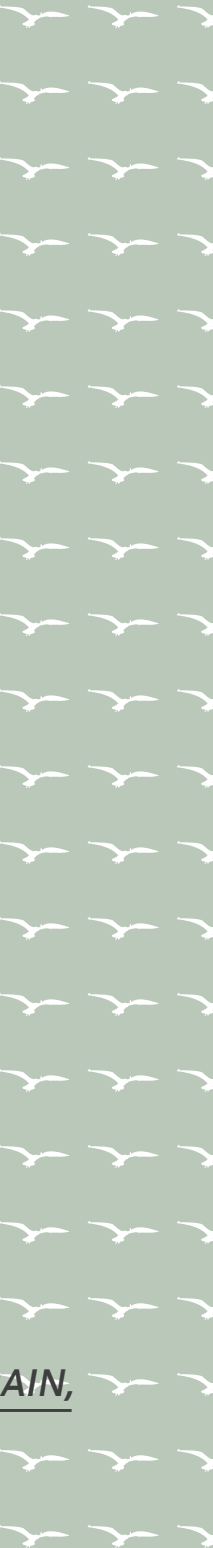
ECOLOGICAL CO-EXISTENCE IN BRĂILA'S SMALL WETLAND NATURAL PARK

How to improve access to the Danube wetlands and respond to the common needs of its surrounding communities with a modular kit.

by Siri Borten

This project investigates the conflictual inter-relationships between the Danube's Small Wetland Natural Park and the surrounding settlements of Brăila, Chișcani, Stăncuţa and Mărașu. Particular focus is placed on the edge transition areas between land and water, between the human settlements and the natural park. This negotiated territory is "ground zero" as it weaves together a complex and conflicting mix of political, economical, physical and ecological interests.

FOCUS ON THE EDGE TRANSITION AREAS BETWEEN LAND AND WATER.

A thorough investigation into these situations provides a sober awareness of the difficult nature of such a situation, yet it also signals at possibilities for common ground – situations where the different interests can be addressed at once, in equally beneficial terms. Based on this grounded knowledge, a series of sites are identified to provide targeted, controlled and equal access and exchange between the park and the adjacent settlements.

Further a modular infrastructure kit is proposed as a means to activate and accommodate each access point. The modules are imagined as a series of pitch roof floating rooms whose form and material is born out of vernacular floating structures on the Danube Delta. The flexibility and simplicity of the kit allows it to adapt to the various conditions of each site as well as the practical needs of all actors. It's floating capacity combined with it's steel pole anchoring system addresses the continuously shifting shoreline – the water level fluctuates by as much as 6m in a single year.

The connections prioritize the conservation of the natural capital of the park while looking to establish mutual forms of exchange where both the park and the adjacent settlements benefit. This symbiosis could see potential gains for the city in terms of tourism and education, for institutions in terms of research, for the villages (and to some extent the city) in terms of work and access to natural capital, and for the park in terms of maintaining and enhancing the conservation mandate.

South of the city of Brăila, along the Danube, lies the Small Wetland Natural Park. It is the country's second largest wetland area - the Danube Delta being the largest.

The wetland area is composed of 7 islands, which are home to 52% of all species in the romanian fauna.

The area serves as the biggest natural tourist attraction in the region, drawing in not only bird watchers but also science researchers, students, eco farmers and others fascinated by the history of the islands. In total, during the summer months, about 8000 people visit the small islands.

Brăila

Small Islands of Brăila

Danube Delta

FROM WETLAND TO FARMLAND
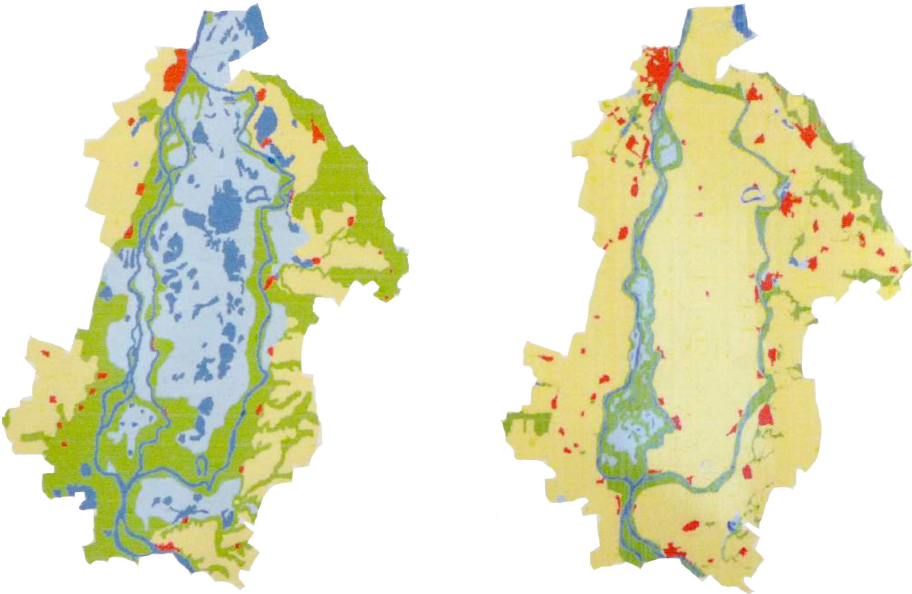
before 1964

after 1964

The wetlands of Braila were five times larger than they are today. In the early 60's more than half of the area 's delta ecosystem was transformed into arable land via drainage, deforestation and the construction of embankments. This has created some of the most fertile agricultural land in Europe yet it has also destabilized the river system leading to more frequent and severe flooding of the surrounding areas.

Agricultural systems	50%	
Socio-economical systems	2%	
	-5%	Fresh water eco-systems
	-20%	Forest/Meadow eco-system
	-25%	Wetland ecosystem
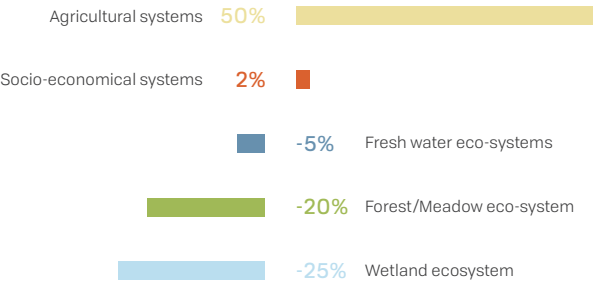
Protection zone

City infrastructure

Lakes

River

Grassland

Arable land

Forest land

Vineyards

Reed
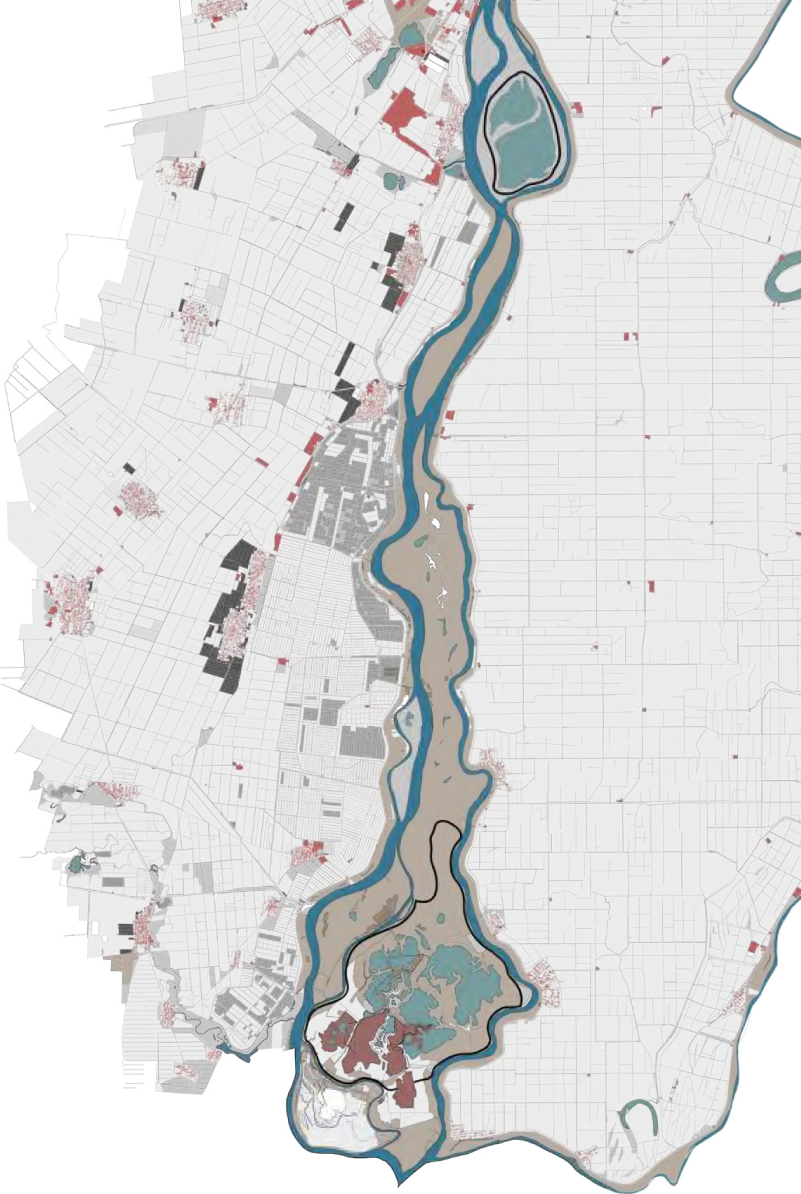
CURRENT LAND USE

In the 90's conservation laws and initiatives helped establish the remaining wetland area as a protected natural park. In doing so, it ensured the conservation of the existing natural ecosystems. At the same time many of the previous relationships and activities tied to the wetlands have been greatly limited or restricted. Tourism, educational and research activities, both private and institutional, have been affected, while the local communities have been particularly hard-hit.

EXISTING PARK LAYERS

208 bird species
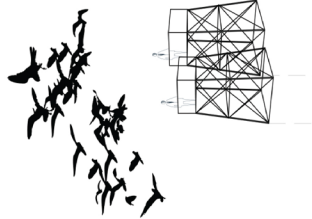
15 land and water trails

3 bird watching towers

8000 tourists per year

90 doctoral research theses
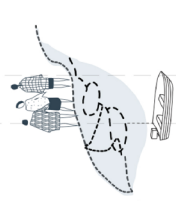
access is currently only permitted
with the accompaniment of a
park ranger
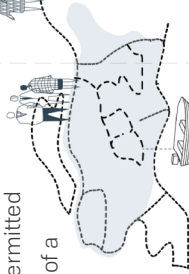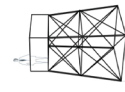
vegetation and fauna
are protected by a
management plan
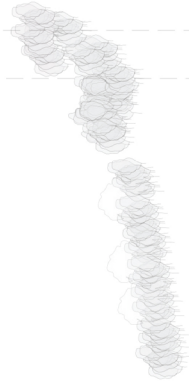
70 sq km of wetlands

water levels fluctuate by a
maximum of 6m throughout
the year which establishes a
diverse range of aquatic and
terrestrial habitats
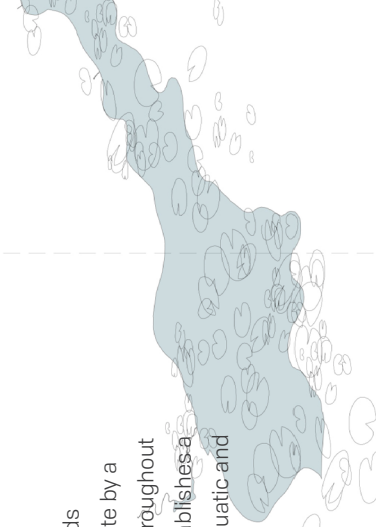
681 sq. km of agricultural land
surround the wetlands

14 farms open for agri-tourism

BRĂILA

CHIȘCANI

GROPENI

ȚĂNCĂU

BANDOIU

MĂRAȘU

STĂNCUȚA

GIURGENI
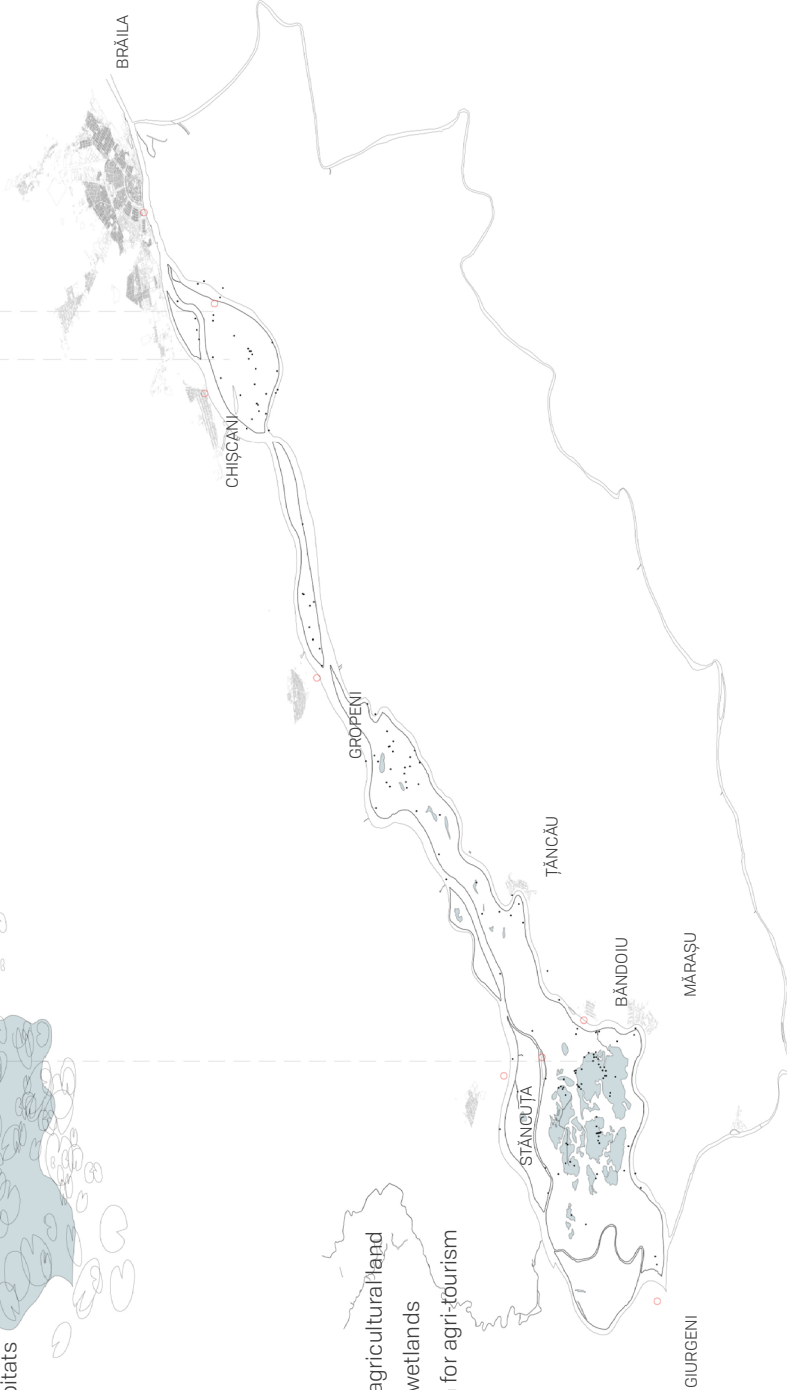
some examples of the vegetation and fauna
protected by the management plan
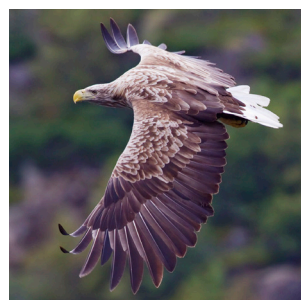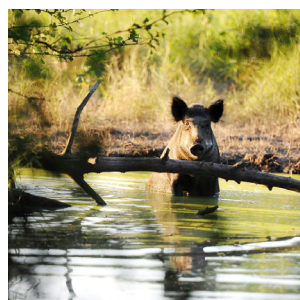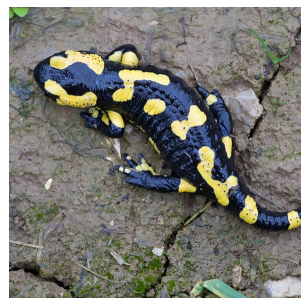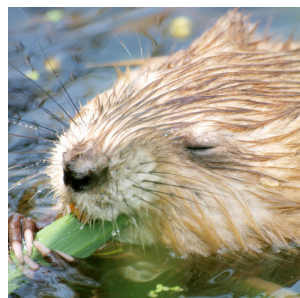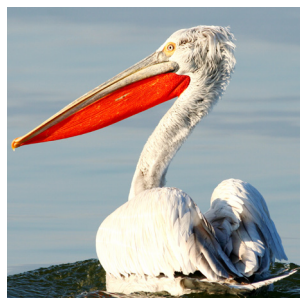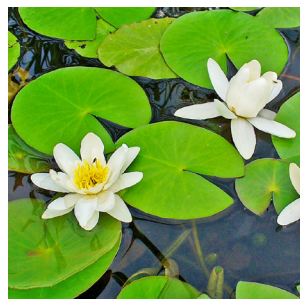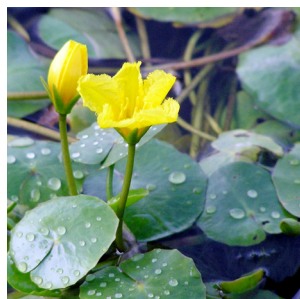
PERSONAL TOUR OF THE PARK

In visiting the wetland park it became apparent that much of the park infrastructure indicated on the tourist brochures (issued by the management office) do not exist or is in an irreversible state of decay. Throughout the neighbouring villages I visited no one seemed to be aware that any such infrastructure exists or has ever existed.

Observation towers

Existant tourist infrastructure

Ferry crossing

Future tourist infrastructure

by car via:

BRĂILA - CHIŞCANI - TICHILEŞTI - GROPENI - TUFEŞTI - CUZA VODĂ - STĂNCUŢA ---- GIURGENI

120 KM - 2H15M

Linear distance of the entire park
50 KM
Length of guided boattrip
35 KM - 4H
*including time for gathering illegal nets
1 - 6: RANGER AREAS

BRĂILA CITY

CHIŞCANI
TICHILEŞTI
GROPENI
ŢĂCĂU
STĂNCUŢA
BdJ
BĂNDOIU
MARĂŞU
STRÂMBA
GIURGENI

Source: Park admistration

intention

CHIŞCANI
TICHILEŞTI
GROPENI
1
2
ŢĂCĂU
3
STĂNCUŢA
BdJ
BĂNDOIU
MARĂŞU
5   4
STRÂMBA
GIURGENI   6

Source: Field trip by boat + car + images online

reality

ACTORS AND ACTIVITIES

rent boats to visitors

farming

fishing

forestry

LOCALS

textile production

agricultur-al tourists

TOURISTS
8000 / yr.

eco-tourists

uncontrolled access

Education-al tourists

birdwatchers

VILLAGE COMMUNITIES

Students
34 / yr.

controls access

11 county & city
SCHOOLS

Educational program

PARCUL NATURAL park rangers

Danube Day

PARCUL NATURAL administration

issues work permits

BRAILA county

GOVERNMENT

sailors

Life Natura

manages project

EU

Integrated management plan for the wetlands

technicians

co-owned & available

administration

ExpeER
Experimentation in Ecosystem Research

ACTORS &

ACTIVITIES

BRAILA RESEARCH CENTER: Systems Ecology & Sustainability

members of

controls access

research laboratory

pontoon research station

boats

Ph.D. students

use amenities

RESEARCHERS

wetlands

UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST

fauna

agriculture

socio-economic-cultural

☐ activities

🔵 actors

RENEGOTIATING ACCESSIBILITY TO THE WETLANDS

Historically the wetlands served as a source of income, food and firewood as well as a recreational space for the neighbouring settlements. The significant reduction of this ecosystem in the 60s, from wetland farmland, and the consequent privatization of the farmland in the 90's, has diminished the livelihood of the local communities. This has been further exacerbated by the conservation of the remaining wetlands in the 90's. which created limited-to-no access to the area. The result has been an ongoing tense relationship between the park management and the local communities, where conflicts over illegal fishing and wood cutting are the norm.

Additionally tourism, educational programs and research activities have encountered access difficulties due to the limited management and physical infrastructures of the park. It is firstly difficult to receive approval to access the area, and once given this, physical access proves to be a real challenge due to limited, aging and at times nonexistent water/land transport infrastructure.

Here questions of how to negotiate improved access to the wetland areas and re-establish a coexistence with the neighbouring settlements without threatening the conservation initiatives becomes the premise for a new architecture.

THREATS AND POTENTIALS

EU

issues directives

BRĂILA COUNTY

PARCUL NATURAL ADMINISTRATION

wants to develop

park rangers enforce restrictions

UNCHECKED ACCESS TO PARK
surveillance possible solution

TOURISTS

BED AND BREAKFAST

DEPLETING RESOURCES

excessive forestry

poaching

overgrazing

TOURISM

cruise tourism

bathing facilities

balanced accessability

village bed & breakfast

ensures socio-economic development

POOR ECONOMY IN VILLAGES
depleting natural resources lowers incomes

source of

LOCALS & VILLAGE COMMUNITIES

potential livelihoods

beekeeping

silkworm cultivation

SUSTENANCE

recreational space

food

firewood

grazing land

income

threats

potentials

Legend

- Integrated protection area
- Sustainable management
- Sustainable development of human activity

SITES OF INTERVENTION

The wetland park is divided into three zones, each with a differing degree of accessibility and possibility for activation. The red zone is under strict conservation protection and have limited access. The grey-blue zone is sub-managed by the Braila Forest Department and have a greater degree of accessibility although they similarly have strict laws about allowing human activities and built infrastructure. The yellow zone allows for the highest level of accessibility and flexibility when it comes to human activities and built infrastructure. This zone forms a perimeter strip around the wetland park - a "moat" or buffer area to the mainland and neighbouring settlements. It is here that a series of new access points or "bridges" are identified to provide targeted, controlled and equal access and exchange between the park and the adjacent settlements, as well as accommodating tourism educational and research activities.

Dimensions

Walls	4 x 5/7/10/15 x 0.20 m
Floating Elements	11 x 2.5/5/10/15 x 0.90 m
Platforms	11 x 10/13/15/20 x 0.20 m
Gables: 45 °	7, 7, 10 m
Roof	7 x 10/13/15/20 x 0.20 m

Planks laid out for hikers to cross a marsh, Norway.

THE WETLAND KIT

A modular infrastructure kit is designed to activate and accommodate each access point. The modules are imagined as a series of pitch roof floating rooms whose form and material is born out of vernacular floating structures on the Danube Delta. The flexibility and simplicity of the kit allows it to adapt to the various conditions of each site as well as the practical needs of all actors. It's floating capacity combined with its steel pole anchoring system addresses the continuously shifting shoreline – the water level fluctuates by as much as 6m in a single year.

february - april

november - december

august - october

may - july

Traditional house from the Danube Delta, now found in the village museum in Bucharest.

+3 m
−3 m

BRĂILA

Fishing association
Ferry to The Great Island

BĂNDOIU

MĂRAŞU

Owns 3120 ha (13%)
of the land in PNBMB

Park ranger: zone 5

STRÂMBA

Park ranger: zone 6
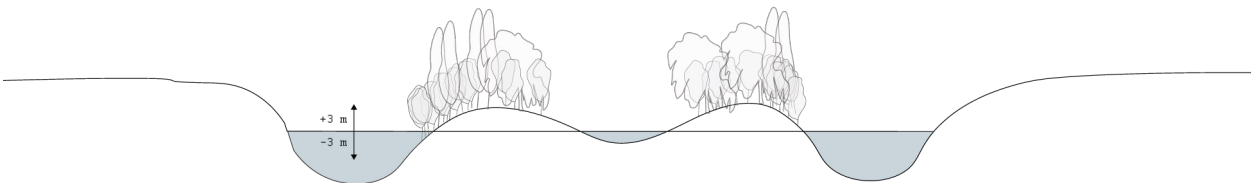
Sustainable development of
human activity

Sustainable management

Integrated protection area

Privately owned land

92A0 - Wetland dominated by
Salix Alba + Populus Alba

Mix of habitates 3150, 3160,
3270, 91E0, 92A0, 9200

91E0 - Alluvial forests of Alnus
glutinosa and Fraxinus excelsior

Ownership borders

Tourist trails

Park ranger / adm.

Forestry ranger

Tourism infrastructure

University /
Research

School kids

CHIŞCANI

Owns 2429 ha (13%) of the land in PNBMB
Fishing association
Fish farming / radio transmittor lab

Park ranger: zone 1

GROPENI

Owns 1829 ha (8%) of the land in PNBMB
Fishing association
Ferry, privately owned by AgriCost

TUFEŞTI

Park ranger: zone 2

STĂNCUŢA

Owns 9860 ha (43%) of the land in PNBMB
Fishing association
University resort + center

Park ranger: zone 4

BERTEŞTII DE JOS

VĂRSĂTURA ISLAND

Owns 5261 ha (23%)
of the land in PNBMB

GIURGENI

Park ranger: zone 3

Program

> park administration field office - park + forestry ranger

> tourist info point + kayak rental

> boat parking + fishing pier

BĂNDOIU
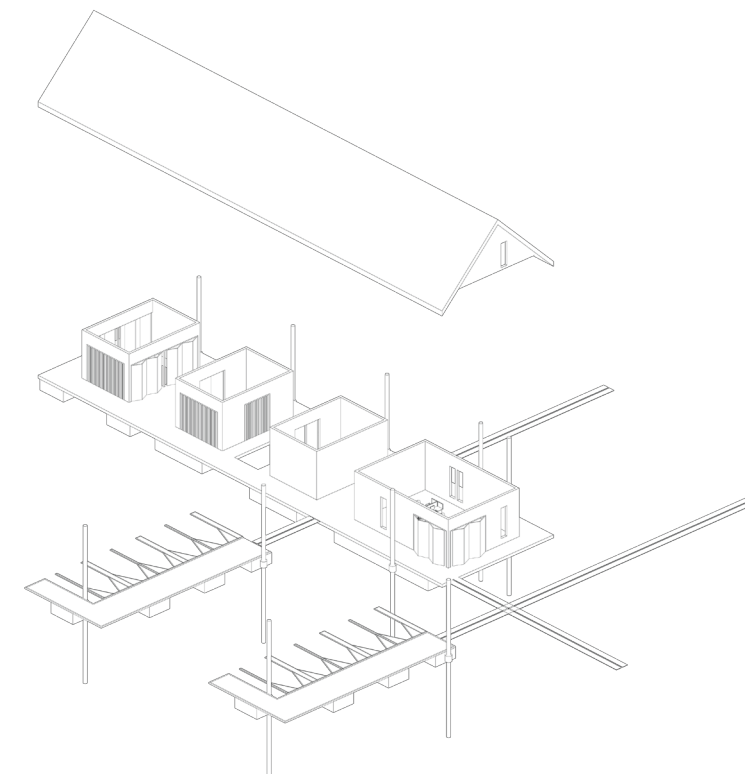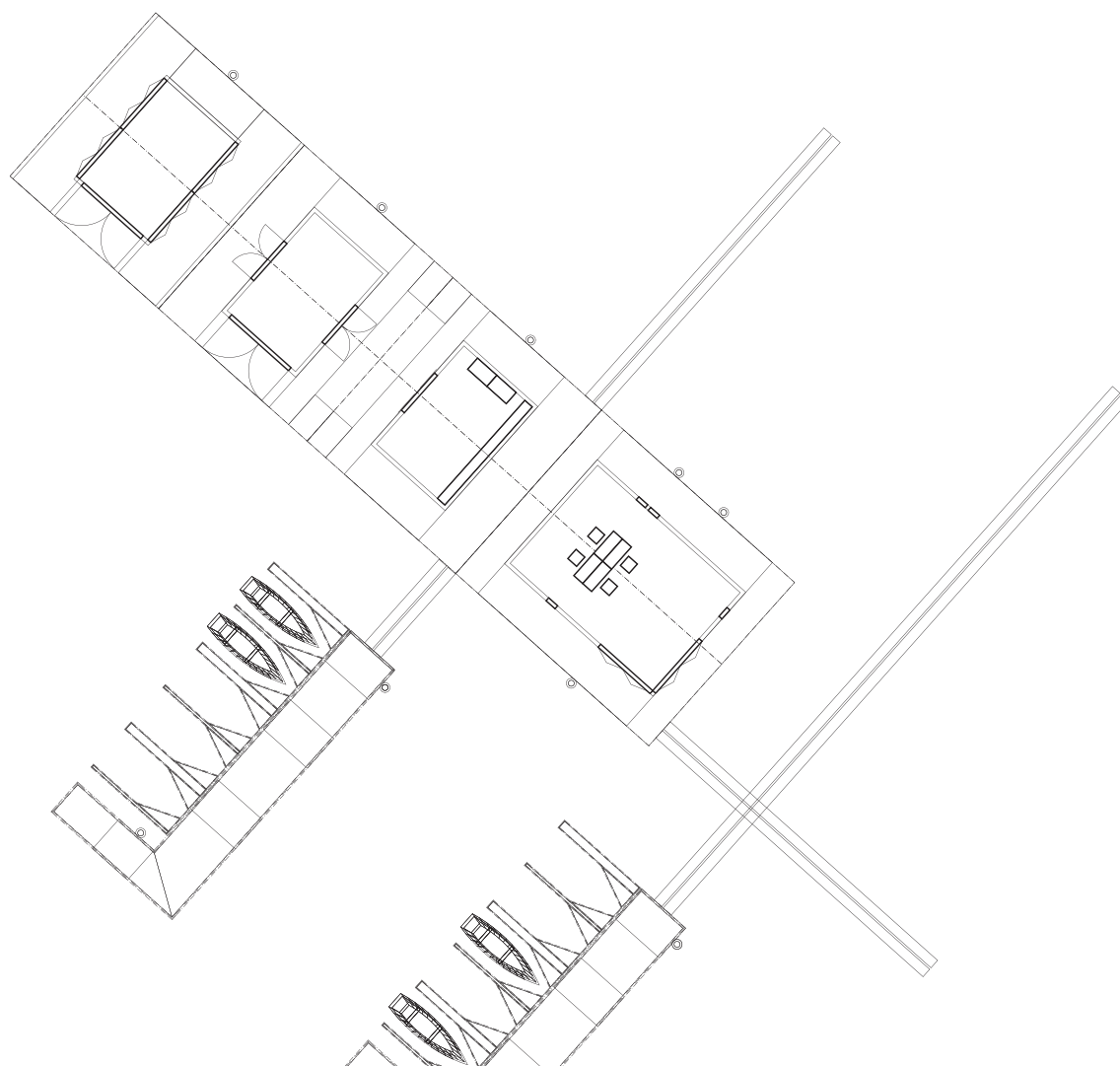
Program

> park administration field office - park + forestry ranger

> tourist info point + kayak rental

> tourist lodging

> boat parking + fishing pier

BRĂILA
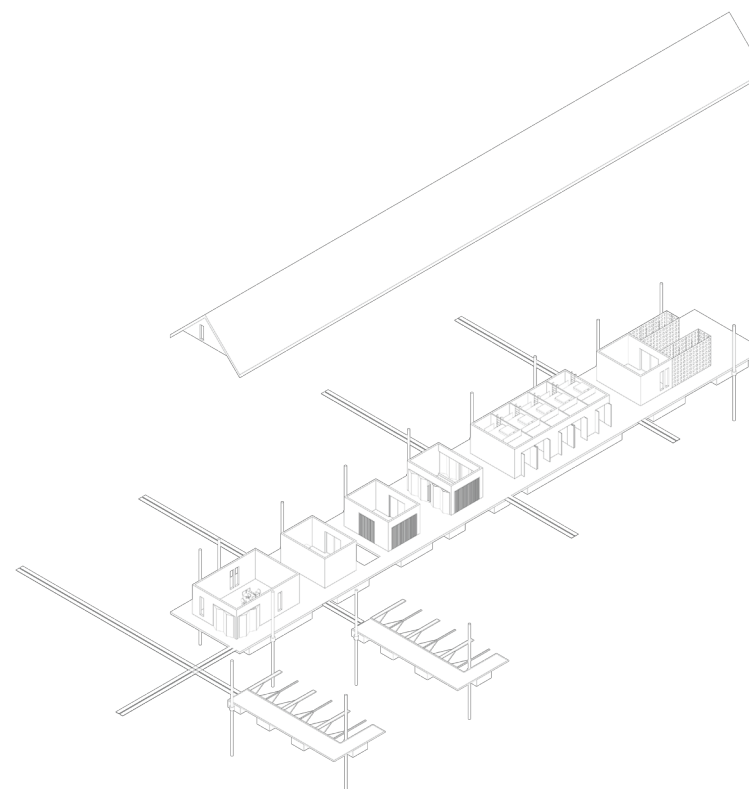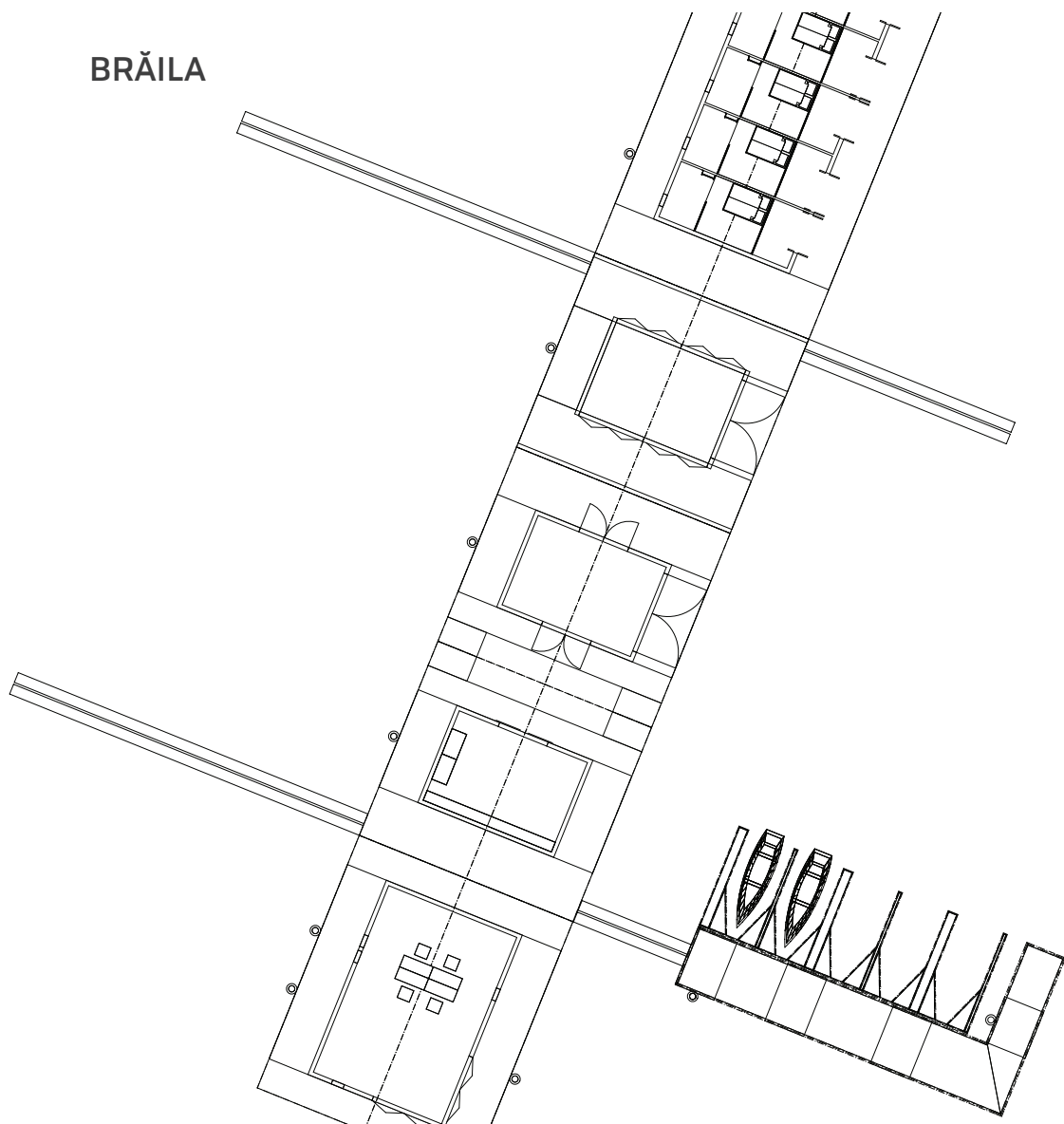
Program

> research station - sampling point for the University of Bucharest

> boat parking + fishing pier
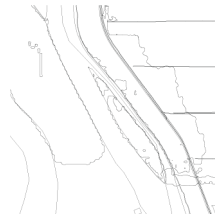
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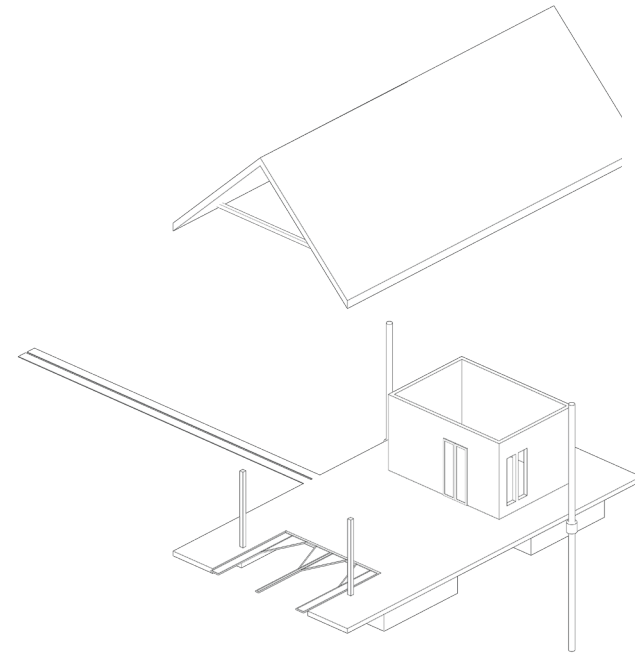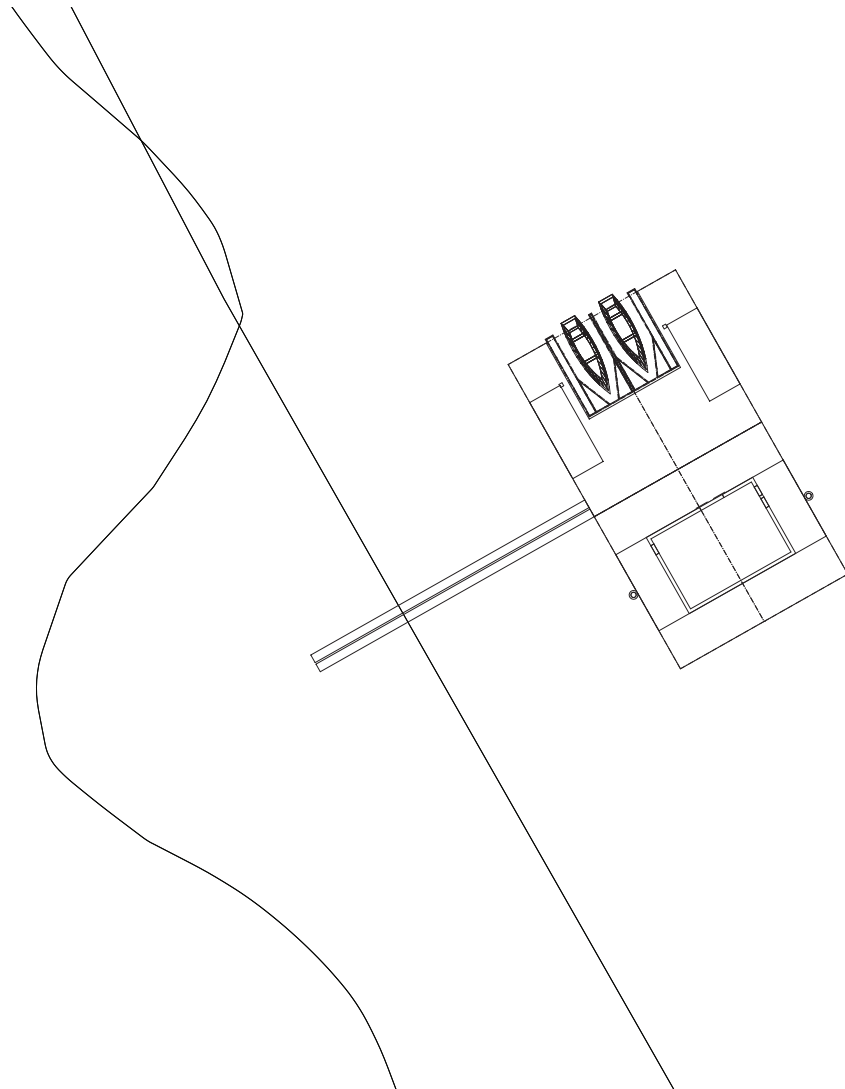
Program

> park administration field office - park + forestry ranger

> tourist info point + kayak rental

> tourist lodging

> boat parking + fishing pier
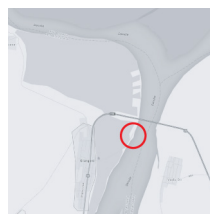
GIURGENI
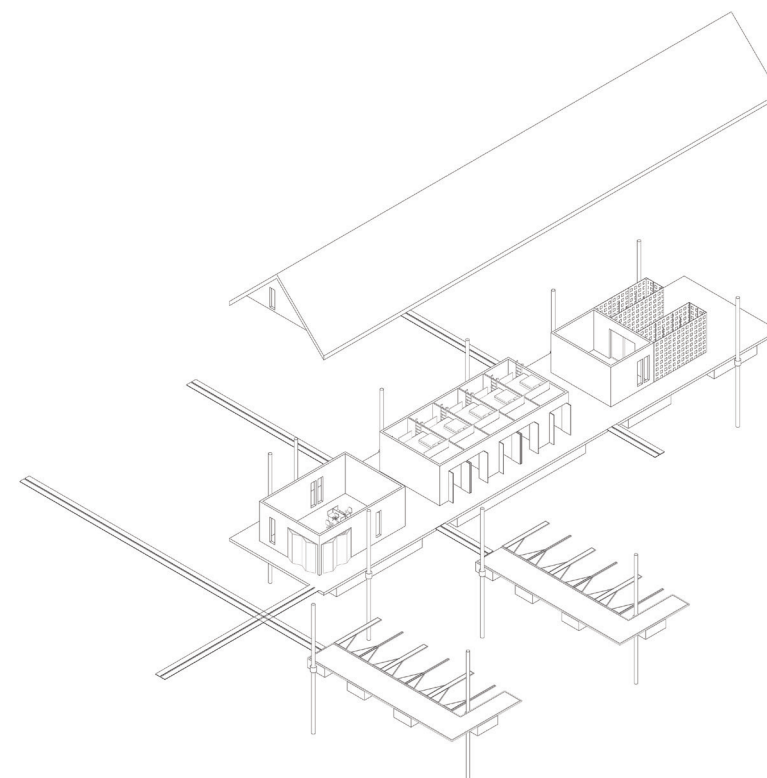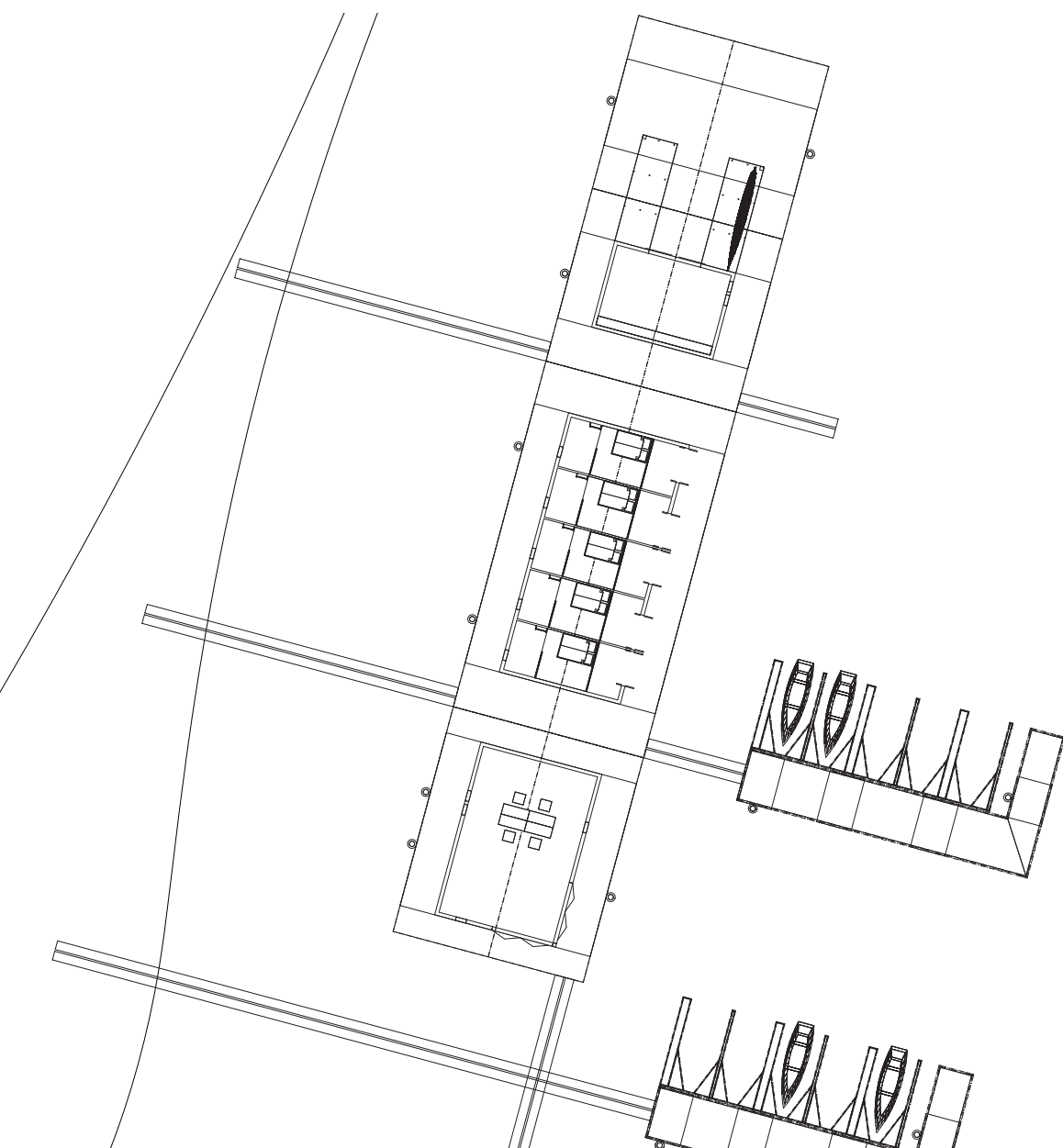
Program

> park administration field office - park ranger

regional fishing association field office

    - refridgerated room

    - storage room

    - boat repair workshop

> ferry dock for agricultural enterprises (i.e. Agricost)

GROPENI
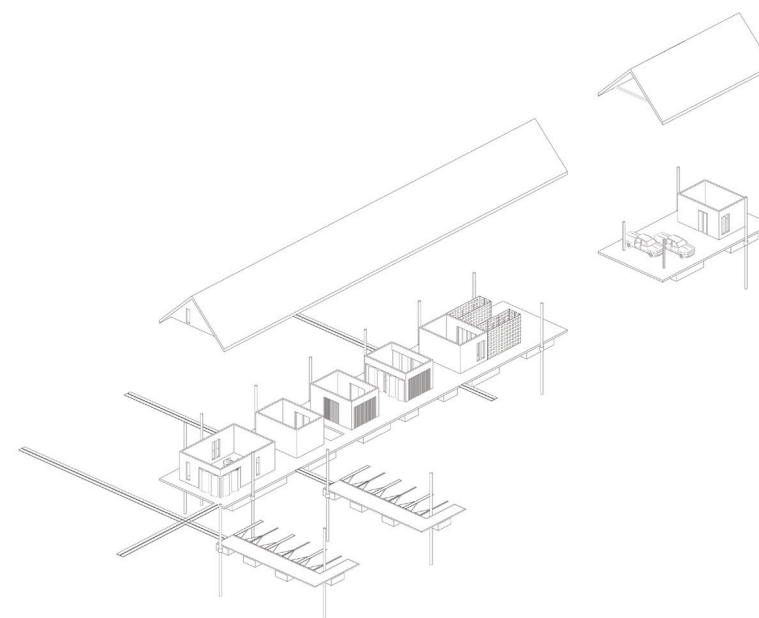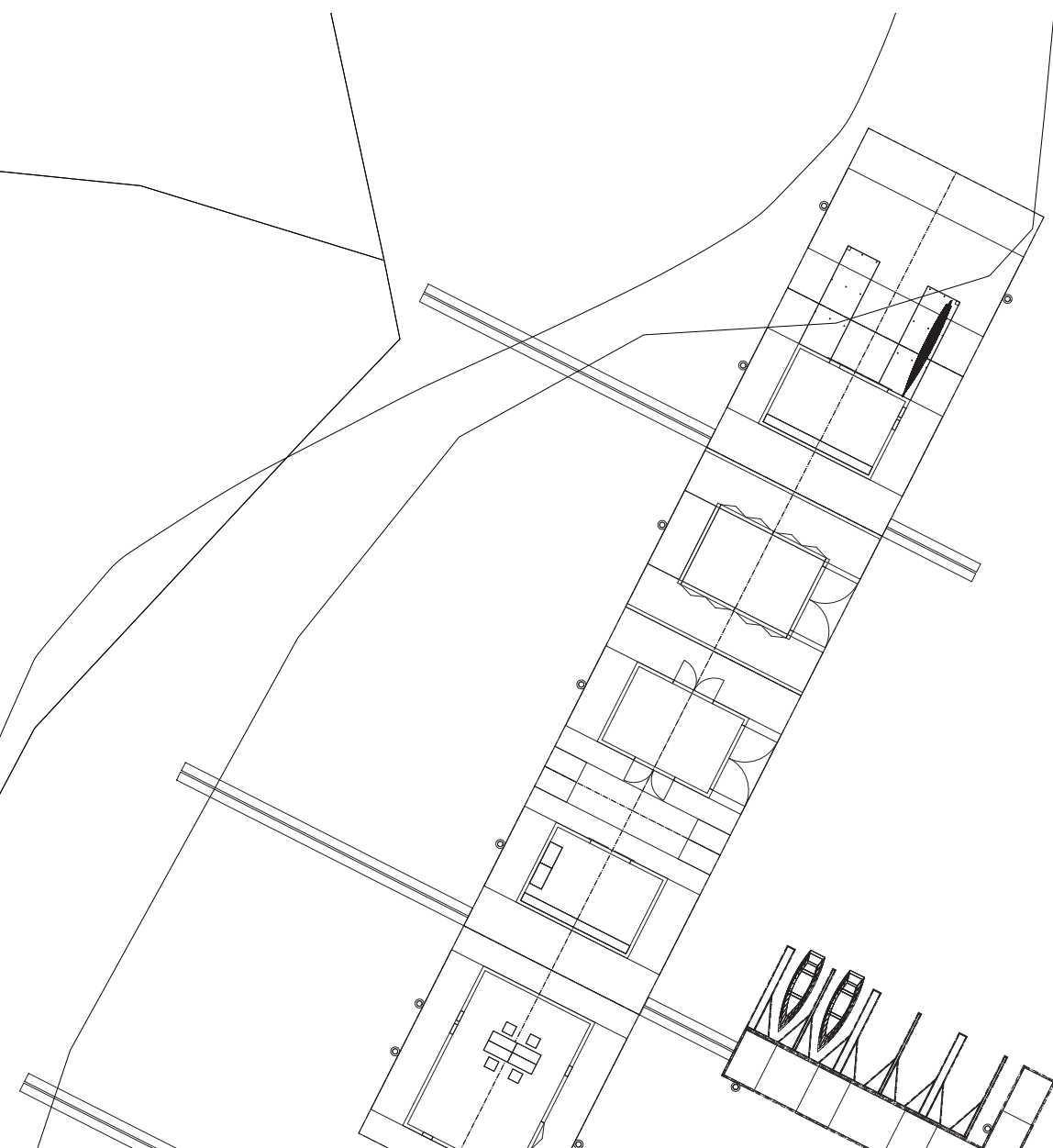
Program

> research station - sampling point for the University of Bucharest

> boat parking + fishing pier

SMALL ISLAND OF BRAILA
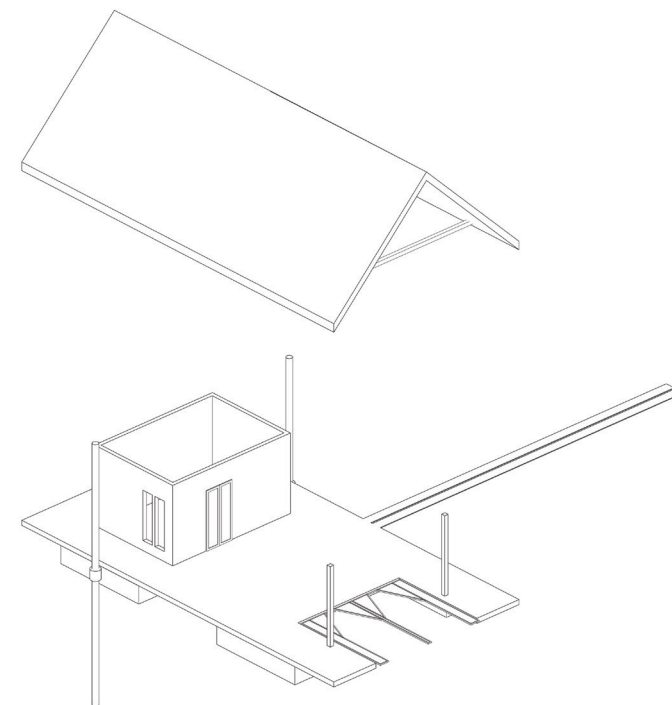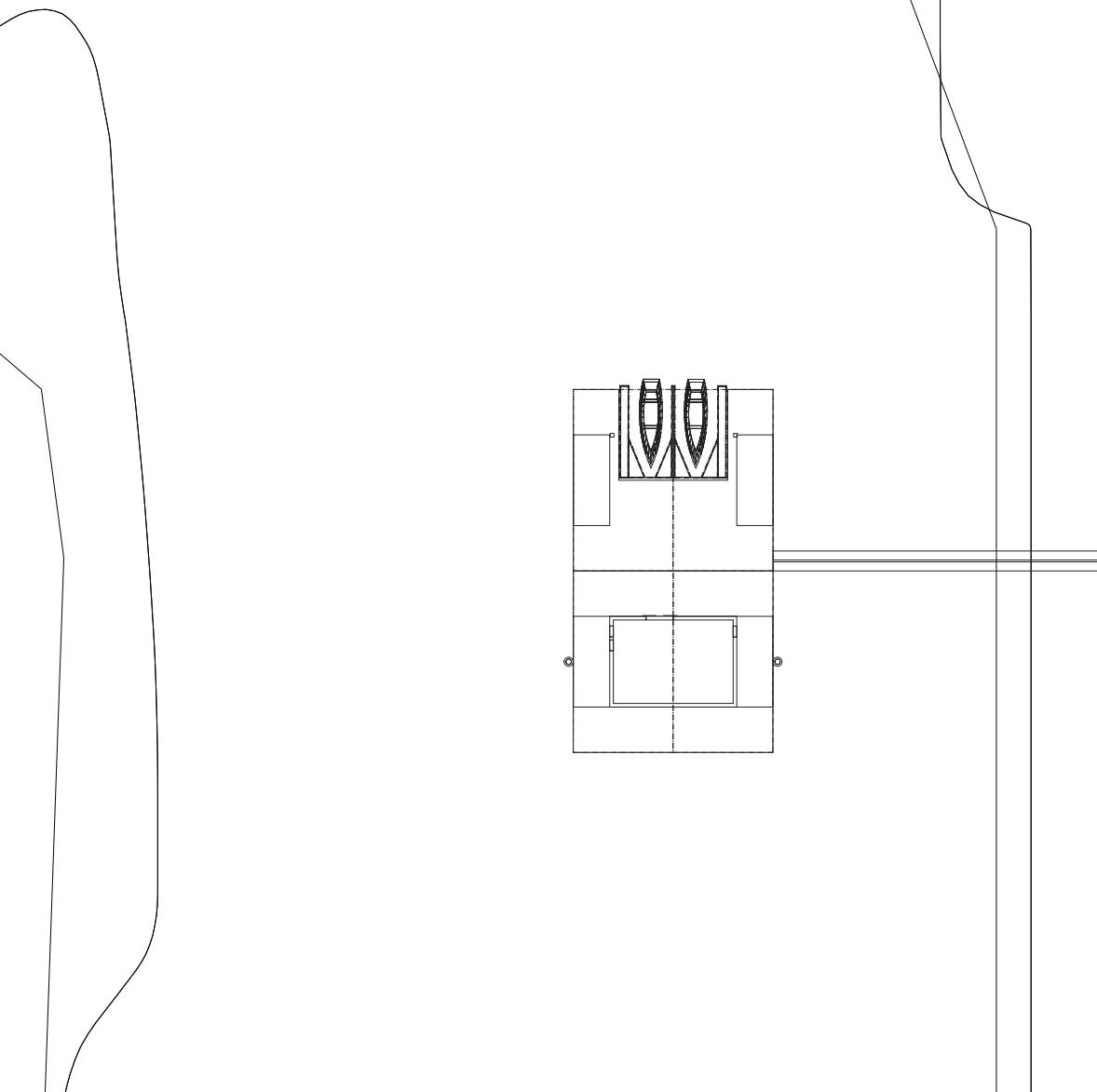
Program

> research station - sampling point for the University of Bucharest
regional fishing association field office
- refridgerated room
- storage room
- boat repair workshop
> boat parking + fishing pier

STĂNCUȚA
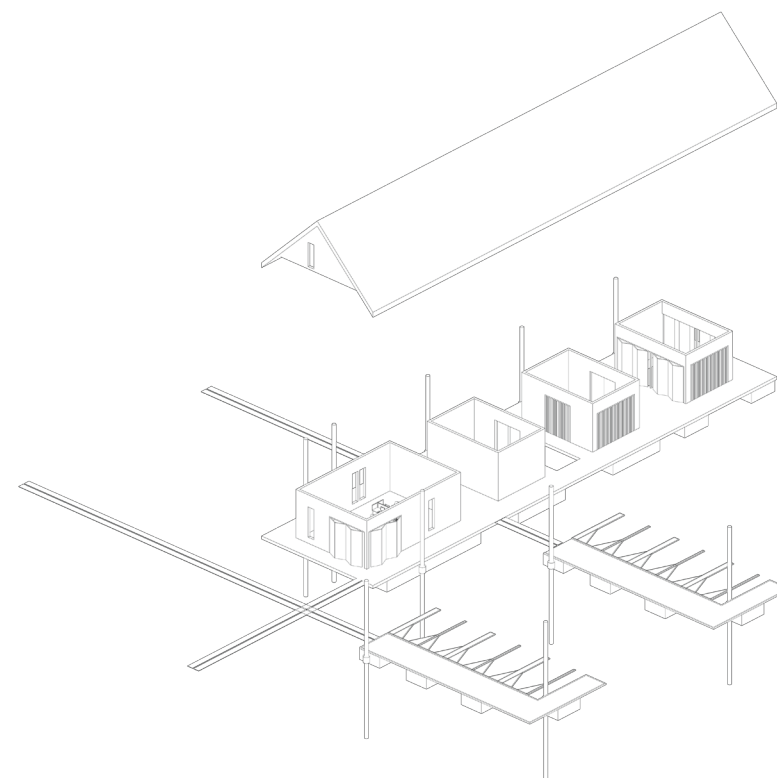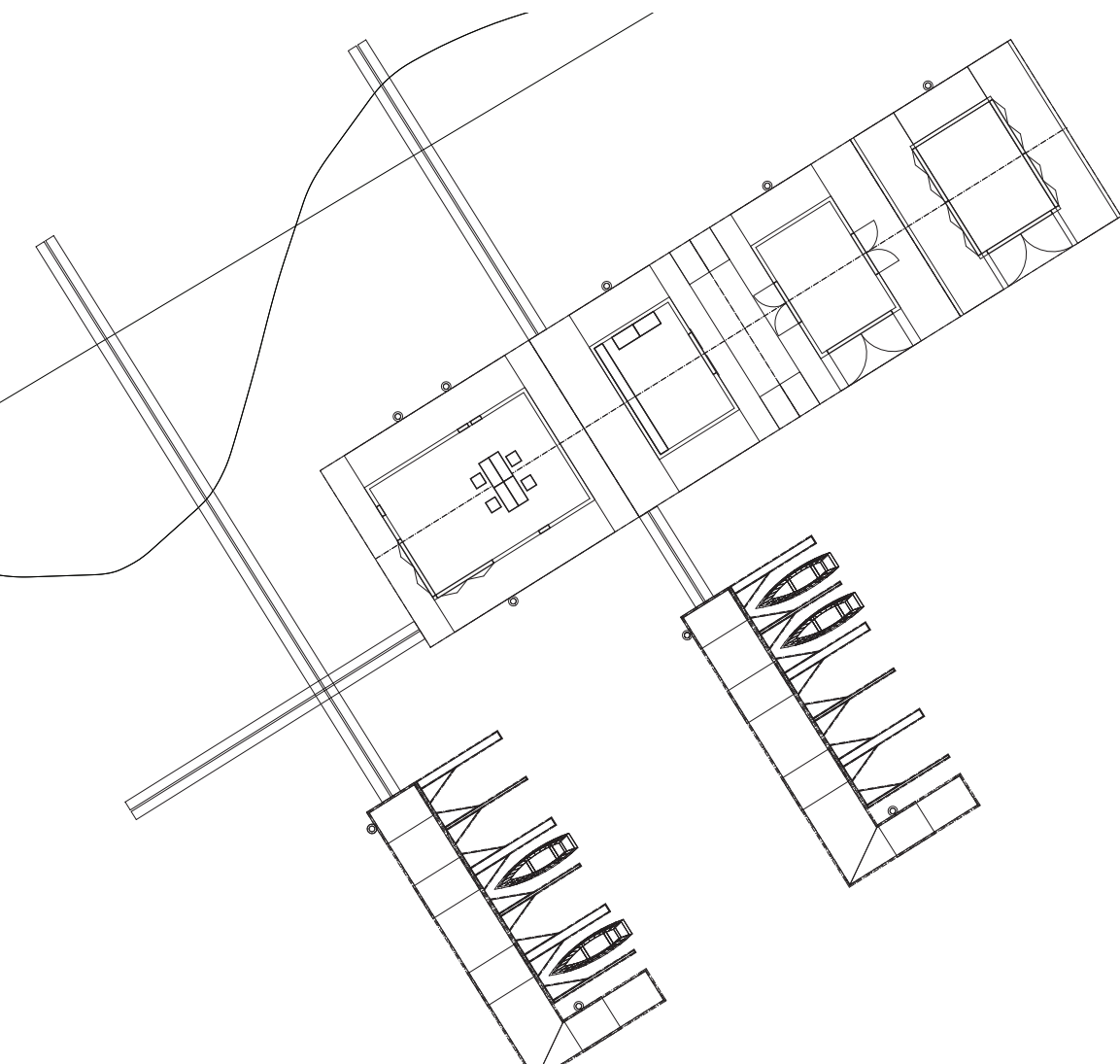
a spatial engagement with brăila's latency

POSTCARDS FROM BRĂILA

bomba 1
(slang for local bar)
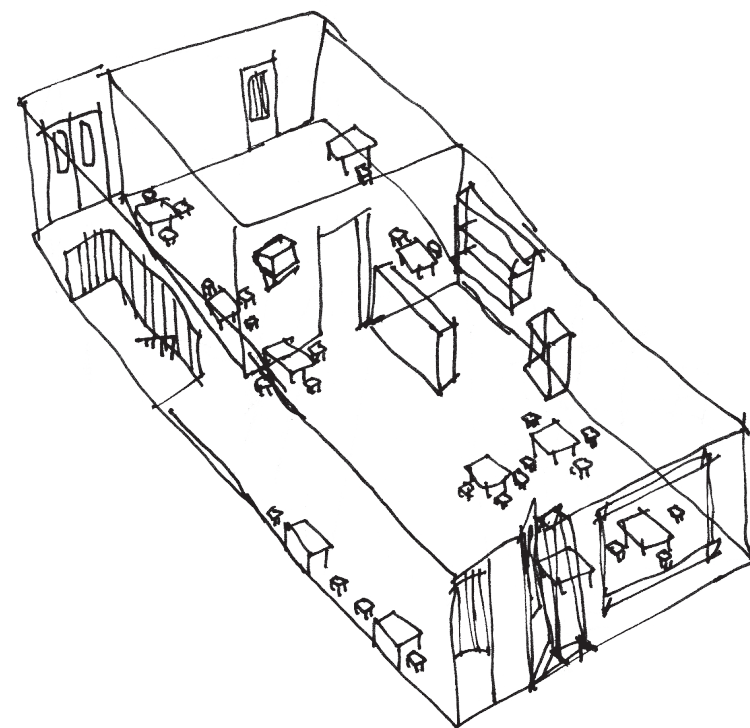
Open air market

Open air market
axo

DACIA
1310

a spatial engagement with brăila's latency
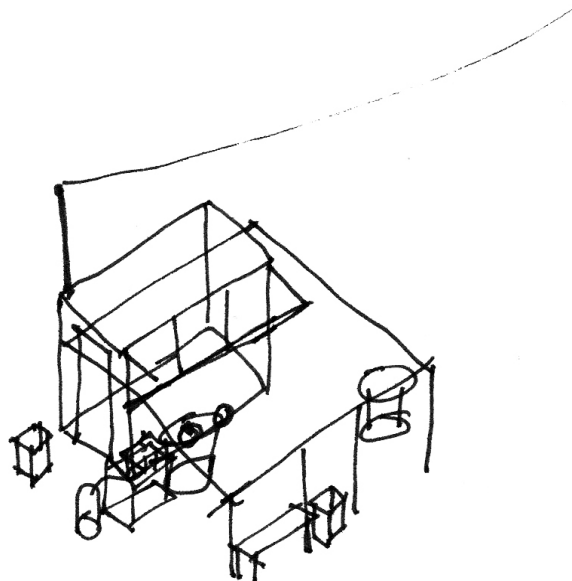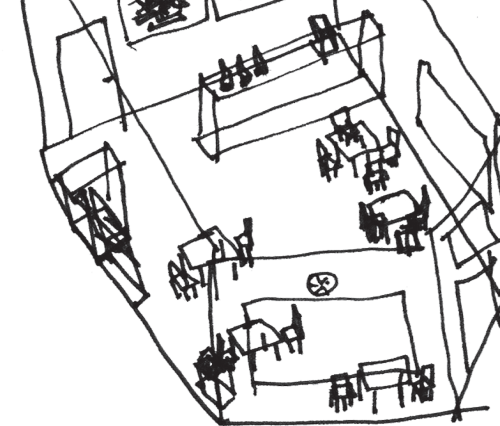
Bomba 2 axo

Bomba 2

DACIA
1310

City theater

axo

City theater
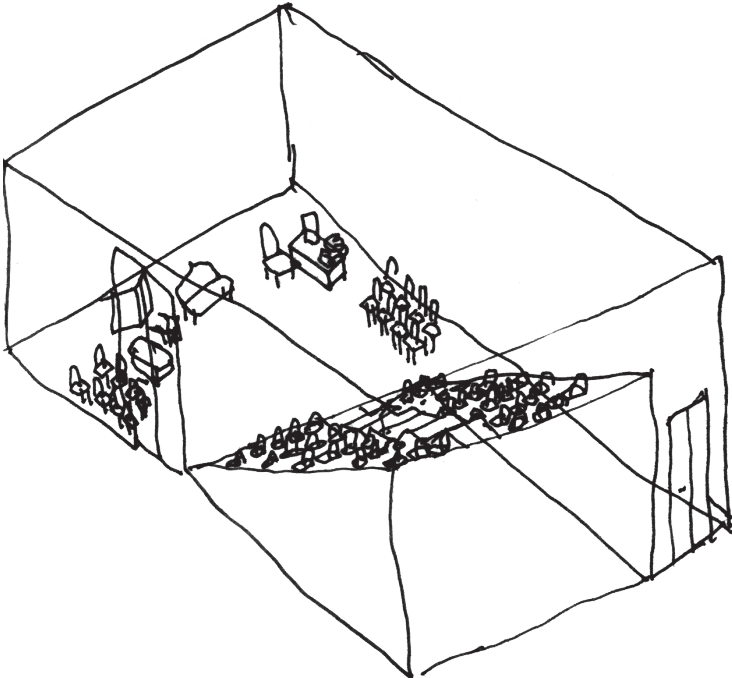
TEATRUL MARIA FILOTTI
45° 16' 17" N 27° 58' 23" ∅
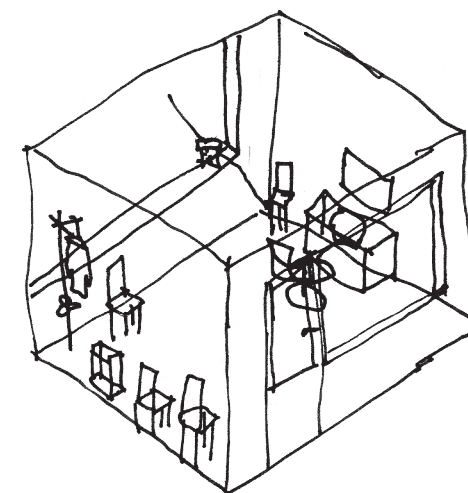
FRIZERIE BARBATI COPII DAMA

hairdressing salon

PARTICIPATORY DESIGN AS TAILORING

by Andrea Spreafico

If an architect's office has to design a house for a client, his client will implicitly be the user of the house. As a client he will give a commission, as a user he will give feedback on the way the project interprets the commission brief, in this sense he will participate in the design process. In the case of an urban project the complexity of participants increases. Such an example is when the client (the city administration) represents the users (the citizens) within the rules of representation, but doesn't match with them. It is therefore necessary to seek the information that only users can give directly in the field. This informative moment within the participatory processes is in my eyes more important than the proposal-oriented one, that follows in most participative approaches. Participatory approaches are often considered more complete if people are involved actively in the design process of something new. I will try to show why the involvement of people in the design in not necessarily a parameter to define the degree of their participation.

When non-professional persons are asked to participate in the designing of a public space or a performance they generally propose what they presume is expected from them, also they are limited to proposing only what they know or are aware of – they cannot ask for what they don't know. In this case, the resulting of participation turns out to be more interesting from a social perspective rather than an artistic or architectural one.

The art theoretician Claire Bishop has framed a similar shift in the field of relational arts in her essay "The social turn" : Speaking about the presumed bigger value of "real efficacy" compared to the "aesthetic experience" she note: "This uneven inclination towards the social component [...] suggests that contemporary art's 'social turn' not only designates an orientation towards concrete goals in art, but also the

critical perception that these are more substantial, 'real' and important than artistic experiences. At the same time, these perceived social achievements are never compared with actual (and innovative) social projects taking place outside the realm of art; they remain on the level of an emblematic ideal, and derive their critical value in opposition to more traditional, expressive and objected-based modes of artistic practice. In short, the point of comparison and reference for participatory projects always returns to contemporary art, despite the fact that they are perceived to be worthwhile precisely because they are non-artistic. The aspiration is always to move beyond art, but never to the point of comparison with comparable projects in the social domain" (Claire Bishop, Artificial hells, 2012, p. 19). Similarly, participatory architectural projects in public space are often justified on their participatory identity rather than in the quality or type of public space that they construct.

It is definitely interesting to use one's own professional experience in order to engage local people in participatory processes, if the goal is offer to the participants an inspiring experience with urban, artistic or cultural issues. Another option is to focus not on a participative form of design but on the informative aspect of participation, i.e. to individuate a shared problem, a common field of interest, a topic that can be articulated in a participative manner which the users can appropriate as their own. The problem can be then solved by the designer in a dialogue similar to the one mentioned above where a client commissions his own house: the problem is defined together with people from the area of interest and the designer makes proposals that evolve with the feedbacks of the users. This demands a big investment in developing ways to engage with the users which includes communicating and making accessible the ideas of a project in fieri, but it guarantees the pertinence and consistence of the problematics addressed by the project. The social aspect of participative projects nevertheless can bring something

primary to any creation, that has to last after its realization: the care for what has been done. Nothing can last without janitorial care. If janitorial care doesn't come from above (and it does only in the case of institutional engagement) then it has to come from within. In order to come from within, people need to have the feeling that this is their creation and they are responsible for it. They don't have to find it necessarily useful, they have to feel its theirs in order to initiate what I will call "janitorial appropriation". Some cases of squatting of abandoned public buildings can be a reference for this type of appropriation such as when a group appropriates an abandoned building, starts to fix it and in the process propose to the community around the building a new use for it. The community accepts the squat not because they themselves are squatters nor for what type of new activities will occur within, but because this action will guarantee a level of maintenance of otherwise abandoned piece of urban fabric. To participate in the conception of a space in an informative way can play the same role in increasing the volume of care for the ongoing life of a project as designing it.

What then is the difference between this form of participation and the one where users are asked to take a leading role in developing the design? The architect Valerio Olgiati, speaking about his office's building praxis, has said: "how an architect conceives a building tectonically is not solely a structural response, although a building's structural system is extremely important for a building to make sense and be magnificent and beautiful. The tectonic resolution of a building is ultimately of the highest artistic order" (A+U 507, p. 11). He is speaking as a man in front of a blank sheet that has to deal with gravity and art at the same time and his remark, beyond its pompous wording, unifies in a straightforward manner the design of a building with its constructive conditions. In Olgiati's remark there is no room for a distinction between the structural solutions and the artistic dimension of the project. Similarly in participatory projects there should be no distinction between

the users of the project and the design of a project for these users: which differs greatly from the idea that users should design the project.

To further clarify this position, one could consider the performing arts where one could define "participatory" those performances which cannot be documented if the audience is not there (if I can document the piece when the audience is not attending it, it means that the audience does not take part in the dramaturgical identity of the piece). Let's take the first degree of audience participation in a performance as an example, namely when a member of the audience is asked to go on stage for some reasons that she and the rest of the audience ignore: if this gesture is not dramaturgically motivated during the whole piece, it will just have been a moment of embarrassment, maybe the director would be able to say he did a participatory piece and... that's it. In this case participation has been a goal and not a "constructive" element. In the same manner, if an architect were to ask people within their neighbourhood what they want in their square you can imagine the same sort of embarrassment: people are not keen to make the work of someone else if they do not see a reason for it – if they do not see the goal of their involvement.

Two examples from recent theatre performances can help to articulate this relation.

1) Rimini Protokoll's "Home visit Europe" is a piece without performers that is played at people's houses. A hosting theatre organizes the invitations and installs the necessary infrastructure to run the show. The audience (ca. 15 people per show) finds itself in a house where they will play a board game with personal questions about European identity. As they answer the questions, the audience becomes the "actors" of the piece and the dramaturgy is set in such a way that you need only to follow the rules of the game in an absolute

natural way. In doing so, the participants know why they are sharing with others their personal story: not for the sole sake of doing so, but for the development of piece one is a part of and intrigued by. The participation of the audience guarantees the absolute authenticity of the information generated during the piece. This provides the piece with a documentary depht that is very difficult to achieve with fiction.

2) Christophe Meierhans' "Some use for your broken clay pots" is a performance in the form of a lecture which proposes an alternative way of thinking about democratic representation. Since elections oblige politicians to waste half of their time in trying to be re-elected, Meierhans proposes a system based not on election but on disqualification, where people are chosen randomly as representatives and then democratically and systematically disqualified. The lecture is presented accurately with clear slides – and it last two hours. Before the show begins the audience is informed that they can use one of the four microphones provided to them: it normally does not take long before they start to question Meierhans system, who is able to politely answer and articulate their questions without losing the dramaturgical line of his piece. This engagement of the audience, which is provoked by Meierhans with clinical precision, convert what would otherwise be just a long lecture into a quality (participated) performance. By speaking to his audience about a topic everyone is personally bound to, democracy, the piece manages to transform a monologue into a plural dialogue, with engaged discussions and exchange of opinions, and it does it without losing control of the dramaturgical development which forms the constructive spine of the piece.

These two examples show how it is not only possible but recommendable to conceive of participatory processes without the delegation of authorial power to the participants, but inviting them to articulate not the design but the content of the project. Users should be the main actors of a dialogue

between the designer's white sheet and the context of the project. To try to and make this dialogue spontaneous, obvious and trustful is maybe the biggest challenge that designers face in order to give a proposal to the users that is tailored on them. A project that in the future, once the designer is no more there, will be worn and cleaned and ironed and worn again.
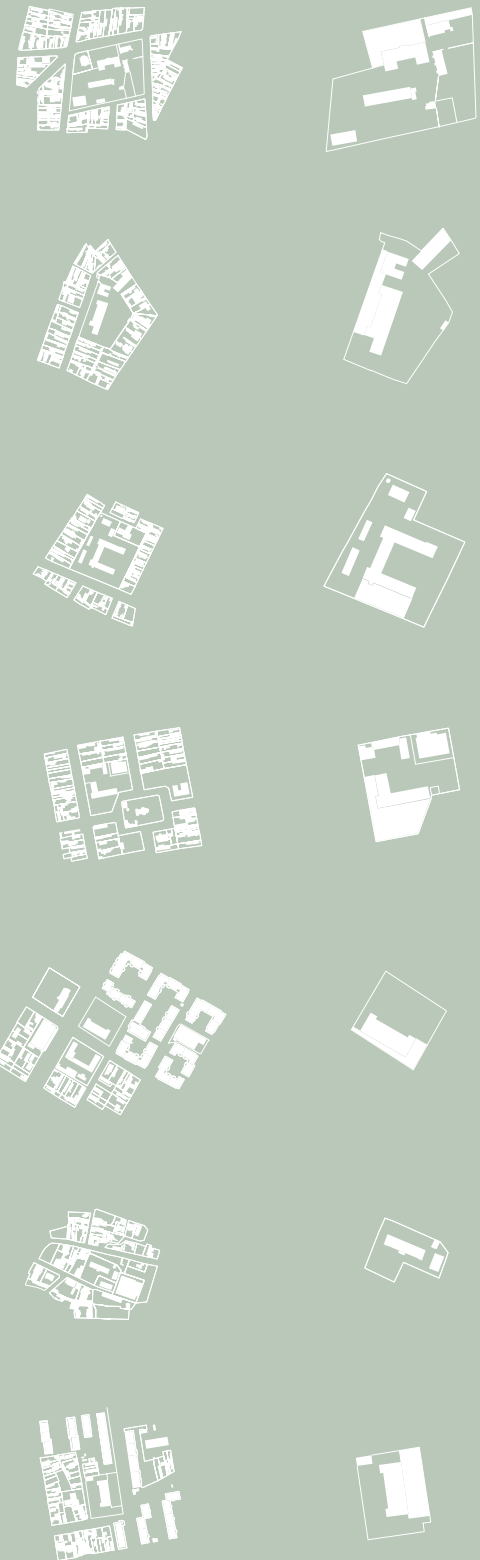
PILOT PROJECT FOR IMPROVING PUBLIC SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE

How to improve a school ground through participatory actions that tailor their architectural proposal on users and appropriators to ensure both its functionality and assimilation.

Goda Lukšaitė and Anton Huhn

The primary aim of the project has been to improve the schoolyard of Şcoala No. 22 "Radu Tudoran" in the Chercea neighbourhood of Brăila.

The choice to focus on schools and schoolyards is grounded in the role they posses as local urban centers throughout the city neighbourhoods. These nodes provide open public space and accommodate recreational, educational and cultural activities.

Within School No.22, the entrepreneurship exhibited by school staff and teachers as well as the spatial opportunities offered by the school grounds formed the basis of the project. A series of participatory workshops sought to tease out the various interests and desires which eventually led to an initial focus on activating the school's front yard garden - an area which has become overgrown and slowly accumulating waste due to it being fenced off from the rest of the school yard.

A series of built interventions were then carried out - three new gates cut out of the existing fence - to reconnect the entire schoolyard and a series of educational games with the students to clean-up and activate this new extension. By opening

the three fences together with the children, school staff and teachers, we tried to underline and empower the identity of the school space

The participatory workshops and built interventions serve to channel these energies of disparate ad-hoc personal initiatives into an attitude of collective long term care of the school. Additionally, given that students/youth are key figures (both participants and benefactors) in the transformation and care process, we have looked to provide an educational dimension to all activities throughout the design process.

Furthermore, we translated this initial work into a series of future physical/building interventions which propose a new future for the school grounds. This proposal, centered around a "central square", consists of a gym / event space, a woodworking workshop and a pigeon house/garden as well as the newly activated front yard garden. Together it shows a way to think of these interventions in the context of the whole school - as an organic and equally important combination of spaces which maximize the relationship between the spaces and people who occupy them.

SCHOOLS AS LOCAL URBAN CENTERS

Public schools are fairly well distributed throughout the city such that most residents are in close proximity to at least one school. Over the years the schools have proven themselves to be local centers as their yards are available year round and regularly used by youth to gather and play sports (particularly football). And their inner premises accommodate community groups and activities after school hours.
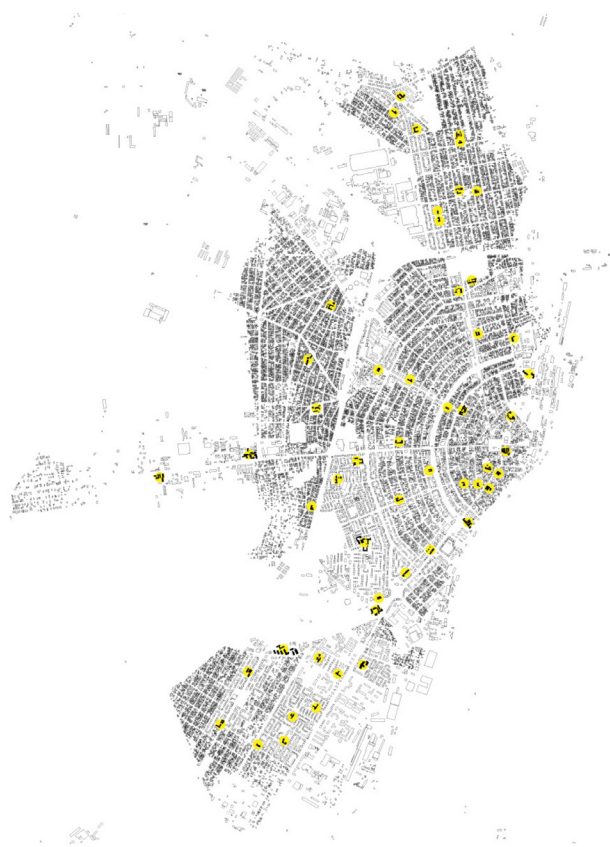
With industrialization and urbanization efforts from the 60's to the 80's, many new schools were introduced into the city fabric. These schools were prefabricated 2-3 storey buildings of an almost identical nature, something that can be seen by looking closely at the selected schools below, which have undergone various alterations since the 90's.

School No. 22 "Radu Tudoran"

School No. 24

School No. 21

School No. 1

School No. 18

Urban context

Boarders and entrances

Front yard as formal garden

Backyard as playground

SCHOOL NO. 22 "RADU TUDORAN"

Map of actors and activities

School no. 22 was chosen as focus of our work given its communist era architectural typicality and the willingness of the leadership and staff to engage in a participative process.
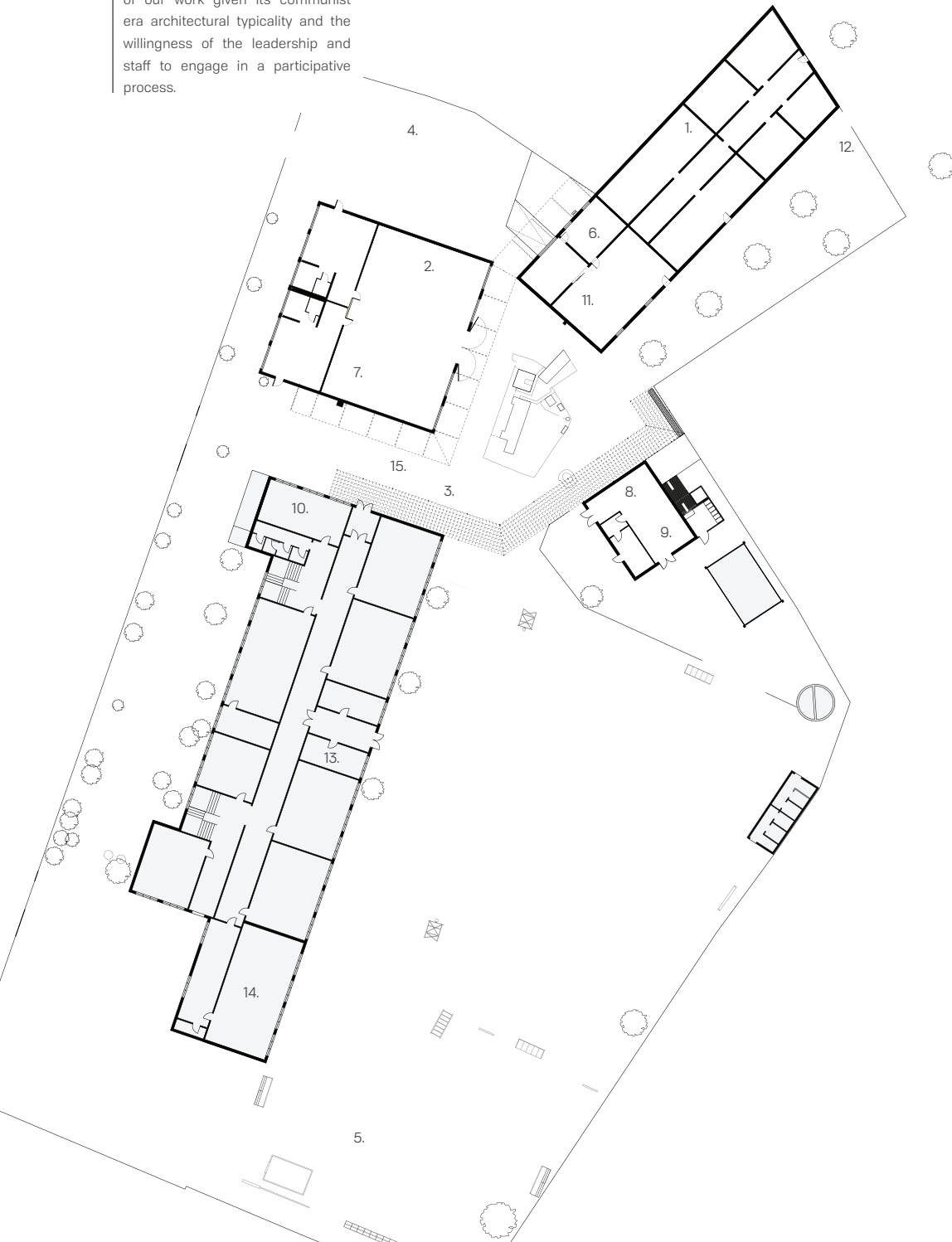
2   Gym class and yearly celebrations

The school does not have a gym or festivity area and currently uses a classroom sized space for these activities. We attended the yearly celebration of its name day: writer Radu Tudoran inside this space. The festivities include numerous performances, and awards ceremony and an exhibition put together by the students of drawings and models of a large sailboat - the same sailboat that features in the main novel written by Radu Tudoran.

7   Gym Teachers

The gym teachers seem to be commonly dressed in sport vests and caps with whistles around their necks. They have a particular intense energy. They spend much of their teaching time in the school yard (weather permitting). They are lobbying for a new gym space to replace an older ancillary building previously used for wood workshop courses on the school premises.

8   Gardening and pigeon farming

Iorgu's hobby of gardening has evolved at the school. Over the years much of the interior space of his office inside the school's former heating plant (ancillary building) has been appropriated by plants he has been growing, particularly on the facade facing into the school's "central square".

School Janitor 9

Iorgu has been the school's janitor for over 40 years. He welded the original school gates and the school's ornamental sign placed on its facade. He planted the main trees in the alle leading into the "central square" that are now large mature trees and spent much of his days shoveling coal into the school's heating plant before they switched over to district heating.

1 Easter egg workshop

Every year leading up to Easter, and Easter egg competition is organized throughout the schools in the city. All are competing for who will build the most beautiful large scale egg sculpture. The winning school has their work exhibited in the city center.

School Carpenter 11

The first time we met Nea Nicu (Nea is meant to mean something similar to Mr.) we talked about the proposed plans to replace the former wood workshop with a new gym building. Wood working classes had been mostly removed from the curriculum, as with many hands-on activities, and the building had come into disrepair. He wondered why this was the case in a nighbourhood where most houses are self-built and largely self-fixed, and the chances of the school children growing old here were very high. Maybe a revised version of hands-on courses and a matching facility space was of value.

10 English Teacher / Vice Principal

Otilia is the vice principal of the school. She has been working here for 13 years and has a strong connection to the school and grounded interest in its future. Her commitment and knowledge of the English language has been fundamental to organizing participation processes with the school body.

Art Teacher 4

The Easter egg competition is led by Alexandru, the school's art teacher. In his role at the school, he has many ideas and wishes but has come to be fairly pessimistic about their possible realization. He wishes to be a successful artist in his own right. He and his wife are the new generation of Braila citizens riding their bicycles to work each day and carrying out Erasmus exchanges to other European countries.

13 Principal

As principal of the school, Mrs. Dobrota is responsible for most decision that address the school premises and its staff and students. Her availability and openness to meet with us, discuss ideas and future plans and agree to let us rebuild and activate their unused front yard has been crucial in moving the project forward. She was also instrumental in helping to re-arrange the school program to allow students to participate in the workshops and opening ceremony.

Hands-on Work 3

The school carpenter has been involved in various hands-on activities throughout the years. He has welded the school emblem hanging on the front facade as well as the metal fences framing several spaces on the school grounds - some of which we later worked to revise.

PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOPS

Re-discovering the school grounds with the school children

THREE PATHS: A scaled pavement chalk drawing of the entire school premises is used to carry out several games inside of what we came to identify as the school's "central square". The games were used to commonly discuss movement and use of space throughout the schoolyard.

NAME THE PLACE: Students were asked to identify their favourite places and share their motives via a variation of the "hide and seek" game. This served to help share and discuss spatial desires.

GARDEN CLEANING: Common cleaning activity structured as a competitive game to initiate appropriation of the disused and recently re-opened front yard garden via the fence gates.

GARDEN PATHS: Several games used to test out and establish movement and use of the newly opened garden space in relationship to the existing school yard.
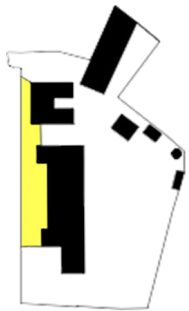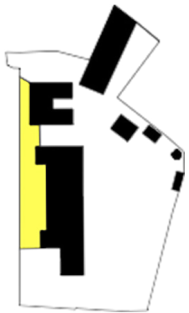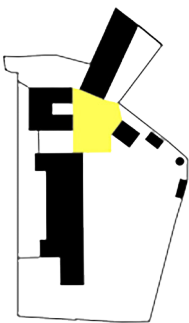
Three paths

Understanding the movement and circulation in the space differently.

Name the place

Raising the architectural discussion (for students), getting to know the oppinions (for us).

Clean garden

Start to appropriate the space and make it ready for new activities.

Garden paths

Test out the cleaned-up garden for new activities, feel its space.

NEW GATES AS STRATEGIC BUILT INTERVENTION

Following the workshops we began to focus on opening up the fenced off and disused front yard which had come to be overgrown and slowly collecting waste. We saw this space as a much needed alternative to the sports field and playground currently available to the students - a backyard garden for quieter, slower activities as well as a pleasant space to look upon from inside the school classrooms and teachers' offices.

A series of built interventions - cuts into the existing fences - were conceived to create new gates celebrating the entrances into a newly discovered space.

a spatial engagement with brăila's latency
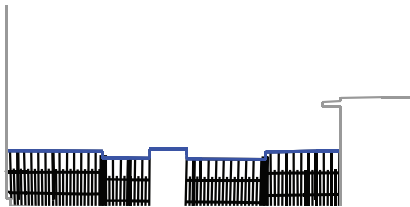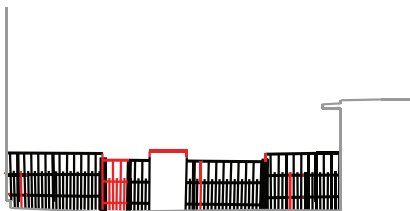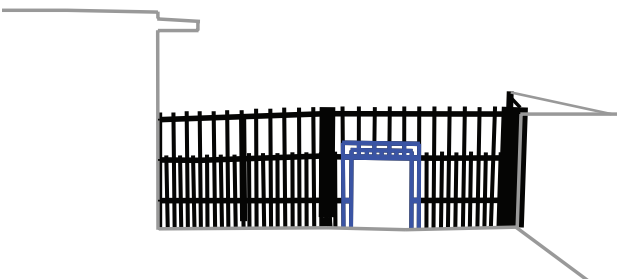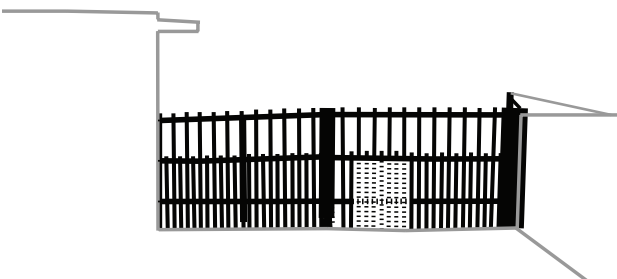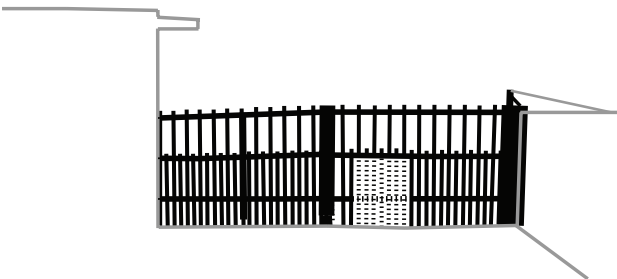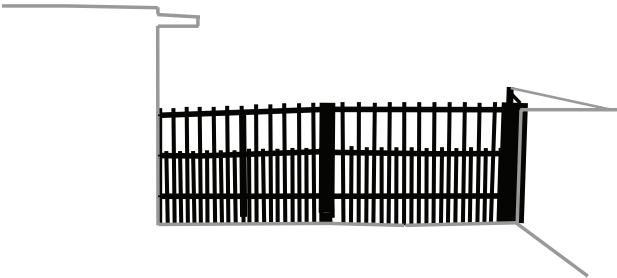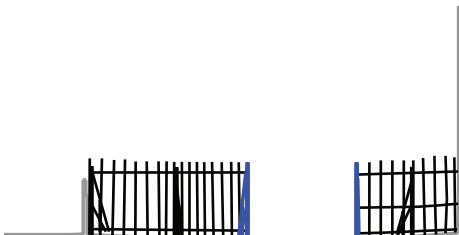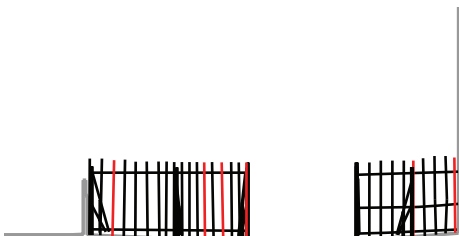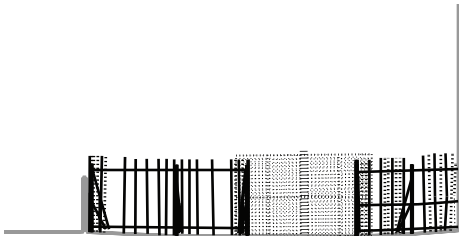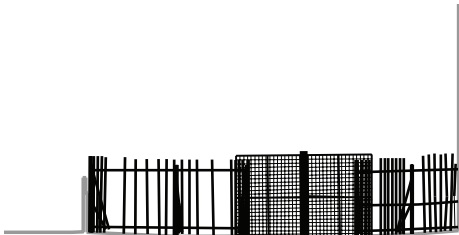
New gates

New buildings/structures

North
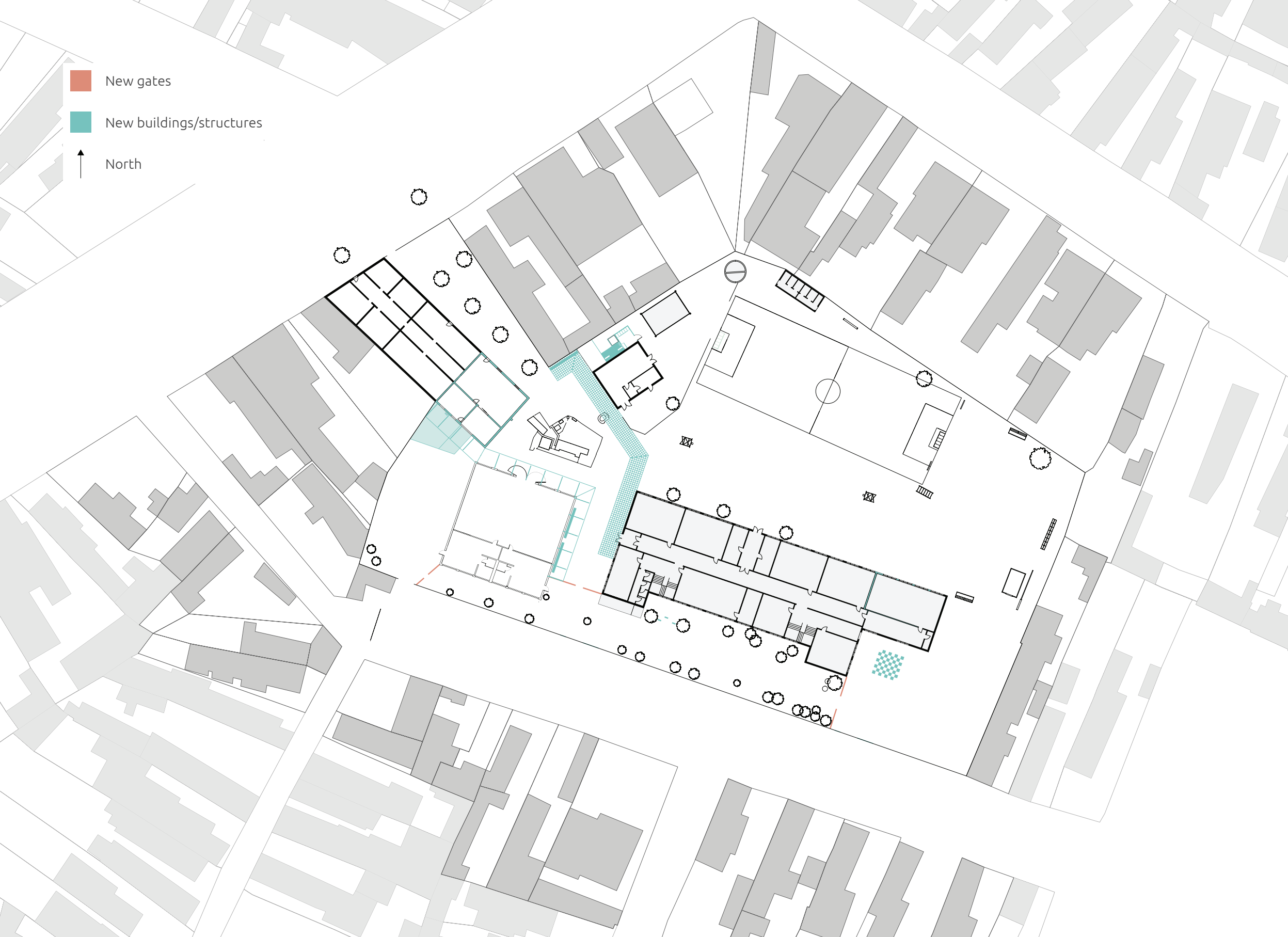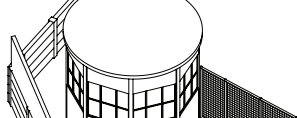
THE NEW "CENTRAL SQUARE" FRAMED BY
A NEW PERIMETER CANOPY STRUCTURE
AND THREE REVISED BUILDINGS.

backyard playground

existing school building

perimeter canopy

pigeon house and garden

new gate #3

new gate #1

new workshop

gym and eventspace

existing kindergarden building

front yard garden

main entrance

new gate #2
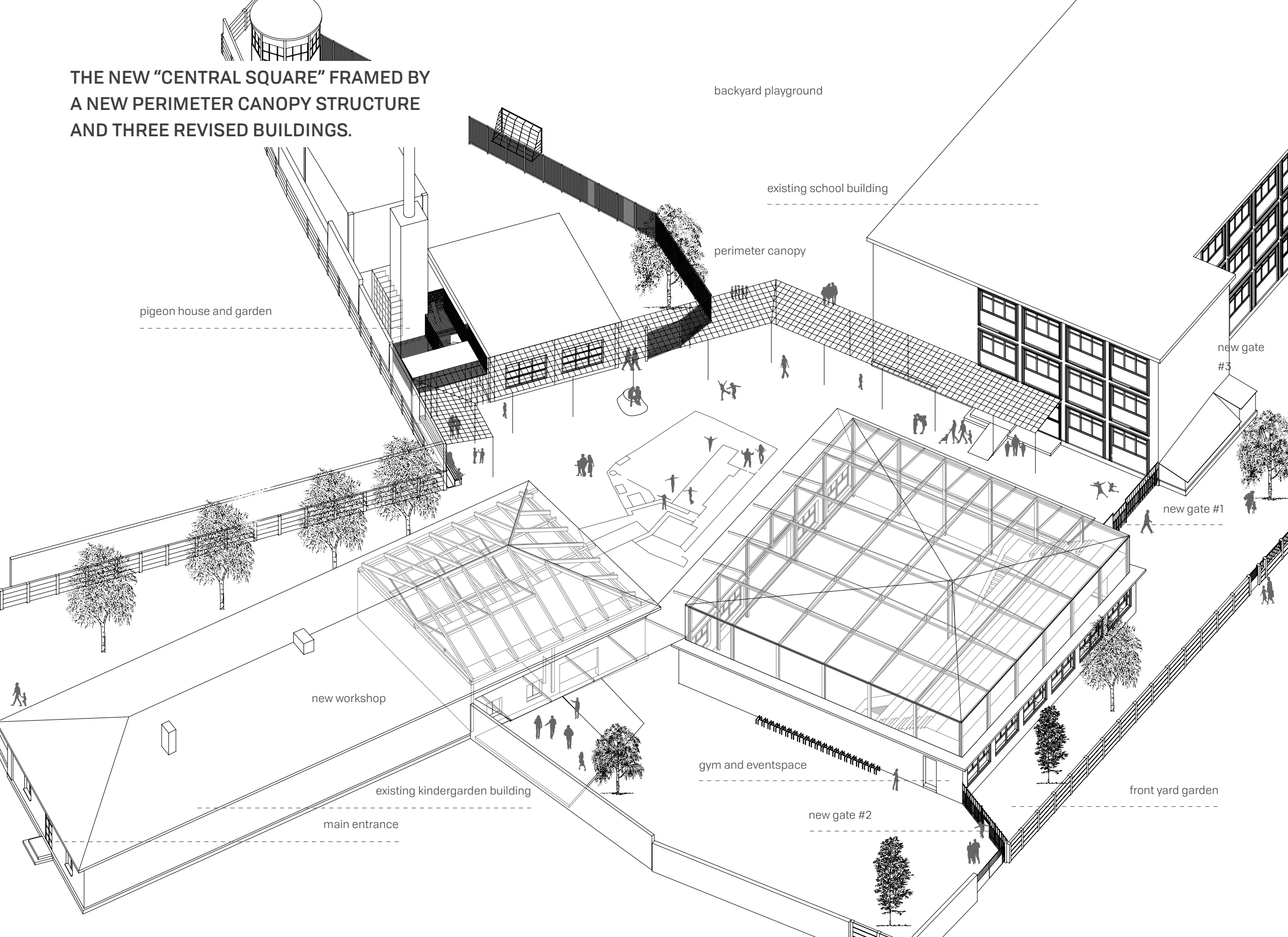
GYM AND EVENT SPACE

The existing workshop building has been vacant for many years with manual education removed from the curriculum. Currently the school has interest in demolishing the existing building and replacing it with a new gym space. Here we propose how to keep and build upon the existing structure a new gym space that would additionally serve as the school's main indoor event space to accommodate the many activities it hosts throughout the year.

PIGEON HOUSE AND GARDEN

The transformation of the former heating plant is predicated on matching two existing observations:

1. The school janitor successfully uses the heating plant as a personal gardening project and he has a private/professional knowledge of pigeon farming,

2. Most neighbourhood residents live in private houses, are active in growing their own crops in their backyards and some engage in pigeon farming embodied by steel mesh pigeon coops on rooftops. Here it becomes evident that the janitor and his actions are representative of the neighbourhood and embody a wealth of local knowledge that has an educational value worth promoting. As such, the pigeon house and garden serve as public extensions of neighbourhood activities within the school premises meant to expose and encourage student engagement with local knowledge.

WORKSHOP

The current workshop building has been in disrepair due to the exclusion of manual handiwork from the school curriculum some good years ago. Yet looking closer at the neighbourhood context it is clear that many residents engage in DIY building activities around their lots and houses - a local tradition of maximizing scarce resources. With this in mind, the thought is to re-introduce handicraft into the curriculum, grounded in the experience of Nea Nicu, and with it an adequate space to help it unfold. A new, smaller workshop space is proposed within a vacant portion of the existing kindergarten building situated adjacent to the "central square". Minimal changes allow for maximum use while its location ensures a healthy activation of the square and reinforces its centrality.

Gym and event space
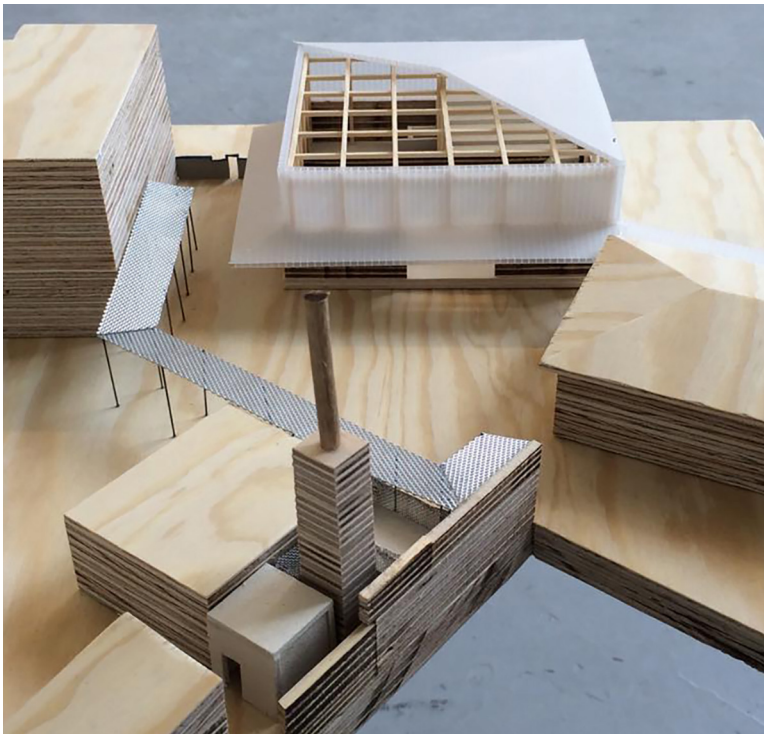
Workshop

Pigeon house and garden

GYM AND EVENT SPACE
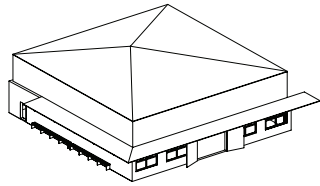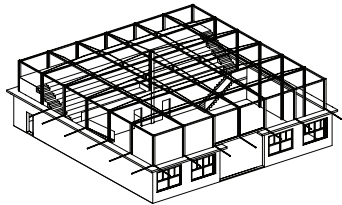
Polycarbonate panel cladding for the new addition

New outdoor perimeter canopy portion
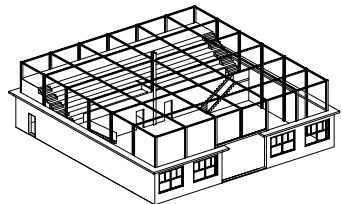
New steel roof structure to provide adequate gym height
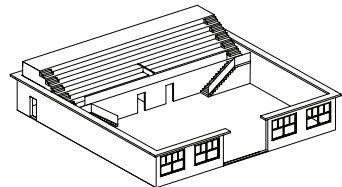
New bleachers above change rooms
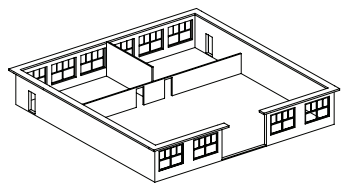
New plan configuration
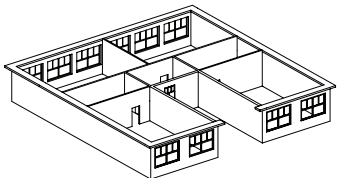
Existing plan configuration
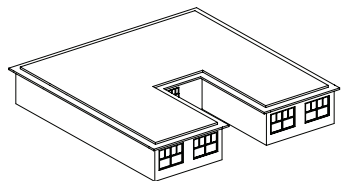
Existing workshop building (not in use)
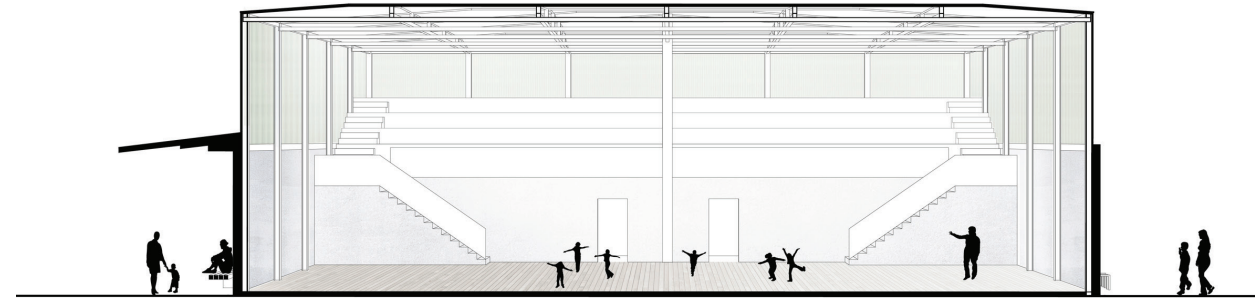
Section
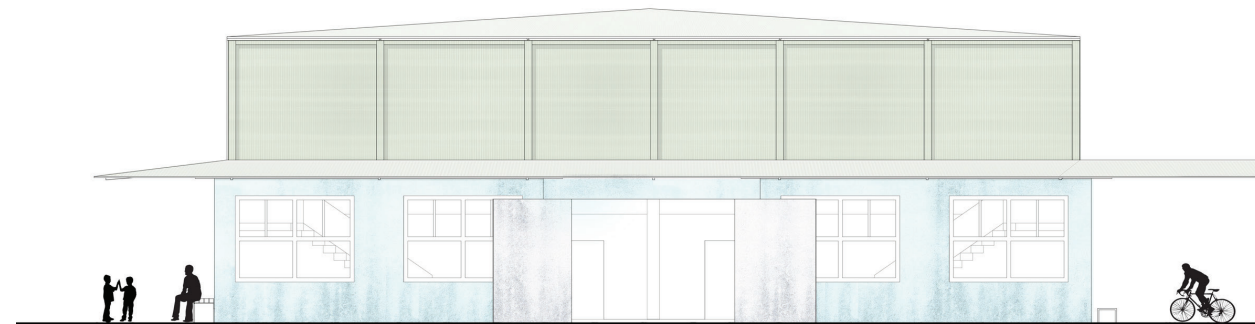
Elevation

Existing workshop building (not in use)

PIGEON HOUSE AND GARDEN
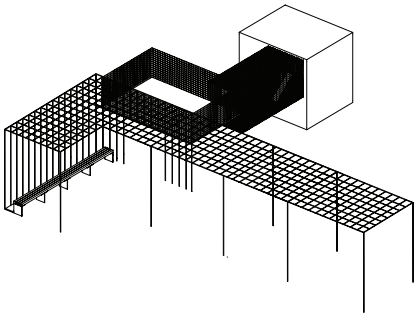
Shaded outdoor seating area
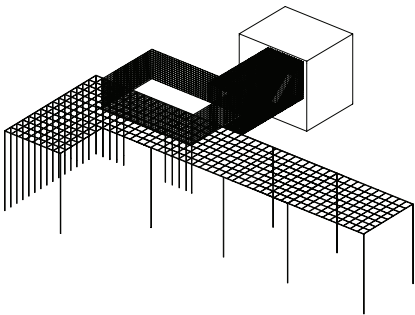
Hanging roof garden
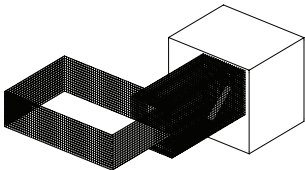
Open landing surface
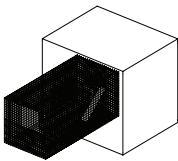
Protected outdoor cage
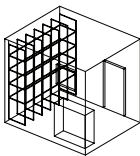
Covered pigeon nest
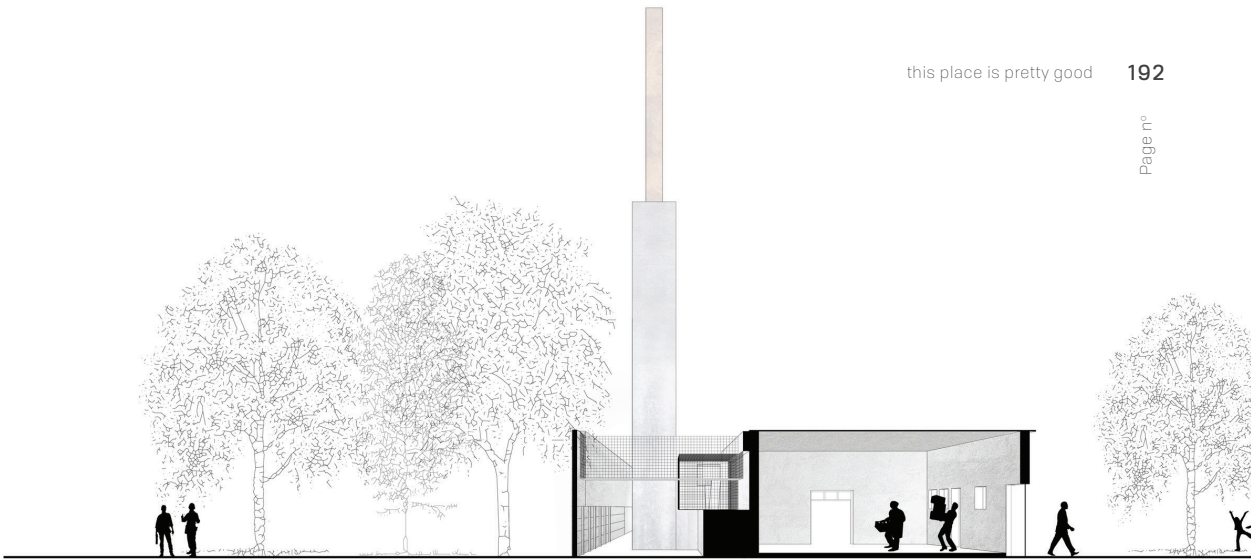
Section
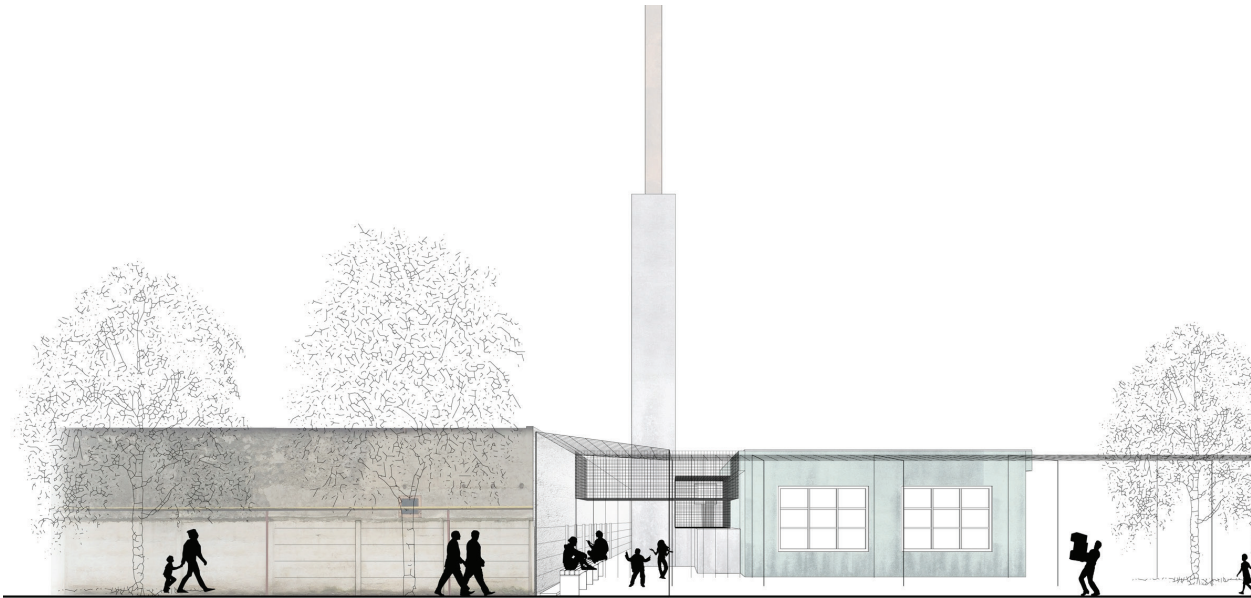
Elevation

Existing heating plant building
(janitor's office)

WORKSHOP
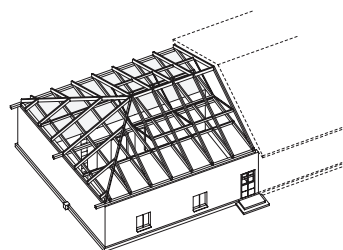
└ New mezzanine material
   storage space
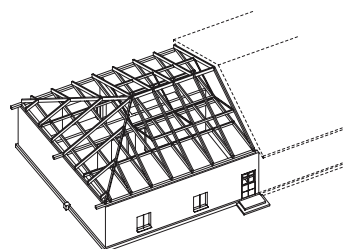
└ Uncovering and mitigating
   existing wood roof structure
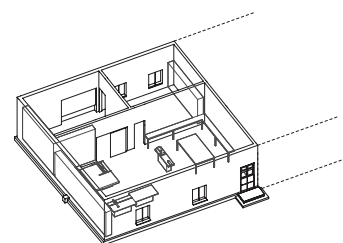
└ New plan configuration
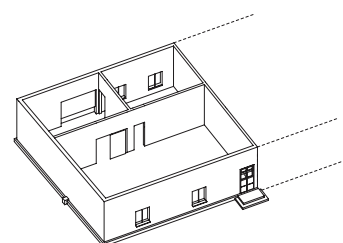
└ New doorways between rooms
   and backside to facilitate
   workspace and delivery
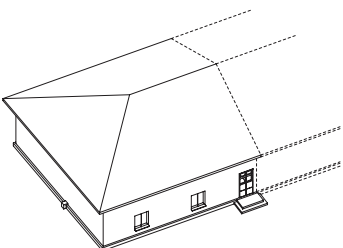
└ Existing kindergarten segment
   (not in use)
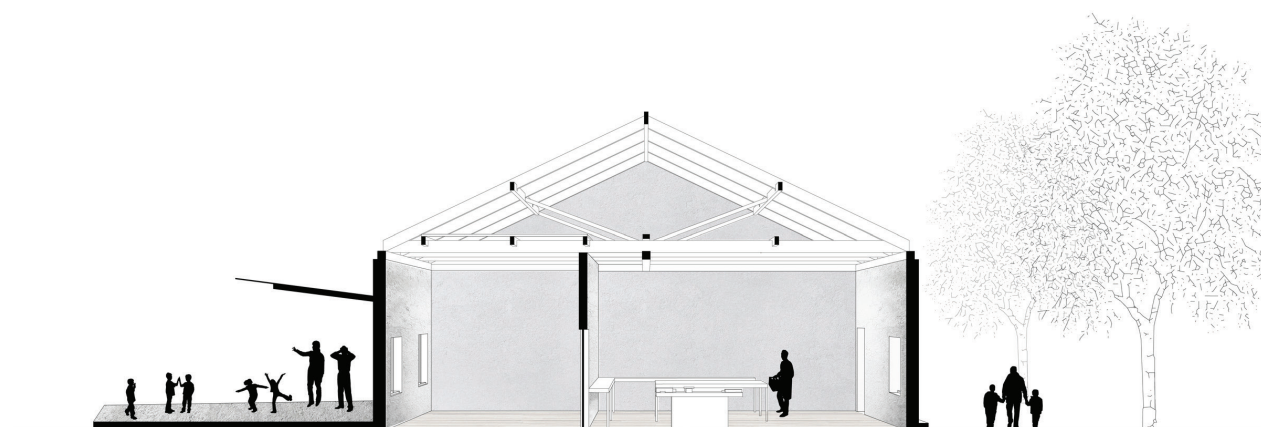
Workshop section

┌ Existing kindergarten segment
   (not in use)

POSTCARDS FROM BRĂILA
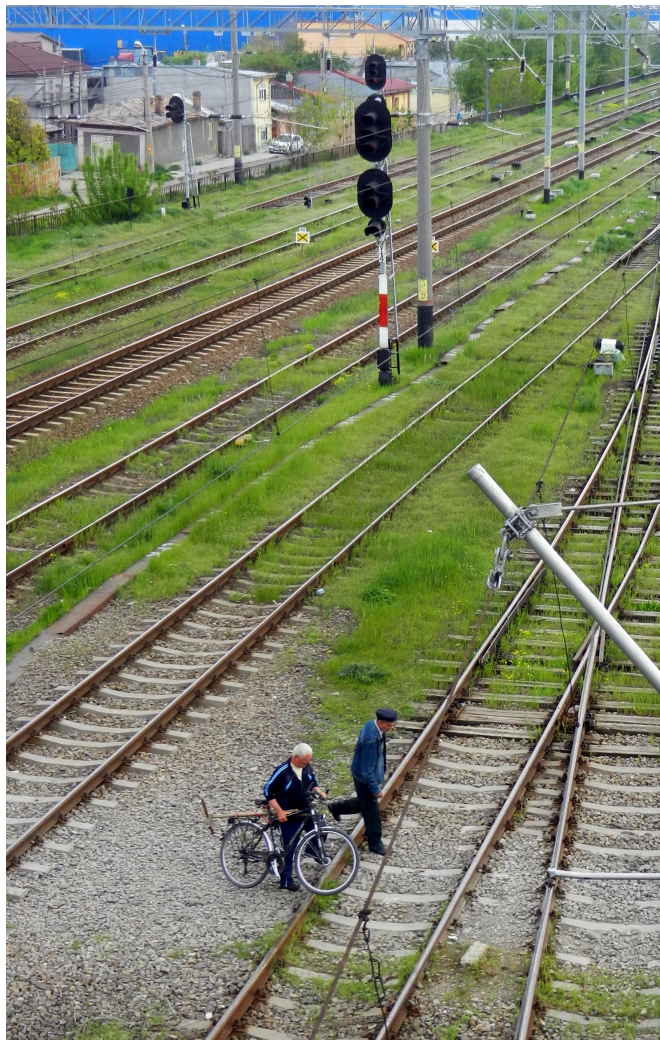
pedestrian
crossing

DACIA
1310

> archaeological site
> geological formation as city edge
> informal garbage dump

nostalgia

DACIA
1310

wedding at a
gas station

The salt lake:
therapeutic mud
baths
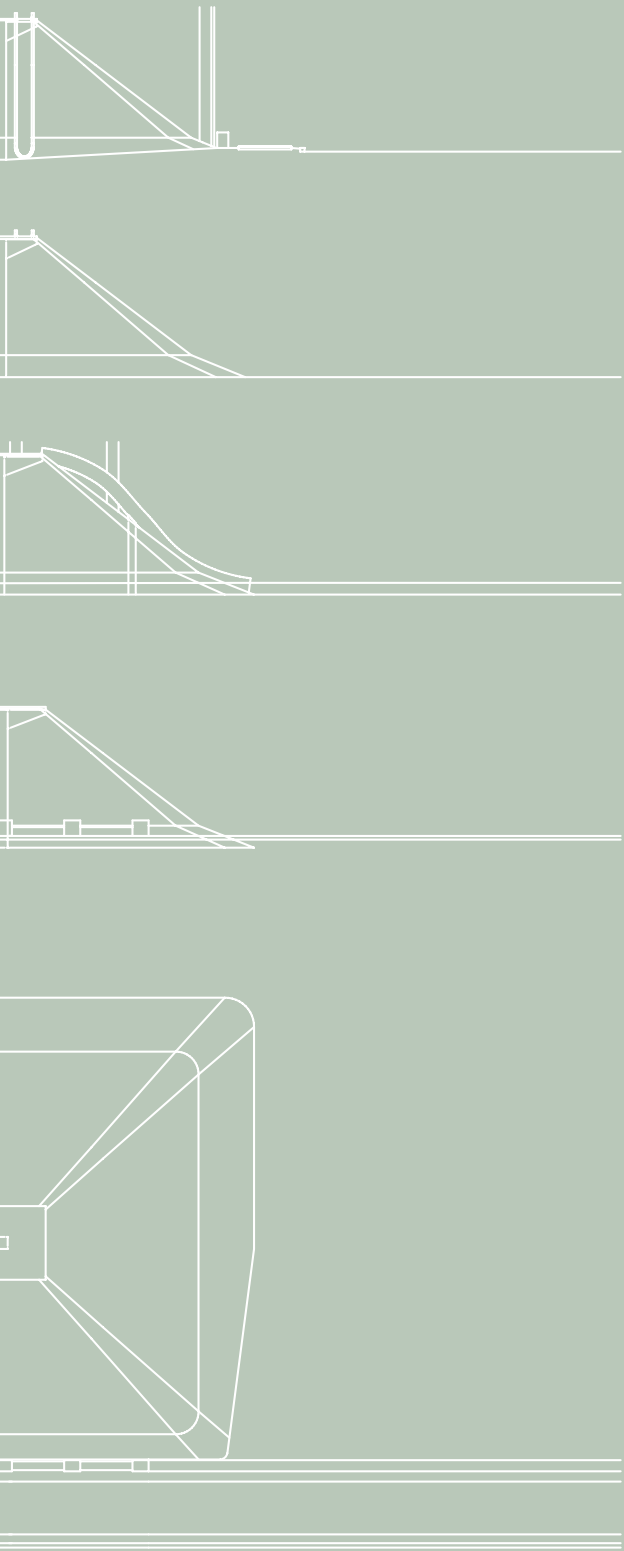
SCARCITY

by Guillaume Eckly

1. insufficiency or shortness of supply; dearth.
2. rarity; infrequency.

One could say that scarcity is an unavoidable condition of architecture, since there is always the possibility of wanting more, which is to say to not have enough. One could also say for the same reason that scarcity is then an unavoidable condition of life, which actually brings architecture back into the realm of everyday pain and joy, into the moral obligation of a humanist genre.

Telling in SMLXL[1] the story of the lost competition for the Ville nouvelle de Melun Sénart (1987), Koolhaas proposes "a deliberate surrender", acknowledging before the world enters irreversibly its permanent condition of global crisis the definitive scarcity of urbanism: scarcity of control. Further explanation of the project dissipates a possible misunderstanding: this surrender is not a cynical slap in its own planner face but an attempt to overcome a state of things and to propose a reliable belief on which to ground positive qualities. The lost proposal reaches the level of a myth: "to take urbanism's position of weakness as its premise".

More recently, Elemental mediatized a quite obvious approach to the question: if you can't offer the whole house, have first half of it. Despite the controversial dimensions of this proposal, one has to admit that it gives at least a very strong echo to a quite unspoken parameter of any built action: its cost, bringing back the very feasibility of architecture to the front of the scene.

Other examples of such pragmatic approaches to resources can be given: the whole work of Lacaton & Vassal systematically deals with this idea of putting the money where it actually "does" something. Extensions or oversized social housing are successful and evident examples, but the variety of their research in this field cannot be resumes by

1 S,M,L,XL (pg. 974). Rem Koolhass, Bruce Mau, 1995

the mere "hygienist" dimensions of it. When rehabilitating the vault of a cafeteria in the Viennese museum's quartier, they actually prefer to spend most of the budget to cover them with hand-made tiles. The utilitarian paradigm steps back to a leave room for a cultural/political need which might have been stronger at this very time and place. In their proposal for the place Léon Aucoc in Bordeaux, they go a step further by proposing to not design nor construct anything new and instead use the available budget for maintenance of the space rather than embellishing what already works - a design decision that has now reached legendary status.

Coming from a rigorous protestant thinker, a fashionable guru or a humble and pragmatic duo, planned for extremely diverse places and cultures, built or not, these examples share a common denominator: the uncompromising choice to put reality and its most trivial economy at the very center of the design process - an understanding of the architect's role and responsibility as a fund manager rather than as a romantic artist, a call for "tactical maneuver" rather than formal composition. Matter of fact.
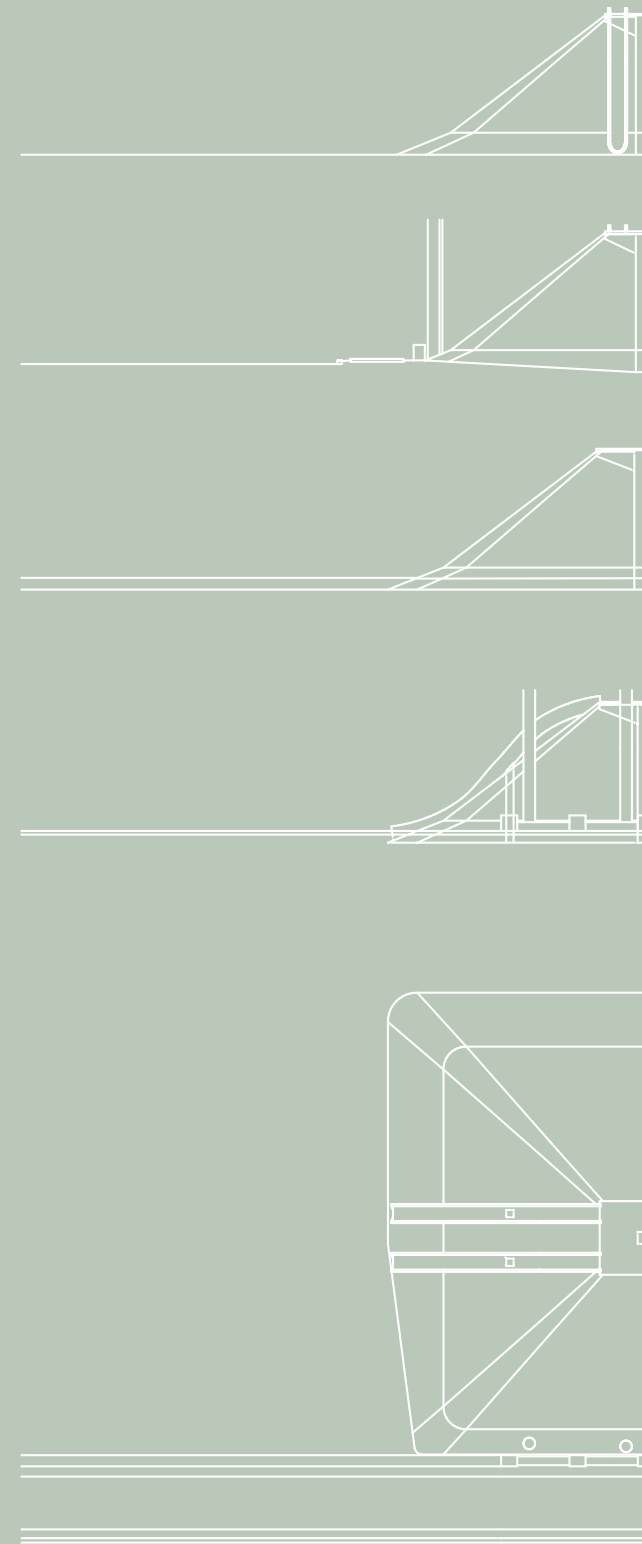
RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF A COMMUNITY PARK

How to transform a wasteland into a park only by repositioning local resources.

by Tiina Teräs and Frede Vik

The project aims to re-activate a former park by stirring interest in the potential of latent resources found onsite and nearby.

Situated at the main pedestrian entrance into a peripheral neighbourhood in short supply of open spaces (Chercea), the space has the potential to act as a local center while simultaneously acting as a gateway between the neighbourhood and the city center.

As a first step, a series of social anthropological studies of the neighourhood coupled with an extensive inventory of ground conditions, plant species and existing objects found onsite were undertaken.

Secondly, this analysis served as the foundation for a series of 6 low-cost, site-specific and programmatically open interventions that look to reintroduce the former park as a social gathering point for the neighbourhood. The interventions range from the creation of a football field (football goals + clearing of the playing field) to the celebration of the space through a communal bonfire fed by waste material

gathered from cleaning the kiosk structure, and to the establishment of a new gathering spot by introducing new seating (concrete benches), new trees relocated from the playing field and overall defined by a painted white line on the road, emphasizing it as a significant entrance and social center of the park.

Lastly, a future proposal for a complete redesign of the park was proposed in model form. Here, all of the local resources uncovered during the analysis, as well as the multiple interventions and their outcomes were incorporated into a long term strategy that transforms the current wasteland into a significant neighbourhood space. It's main gesture being the repositioning of soil and plants found onsite - excavating soil in one area to form a sunken arena, and piling what is excavated in another area to form a mini mountain. Creating with humble and matter-of-fact means a new monumental space that captures the ambitions and pride of the area.

THE FORMER PARK, ONCE THE NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTER, STILL SERVES AS THE MAIN GATEWAY BETWEEN CHERCEA AND THE CITY AT LARGE.

While the streets, schoolyards and community center provide some level of common public space within the neighbourhood, the area is in a short supply of open air, fully public spaces such as parks when compared to all other city neighbourhoods. Currently only 2 public park spaces are present: a WWI memorial space converted into a small playground by the municipality and the former central park and playground that has become a vacant wasteland. This second space served as the neighbourhood center and park up 1989 after which a lack of maintenance and care has led to its gradual deterioration. Furthermore an arrangement to allow a construction company to temporarily establish a construction field office on the site in exchange for requiring them to re-establish a new park once they vacated the premises backfired. The construction company declared bankruptcy just before their occupancy expired and thus avoided re-building the park. To make matters worse, the site was left in a rougher manner than when it was occupied.

school nr. 24

informal ground
level rail crossing

neighbourhoood
community center

former park   central train station

overpass
rail crossing

school nr. 22

small playground

school nr. 13   informal ground
level rail crossing
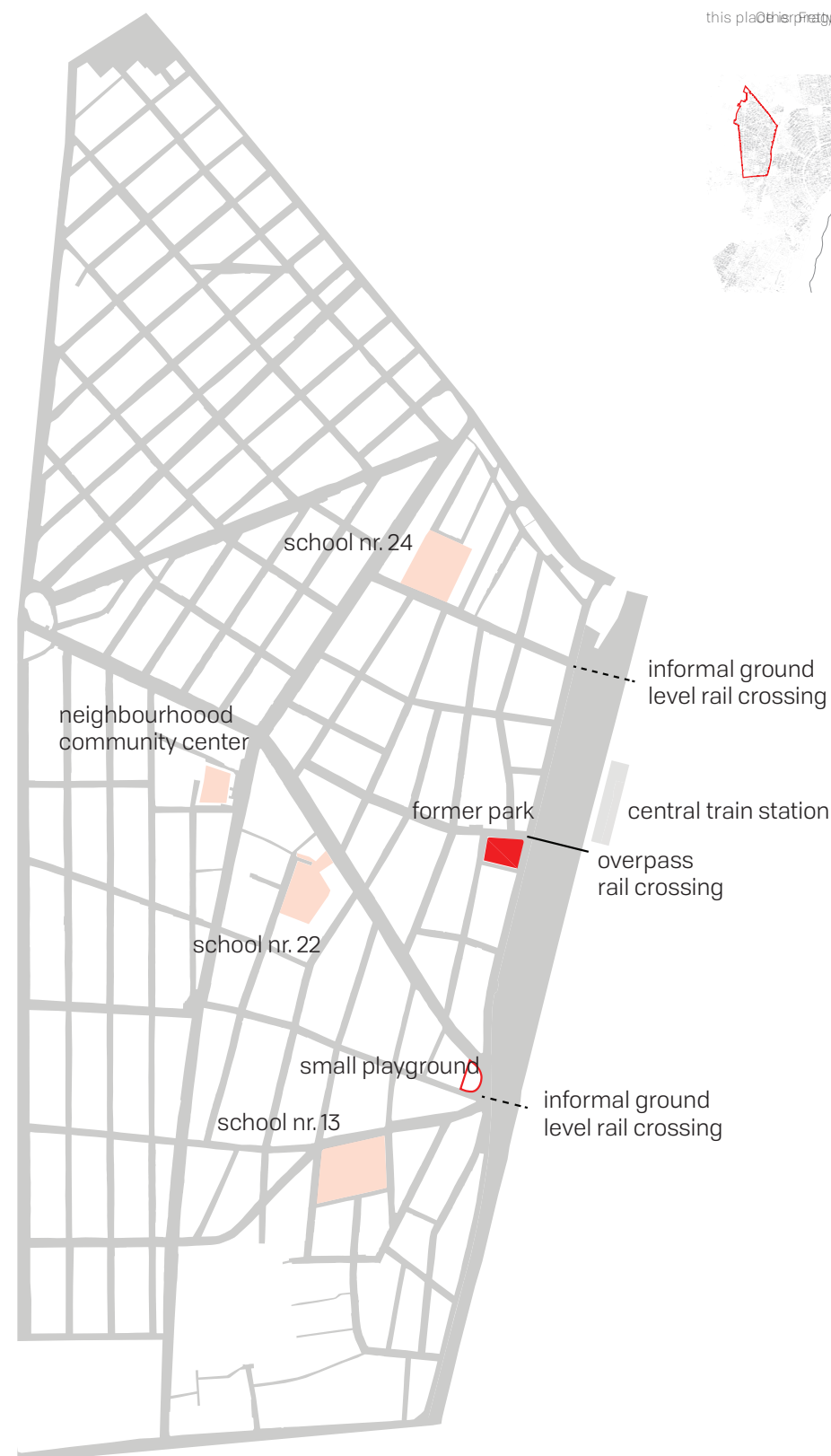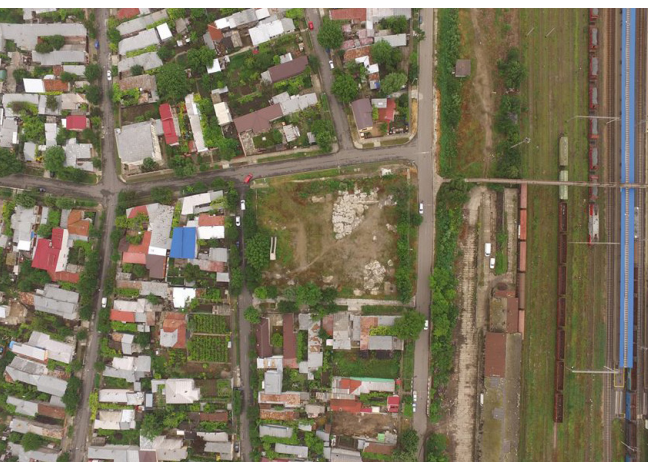
A SURVEY OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND SPATIAL PARTICULARITIES FOUND WITHIN THE CHERCEA NEIGHBOURHOOD
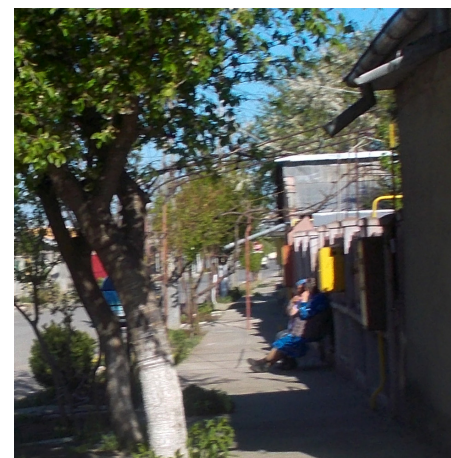
HANGING OUT CULTURE

PLAYING
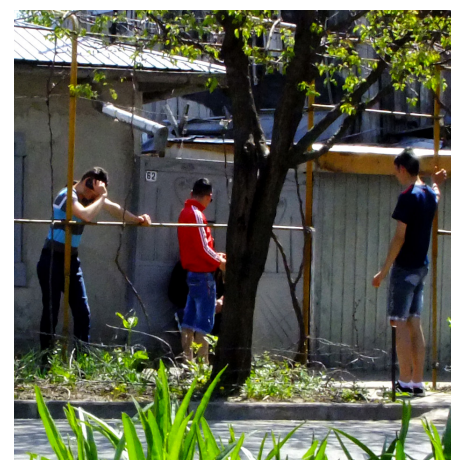
ENCLOSURE OF SMALL AREAS

often in front of private properties

GARDENING
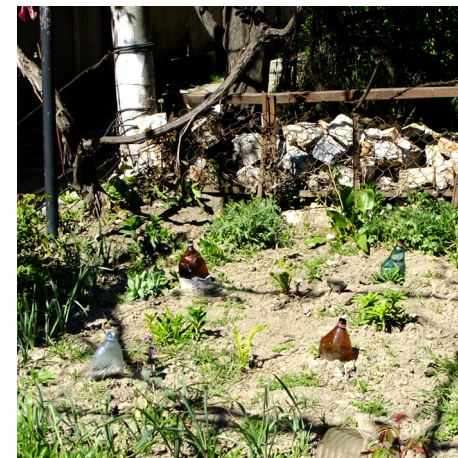
WHITE PAINT

as a display of ownership

DO IT YOURSELF SOLUTIONS

ARCHIVE OF COMMON WEEDS AND TREES
FOUND ON SITE

1. ground ivy

2. common tansy

3. wild chervil

4. shepherds purse

5. thistle

7. dandelion

a. common apple tree

b. european ash

c. cherry plum

d. willow

e. black poplar

f. american elm

WEEDS

1. ground ivy

2. common tansy

3. wild chervil

4. shepherds purse

5. thistle

6. burdock

7. dandelion

8. pigweed

TREES

a. common apple tree

b. european ash

c. cherry plum

d. willow

e. black poplar

f. american elm

g. horse chestnut

h. acacia
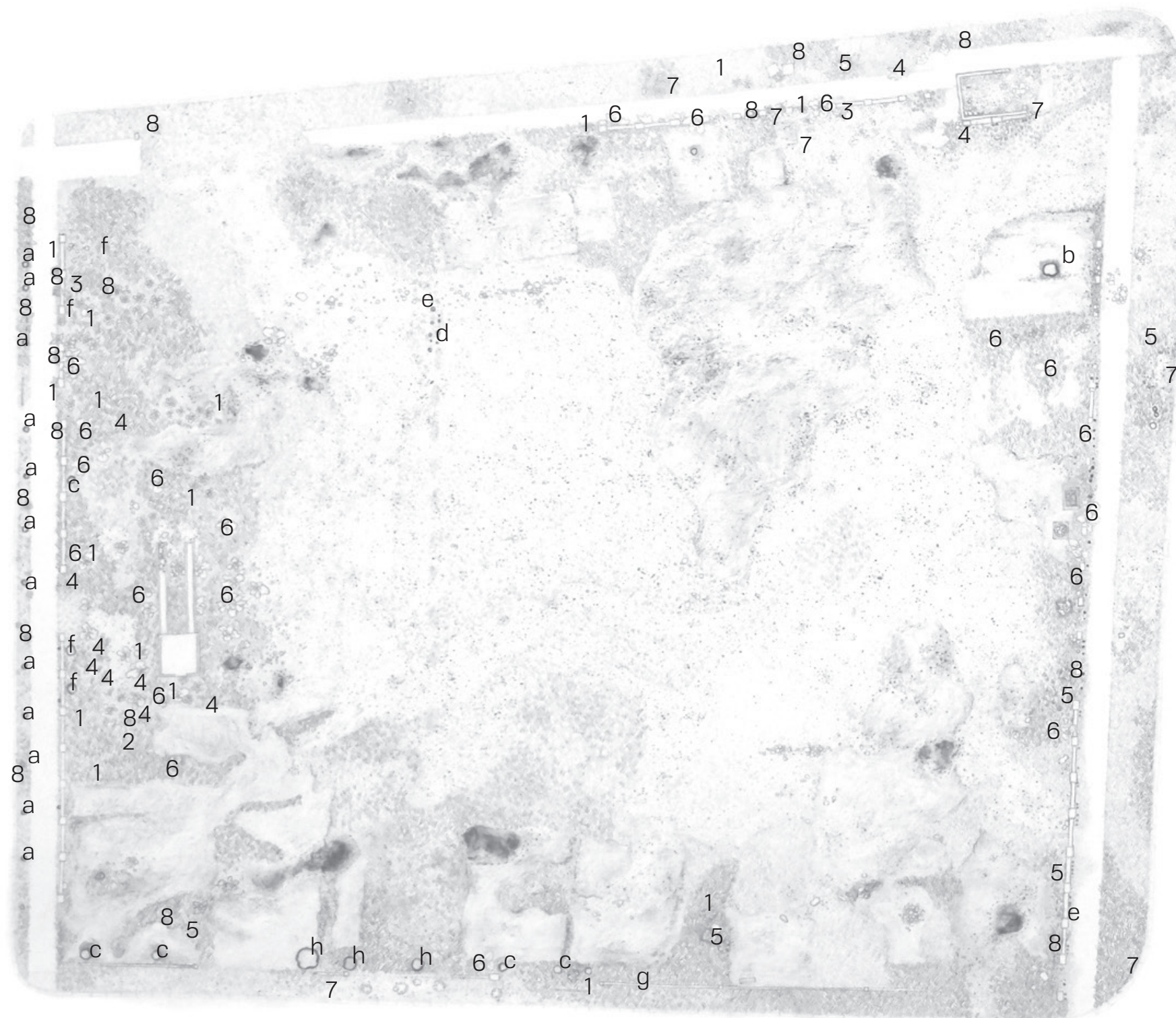
Intervention   1

Materials	14 x 4m pieces of wood	10 RON / piece
	a handful of nails	< 5 RON
	2 cans of paint	22,98 RON | 11,49 RON each
	1 l bottle of paint thinner	8,59 RON
	2 paintbrushes	8,58 RON | 4,29 RON each
	2 pairs of protective gloves	4,98 RON | 2,49 RON per pair
Transport	wood transported by car	0 RON
	goals carried by hand	
No. of people	1-3 | to construct, paint and carry	
Time	8 h | total construction	
Total		190,13 RON

PLAN | Movement and placement
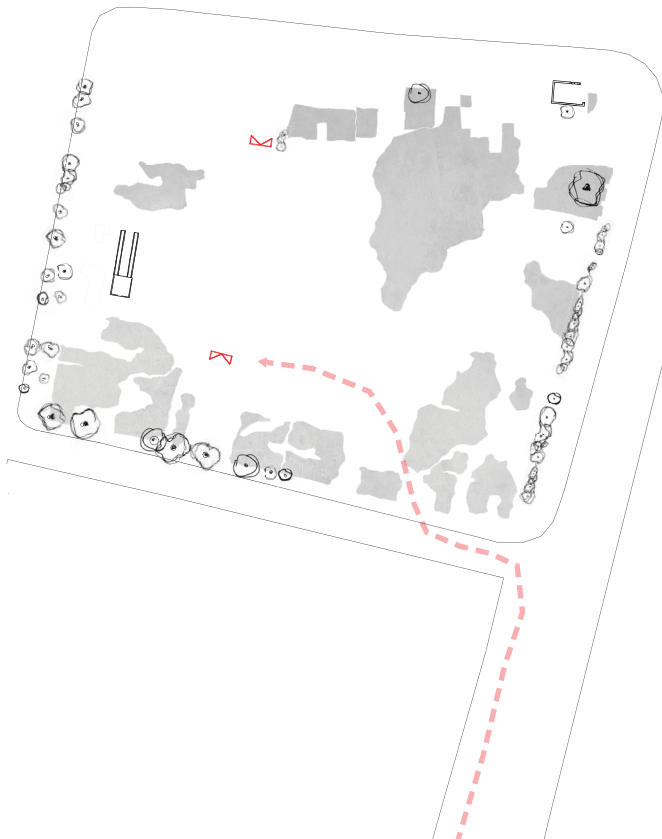
FOOTBALL GOALS

A **POPULAR SPORT:** Playing football is a popular past time of the children in Chercea. Often games are conducted on the busy streets or intersections of the neighborhood because they provide a flat, hard surface.

As the first intervention, the goals were intended to work as an initial attractor for local people and in particular children to the activities happening on the site.

MATERIAL CHOICE: Thin timber elements were chosen as the construction material for the football goals. Despite being a valuable material and therefore running the risk of being stolen, the movability and light weight of the goals was a priority at this phase.

NEIGHBOUR INVOLVEMENT: The goals were constructed on a less busy road and during the process, a number of neighbours, who were mainly older men, showed interest and offered their help and advice. With their aid, materials and tools were borrowed of bought from around the neighbourhood.

Without their knowledge of local sellers and workshops, these sources of material would have remained hidden.

Intervention   2

Materials	1 metal saw	borrowed	0 RON
	1 rake	borrowed	0 RON
	1 shovel	borrowed	0 RON
	gardening tools	borrowed	0 RON
	1 regular saw	12,99 RON
	6 willow saplings	found	0 RON
	3 poplar saplings	found	0 RON
Transport	carried by hand	0 RON
	goals carried by hand	
No. of people	5-10	
Time	3 h	

Total	12,99 RON

PLAN | Movement and Placement
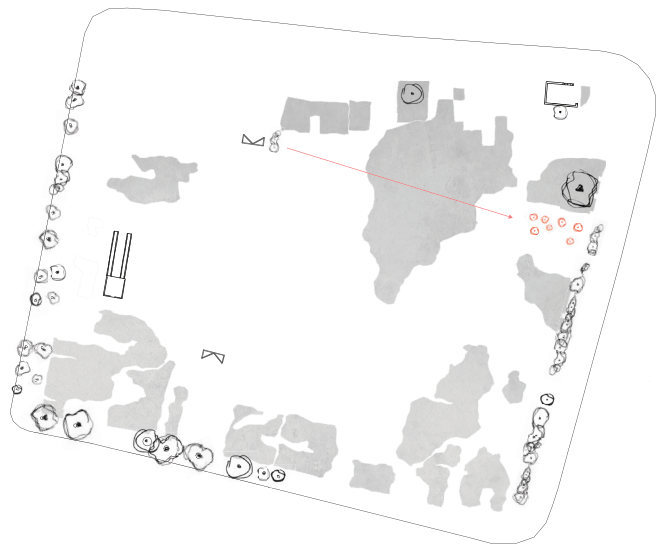
CLEARING THE PLAYING FIELD

S TONES: Before they began playing football, the kids cleared the ground between the two goals of small stones using rakes and their hands.

STEEL RODS: The ground was suitable for playing after this, but just within the playing field there were steel reinforcements protruding from a line of exposed concrete running across the site. These steel rods were removed the next day. We began the work ourselves with a borrowed metal saw and the older children independently took the task upon themselves.

TREES: Next, a small group of about 9 tree saplings were preventing the kids from adjusting the position of the goals and using the field in its entirety. The trees were, as a result, carefully uprooted and replanted on the other side of the site as part of the bench-square configuration.

Intervention   3

Materials	3 shovels	borrowed	0 RON
	1 rake	borrowed	0 RON
	1 rake	15,99 RON
	5 pairs of protective gloves	12,45 RON	2,49 per pair
	1 roll of black garbage bags	< 5 RON
	gardening scissors	8,99 RON
Transport	brick rubble picked up by locals	0 RON
	smaller mixed waste	0 RON
	used to fill in hole on site, styrofoam burned	
No. of people	3-5	
Time	4 h	
Total		42,43 RON

PLAN | Movement and Placement

CLEANING THE KIOSK

R UBBLE: When emptying the kiosk of concrete and brick rubble, a working water faucet was discovered. In the context of the realized interventions, the faucet was used to water the newly planted trees and wash the tiled floor of the kiosk.

During the same day, the brick pieces were spontaneously picked up by locals driving by. The styrofoam pieces were burned in the communal bonfire and the concrete and broken glass-mix was used to fill a hole on the site.

BENCHES: By removing invasive tree and weed species from the back of the kiosk, a bench spanning the width of the wall was uncovered.

Two of the most centrally placed trees were left to provide much- needed shade.

SURROUNDINGS: The surrounding grass area was cleaned of plastic rubbish and dead leaves, providing fuel for the communal bonfire later that evening.

Intervention   4

Materials	organic waste from around the site	0 RON
	1 rake	borrowed	0 RON
	matches	borrowed	15,99 RON
	5 pairs of protective gloves	12,45 RON	2,49 per pair
	1 roll of black garbage bags	< 5 RON
	gardening scissors	8,99 RON
Transport	carried by hand	0 RON
No. of people	3-5	
Time	3 h	

Total		12,45 RON

PLAN | Movement and placement
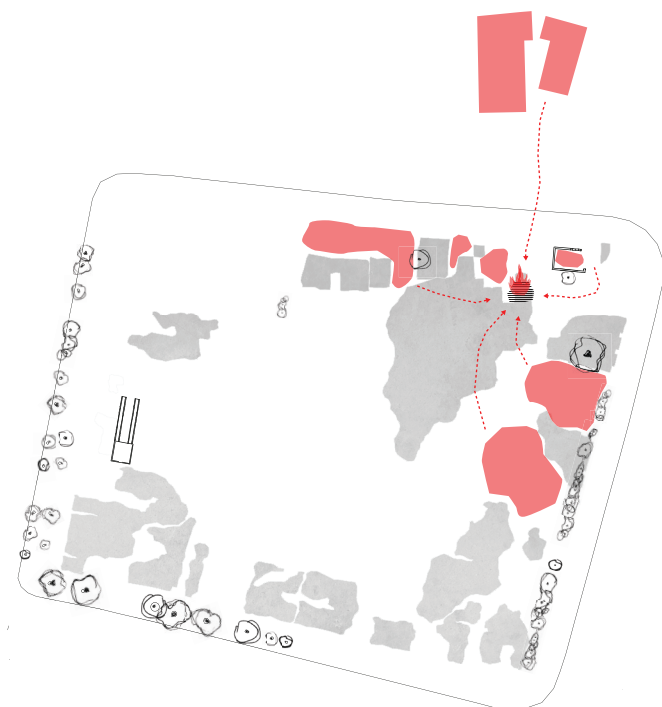
COMMUNAL BONFIRE

COMMONPLACE ACTIVITY: On this site in particular, as well as in the entire neighborhood of Chercea, there seems to be culture of burning organic and inorganic garbage.

In the site, there existed during the time of our visit, 11 separate burning sites, often ranging between one to three meters in diameter. The locals seemed to burn anything that is possible to ignite by fire and there is also a culture of dumping non-burning waste such as brick and concrete rubble, asphalt and glass in small piles around the site.

AN ANTICIPATED EVENT: Fuel for the fire lit at the end of the cleaning day was sourced solely from the site and included dry, dead organic matter and styrofoam from the rubble found in the kiosk.

The prospect of lighting a fire seemed to be the most awaited event among the children and a group of younger and older participants took the responsibility of tending to the bonfire. The aim was to introduce an intervention that was more social in nature that still benefited the park in some way. After lighting the fire, a neighbor saw it and came across the road to place some waste into it.

Intervention		5
Materials	3 large pieces of concrete	0 RON
	rope | borrowed	0 RON
Transport	carried by hand and car	0 RON
No. of people	4-8	
Time	3 h	
Total		0 RON

PLAN | Movement and placement
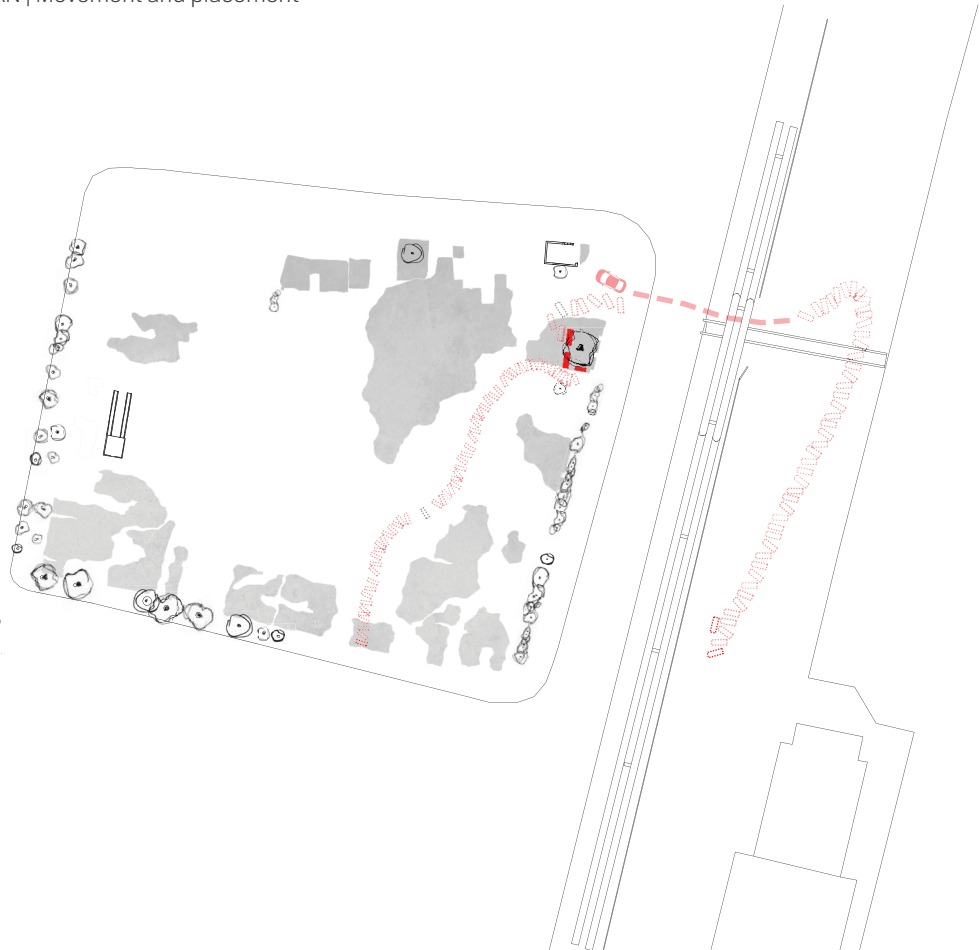
CONCRETE BENCHES

HANGOUT PLACES: Looking at common practices in Chercea, the locals seem to enjoy sitting or leaning in the shade, usually by highly trafficated roads. These strategically situated points for hanging out often become places for casual and random encounters between local residents and passersby.

THE SITE'S POTENTIAL: The part of the site that experiences some of the highest pedestrian and vehicular traffic is the north eastern corner, where the railway overpass terminates and three roads meet.
People naturally congregate in the road space between the railroad crossing and the north eastern corner of the park, making it a strategic location for placing an intervention that possibly draws people further onto the site.

MATERIAL CHOICE: Concrete was the material of preference, being less likely to be stolen. Despite being robust, the benches are unattached and remain movable. The benches were found in a pile, on the other side of the railway tracks and were in part rolled and part dragged onto the site.

a spatial engagement with brăila's latency

Intervention   6

Materials	broom	34,48 RON
	| for sweeping the street	
	string for making a straight line	< 5 RON
	chalk outline	0 RON
	| found plaster pieces	
	2 tubs of paint	115,98 RON | 57,99 RON each
	2 paintbrushes	8,58 RON | 4,29 each
	straight, long pieces of wood | for keeping the edge neat	0 RON
Transport		
No. of people	2	
Time	4 h	

| Total | | 164,04 RON |

PLAN | Movement and placement

WHITE SQUARE

The final intervention was thick, white lines painted on the road to form a square together with one of the kiosk walls and the new concrete benches.

The color white has a particular significance in the the neighborhood of Chercea and possibly in Brăila also. It seems things are painted white to signify ownership and/or care for a space. White paint was commonly used in marking garden boudaries, parking spaces, curbs and to deter ants from the trunks of trees.

The line as an additional function of slowing down car traffic on the Str. Decebal, speeds can often reach up to 80 km/h.

WINDOW: When approaching the park using the overpass, the thick pipeline running along the road, along with the large poplar tree, forms a visual opening onto the site, framing this particular corner quite clearly. The intention was to emphasize the space and its central quality with the white line.

mini football field + bleachers

steel football goals - thick metal
pipe with concrete foundation
bleachers made using existing
concrete railroad ties

entrance

new white square painted
on the road and park
corner to form a new
pedestrian crossing and
entrance into the park.

shallow pool + skating rink

a recessed square is cut out
of the existing soil/concrete
ground surface and connected
via a small channel to an
existing water source found
on site forming a shallow play
pool during summers and
skating rink in the winters

wild forest patch +
concrete seats

relocated trees found on
site to form a forest patch
underneath which a series
of large concrete elements
to be used for sitting are
introduced - also relocated
from a nearby industrial
waste area

earth pyramid

an earth pyramid surrounding an existent
concrete slide meant to stabilize and provide
access to the structure while serving as a
naturally sloped bleacher for the football
field, a downhill sled slope during winter and
an iconic new symbol of the park.
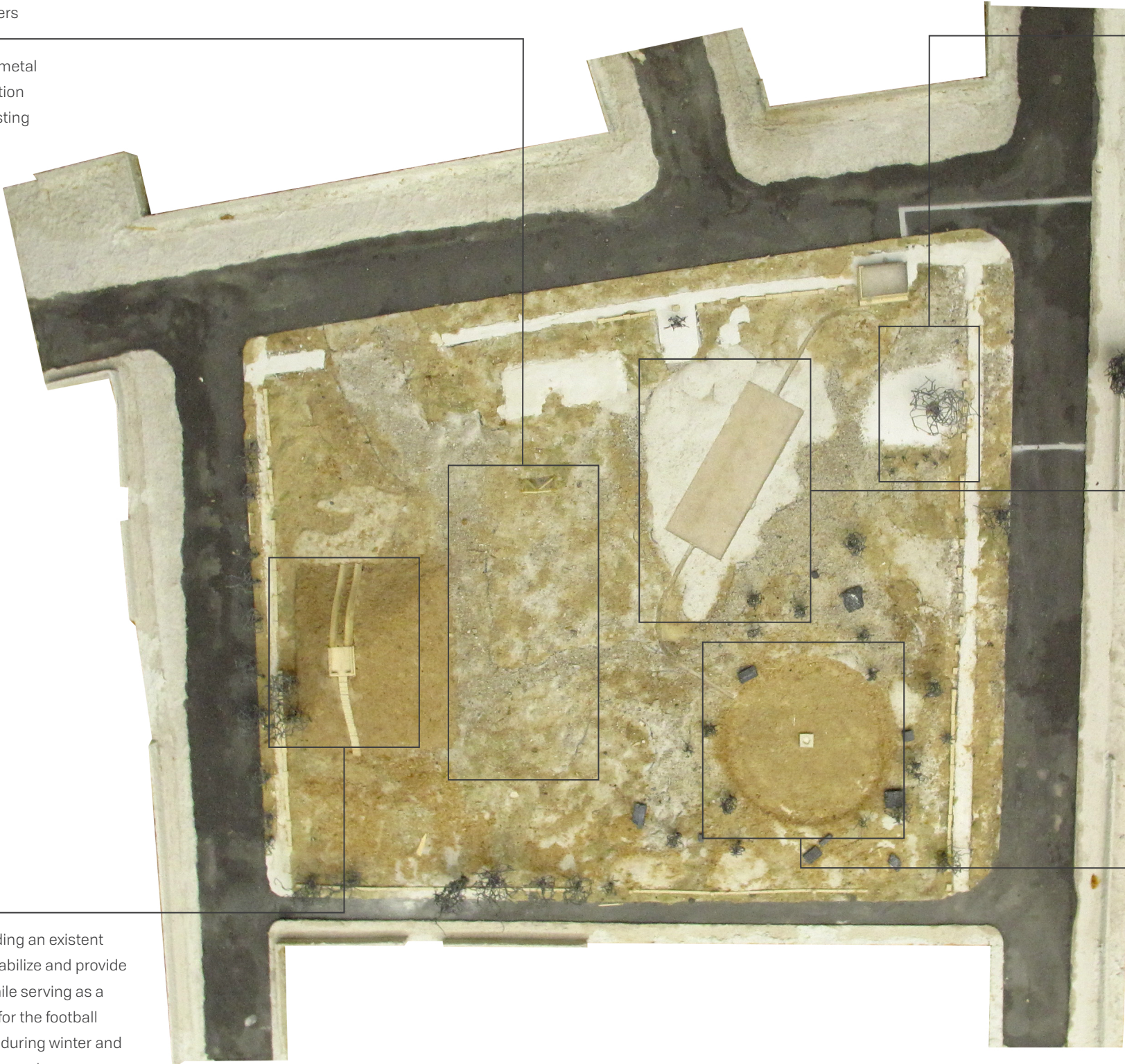
Plan showing long term vision design of park

model showing long
term vision for the park

a spatial engagement with brăila's latency
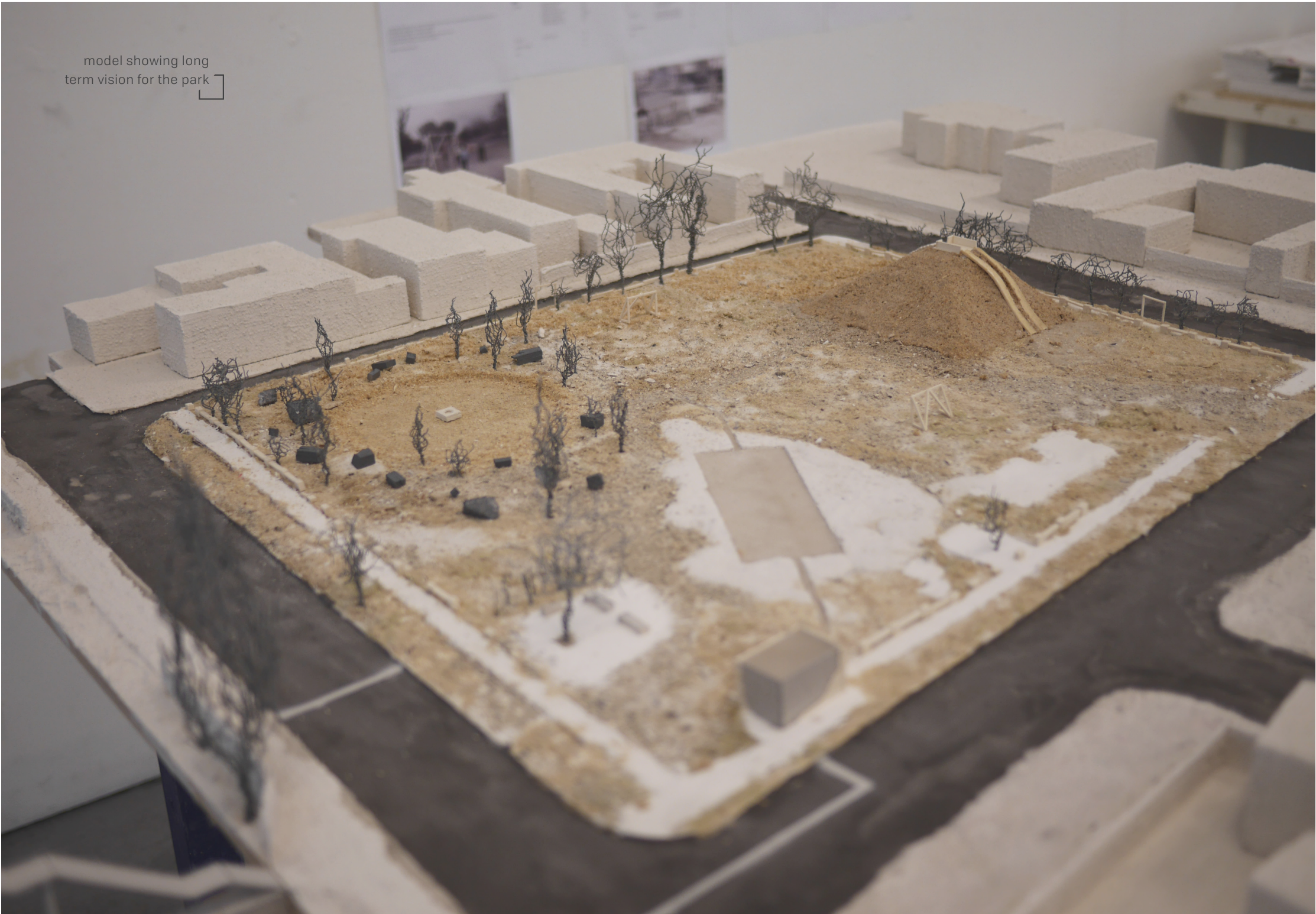
neighbourhood school
workshop: seed bombing
colour clouds fight

A revised version of the project won first place (and funding) in a national competition for the improvement of public space (Urbaniada). Construction of the park is currently underway with completion scheduled for spring 2017.

By Irina Paţă, Cristian Ştefănescu, Tiina Teras and Frede Vik

Earh pyramid under
construction

Leveling of football field
with custom fabricated
football goals
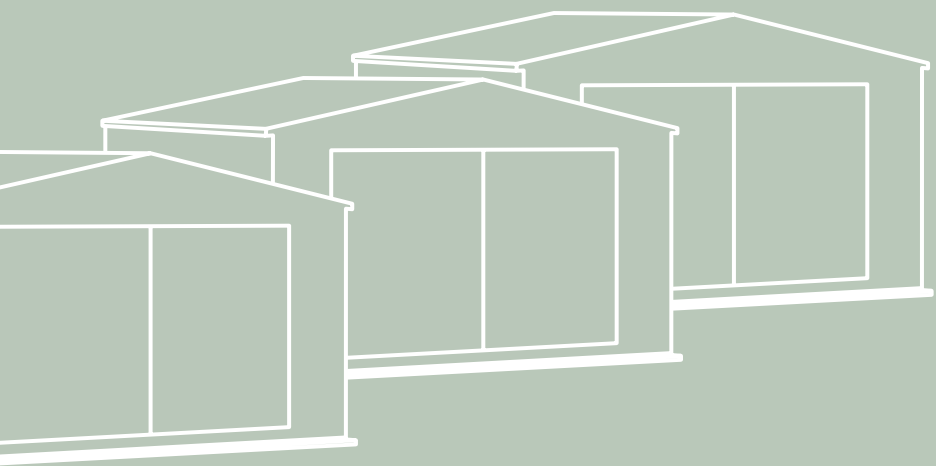
A GARAGE IS A WORKSHOP IS A CHURCH IS A GARAGE

Modernity and the eventual success of its failures

by Guillaume Eckly, Andrea Spreafico and Cristian Ştefănescu

People's use of space has a central role in defining the identity of architectural and urban projects. This reliance and influence of people on their physical environment takes on an significantly individual rather than collective form within many eastern European countries. This condition could in some ways be attributed to a reaction to the communist era, and a sign of the failure of European capitalism to establish a solid alternative to the previous regimes. A reduced capacity for planned, centralized mechanisms to support a city's physical fabric and the life within has caused a vacuum within which individual initiatives have become the norm. Their groundings are often personal, opportunistic, of small scale and rely on the particularities of the situation. Those initiatives rely on a clever and optimistic approach of dealing with what reality offers. When considered as a whole, these singular acts come to form a critical mass that rivals centralized planned initiatives on the evolution of the city.

The prefabricated concrete garage is an exemplary product of such a contemporary paradox. It is remarkably present in the daily life of people and active in forming their social, cultural and physical space. It arguably remains on the mental periphery of people people's head-space, just as it physically remains on the periphery of city-space. This despite its familiarity and ubiquity. It is an emblem of how personal initiative, improvisation and informality can generate and nurture a rich and diverse built and social environment (urban life). Simultaneously an emblem of how the above threatens individual rights and access to public space, breeds illegality and corruption.

There is no starchitectural genius at work in the design of prefabricated garages, but a spread creativity of their owners, that works as a substantial anecdote of "what is it like to improve the quality of life while working on the margins" – using the words of Alejandro Aravena in his statement for the 2016 Venice Biennale.

Prefabricated garages have a significant presence throughout Romania. They are, or in some places were, everywhere. From an urban perspective they appear more like an accident, a problem, a sort of unexpected element attacking the urban fabric as rust or fungus attacks metal and wood. Nonetheless Romanian garages belong to the history of Romanian industry, while having been projected within its economical context and permitted within a legislative frame. Initially thought for utility, a parking garage for a car, it is hard to imagine how one could have foreseen their eventual importance within Eastern European societies following the fall of communism.

A main motive can be attributed to a reaction towards the concept of the collective and a hubris for private propriety meant that followed the fall of communist regimes. To choose, buy and own a car was certainly faster than owning a house. On top of that garages were not only a shelter for cars, but a possible private space too – and as such they were quickly understood and valued. People bought garages, installed them in the authorized spaces and used them for authorized or non-authorized activities. Garages became the centre of a new type of sociability, a mix of private and public space: a sort of parcelled mega squat spread throughout apartment blocks neighbourhoods.

These permitted squats then became a model for the suburbs and the country side where the inventiveness reached new levels: a garage could be not just a workshop, but the extension of a house and a church too.

Prefabricated garages are a form of space, in the same way we intend the expression "form of life". They define a specific spatiality and habitability that are demarcated on one side by their constructive identity and on the other by the legislative frame they were born and have evolved in. Their legislative and material conditions make them radically different from any garage programmed and built within a housing project.

Prefabricated garages can be considered a paradigm of the importance of interpretation for the life of a space. One thing is the plan, the original intention and horizon of a project; another thing is the way spaces are then understood and used, once built.

This versatility of Romanian prefabricated garages seemed to be written in their birth: they were built out of the moulds that served to build parts of building blocks during the communist time. They had "homeliness" in their DNA and their birth was already hybrid.

The paradoxical existence of the prefabricated garage – half national popular, half unpredictably rebel – tells a parable of an architecture that doesn't consider the discrepancy between a plan and its future reality a problem, but rather a condition and as such something that has to be exploited and not avoided.
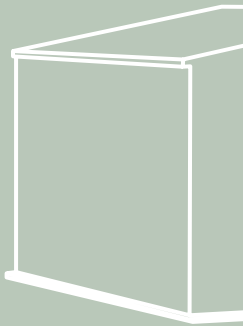
POSTCARDS FROM BRĂILA

Garage as it is

Garage as architect designed house (Bragadiru house by AbruptArhitectura)

Typical apartment block courtyards structured by prefabricated concrete garages

Garage as self-built
housing unit

Garage as church
(Abruptarhitectura)

Garage as private
wood workshop

PREFABRICATED GARAGE AS URBAN INSTALLATION AND PUBLIC EXHIBITION ON THE DANUBE RIVERFRONT

How to simultaneously celebrate and question the significant affect of private initiative on collective city space

by Guillaume Eckly, Anton Huhn, Goda Lukšaitė, Cătălina Ioniță, Andrea Spreafico, Cristian Stefanescu, Tiina Teräs, Patricia Tsunoushi, Frede Vik.

A pavilion or a monument? A beacon or a roof? A garage on a table? The exhibition entitled "This place is pretty good" celebrates the way in which the people of Brăila create social centers around private or privatized spaces such as garages and the courtyards of apartment blocks.

By reusing and repositioning this everyday object, the authors sought to create an urban intervention that taps into and makes operational a latent urban potential present in Brăila, as well as in other Romanian cities: the controversial phenomena of individuals physically appropriating collective space through the ad-hoc placement of privately-owned prefabricated concrete garages in public spaces.

In doing so, the garage is elevated, both physically and symbolically - physically by outlining a new and open space that is able to accommodate diverse and spontaneous activities on the Danube riverfront and symbolically by transforming a simple and mundane object into a monument to the private initiatives prevalent in peripheral urban areas and implicitly its social impact on the city.

The garage numbered 11 sits on the Danube riverfront halfway between the civic and social center (City Hall) and the historic center (Trajan Market). In its precise location, the lifted garage might be the host of a spontaneous stand selling food or act as a reststop and place of shade, it may arise curiosity as an unique structure or merge with the other roofscapes along the riverfront and become invisible.

Raised above the ground, the individual space of the garage is transfomed into a collective one, a space for the city, an infrastructure able to accommodate a variety of activities.
By the end of the inauguration evening, the reconfigured garage had already hosted an exhibition about the city, a film projection, a cooling zone spraying mist, a bbq grill and cold beer tap, a watermelon stand and many discussions.

Since its appearance in the early 90's, the prefabricated concrete garage has become a place for the expression of private initiative by establishing an individual approach to structuring public space, thus highlighting not only the need for organizing such spaces but also the creative potential and beneficial diversity offered by such individual actions.

The raised garage becomes an an artifact – an item of cultural, social and historical significance - which tells the story of how peripheral spaces can act as social centers for everyday life, a story valid for cities in Romania and elsewhere that articulates a global discussion about initiating and sustaining participatory processes as a way of working in architecture and urbanism.

Garage in private courtyard
prior to being relocated

DACIA
1310

DACIA
1310

SPUNEŢI CĂ ACEST GARAJ ESTE O HIDOŞENIE ŞI TREBUIE ÎNDEPARTAT. DAR CE PUNEM ÎN LOC PE PIEDESTAL?

UN GRĂTAR!

C. PĂTRAŞCAN
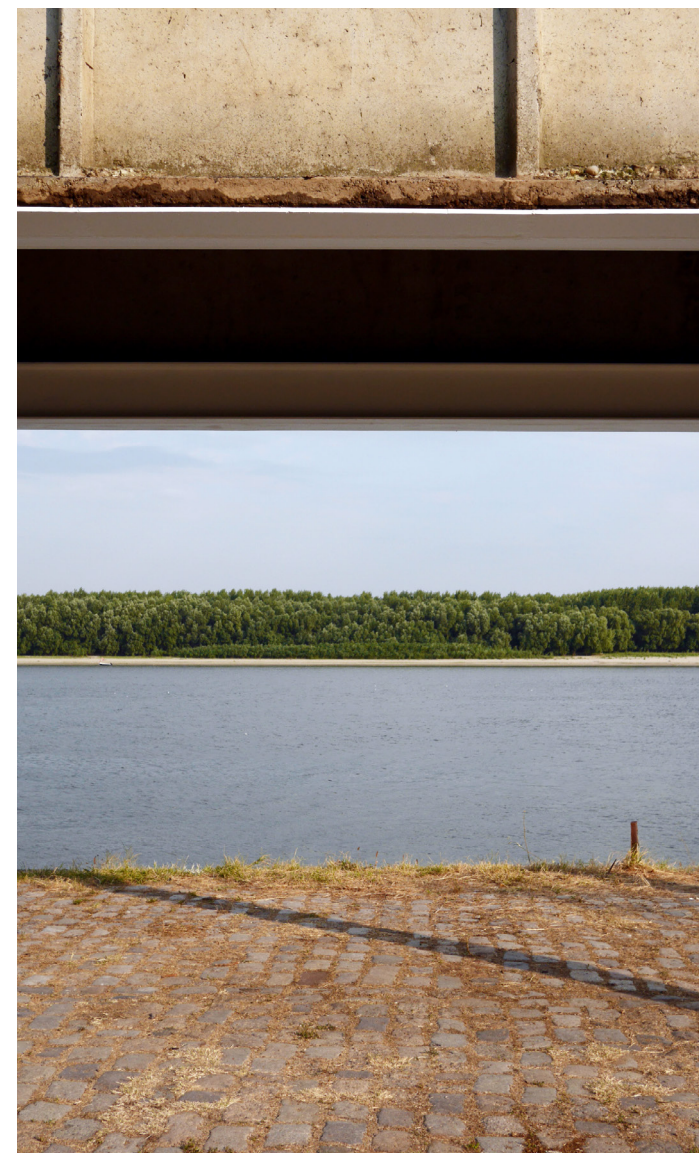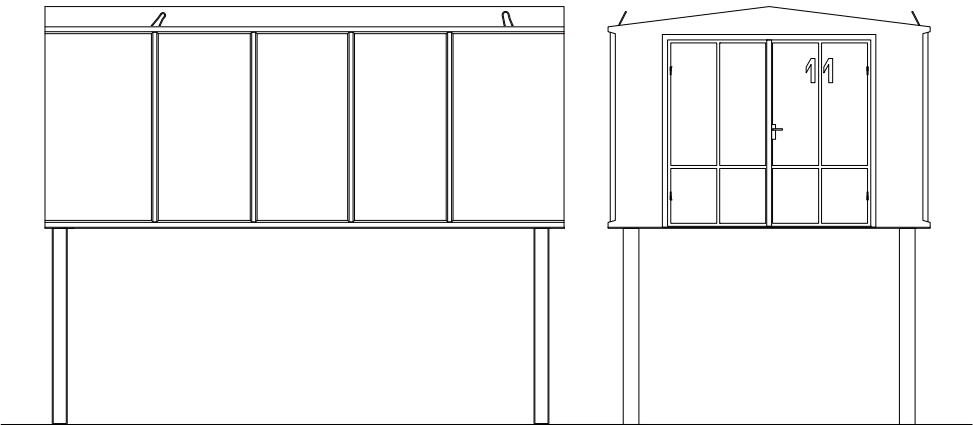
Q: You say that this garage is a monstrosity and should be removed. But what should take its place on the pedestal?
A: A barbeque grill!
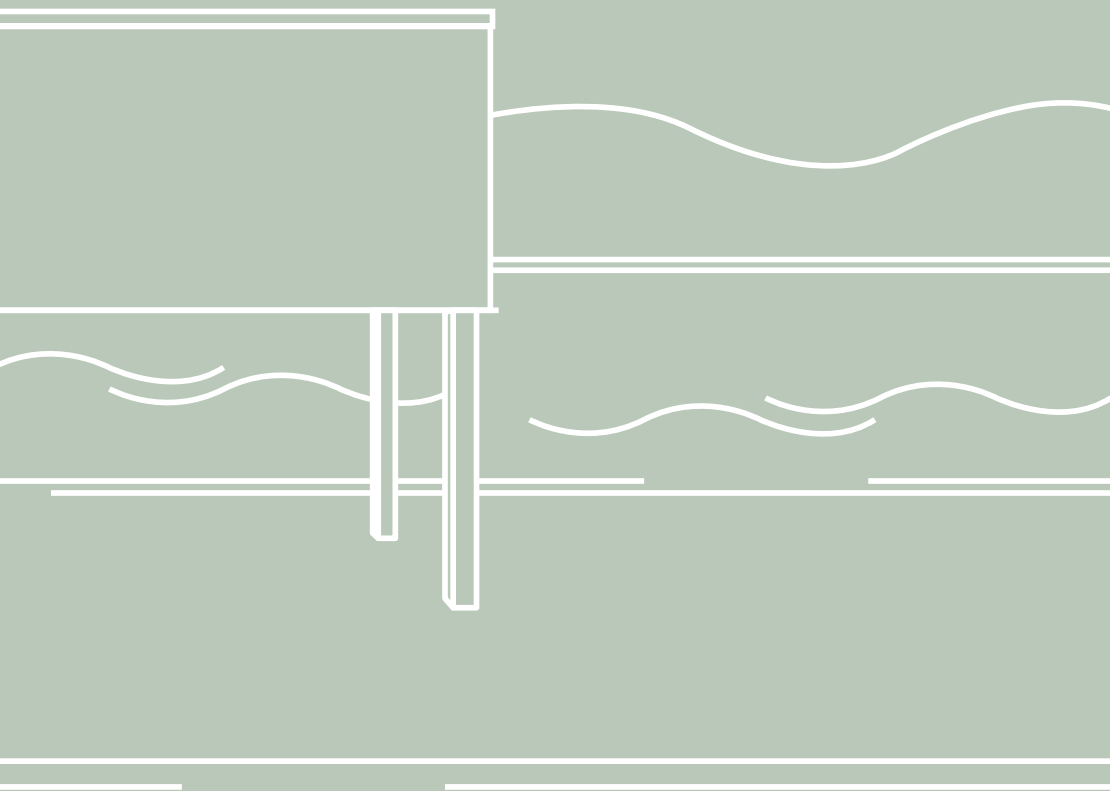
GARAGE THINKING:
THE TRANSFIGURATION OF
EVERYDAY AFFORDANCES

by Cristian Ştefănescu

T he exhibition This Place is Pretty Good can be considered an attempt to study, recognize and act upon what the American psychologist J.J. Gibson calls affordances - a set of possibilities that lie latent in an object or environment. In The Theory of Affordances[1], Gibson states that these possibilities exist independent of an individual's ability to recognize them - they are there whether one sees them or not. Yet the possibilities are dependent on the relationship between the individual and the object or environment to come into being – one needs to first recognize and second act upon the object or environment in order to manifest its possibilities.

Among the work exhibited, the elevated garage is an exemplary product of such thinking. This prefabricated concrete structure is remarkably present in the daily life of people and active in forming their social, cultural and physical space. At the same time it mentally remains on the periphery of people's head-space, just as it physically remains on the periphery of city-space. The familiarity and ubiquity of the garage nevertheless makes it a point of convergence for the collective mind. While it's active role in forming social, cultural and physical space gives the garage an acupunctural quality. Through activation, it could potentially unfold a number of key contemporary matters of architecture and the city, such as the role of gender, private initiative and the everyday in the production of city-space.

In order to begin this process of unfolding, our activation has primarily focused on distancing the garage from its typical use and context, while using its physical form to create a new and pure architectural expression. This transfiguration is aimed at triggering the collective head-space to re-evaluate the garage's potential and its affect on city-space. Doing so while also generating a level of ambiguity of how the garage can be perceived – it is simultaneously something new and

1 Gibson, J.J. (1977). The Theory of Affordances (pp. 67–82). In R. Shaw & J. Bransford (eds.). Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum

strange while still old and familiar. Ultimately this is meant to open up and encourage (or afford) people to mentally and physically participate in the transfiguration of the garage. This process of transfiguration is only in its infancy. It requires time, space and the active participation of key actors to help unfold and center this garage thinking within the collective head-space and make perceptible it's potential to affect city-space.

THE GARAGE, CATALYST FOR OPINIONS, DISCUSSIONS AND QUESTIONS

by Anton Huhn and Goda Luksaite

When creating a pavilion like this, without specific usability, symbolically dislodged from its intended function and original state, there is a point when you are asking yourself, if the functional value is low, what other values does it create and do we feel confident enough in them for the idea to be valid?

There is no way of calculating these values and more importantly we cannot say we know the true value of the work, much because the strength of the symbolism will lie in the perception of those not involved in the project. As a joke we used the term 'imperial snobs' to describe ourselves, but there was an underlying truth to this joke – we shouldn't think we can come with some grand knowledge that our project is going to teach or a superior understanding of Brăila which is going to change everyone's perceptions. Thus the project was shaped in a way that doesn't proclaim to give any answers, but to make people bring out their own opinions and knowledge while faced with something unexpected.

The question raised by the displaced garage is more about

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its context than the object/action itself. Why is it infuriating to some to elevate a garage? It must be bringing up some deeper, more fundamental frustrations about the city, politics, Europe, money, art, beauty and whatever is projected. The success of the garage, from our point of view, is that it creates opinions. It acts as a catalyst for questions. And for those who finds it offensive, it might help in pinpointing where that frustration comes from. The garage itself doesn't take offense, and it doesn't have to be liked. If it is hated it will disappear, if it is liked it might be appropriated for some unforeseen activities, but either way we believe that it still left something more than a displaced object.

THE VALUE OF THINGS AT HAND

by Cătălina Ioniță

The idea to free up space, simultaneously with the idea of raising it to 'monument' levels, is clearly shown through the elevation of the precast garage, in the state in which it was found, on a white, elegant, and clean metal structure. At the same time, this structure is also a (minimal) plinth that, except for the fact that, symbolically, it frees up/gives back the privatised space to public use and frames one of Brăila's valuable elements – the right bank of the Danube. Thus, lifting the garage on the riverfront seems to be a simple and clear architectural-urban planning gesture; however, choosing this mundane object to build the pavilion, capable of attracting attention to a current and real peripheral condition, identified in the project, caused
unexpected reactions for us as well. What belongs to everyday life is, generally, not spectacular; however, when usual objects and spaces are discovered, re-contextualised, elevated to discussion topic levels, through their disconcerting and troubling strangeness, usual objects and spaces receive an aura of mysticism that unveils an affective relationship

between the locals and this object - the precast garage of the '90's – hard to decipher, but interesting.

Beyond the disorganised occupation of the building yard, precast garages are 'invisible' in public discussion: about social life in neighbourhoods with blocks of flats, about the way in which the garage has catalysed private initiative and social life by establishing a personal way of managing public space, about the way in which the need to organise space, as well as the need to manifest one's individual creative potential, highlight the beneficial diversity of individual gestures.

The story of their precasting is not know either. Questions such as: 'who designed them?' 'what connection is there between precast for buildings and precast garages?' were, as far as we know, asked for the first tie in this project, even if the answers to these questions can highlight systems that would be interesting today for architecture: readymade, ease of transport, ease of transformation, etc.

The garage on the riverfront is, however, only a part of the Laboratory in which, by actively exploring the urban space, by discovering the peripherisation markers, by following architectural and urban planning, as well as social and anthropological aspects, we (re)discovered those exact spatial situations and characteristics that, camouflaged in daily life, hide a latent potential, such as a barren space adjacent to a pedestrian crossing over the railway, the vernacular typology of the neighbourhood with low accessibility and 'urban village' appearance, or the accessibility of the natural park for the locals.
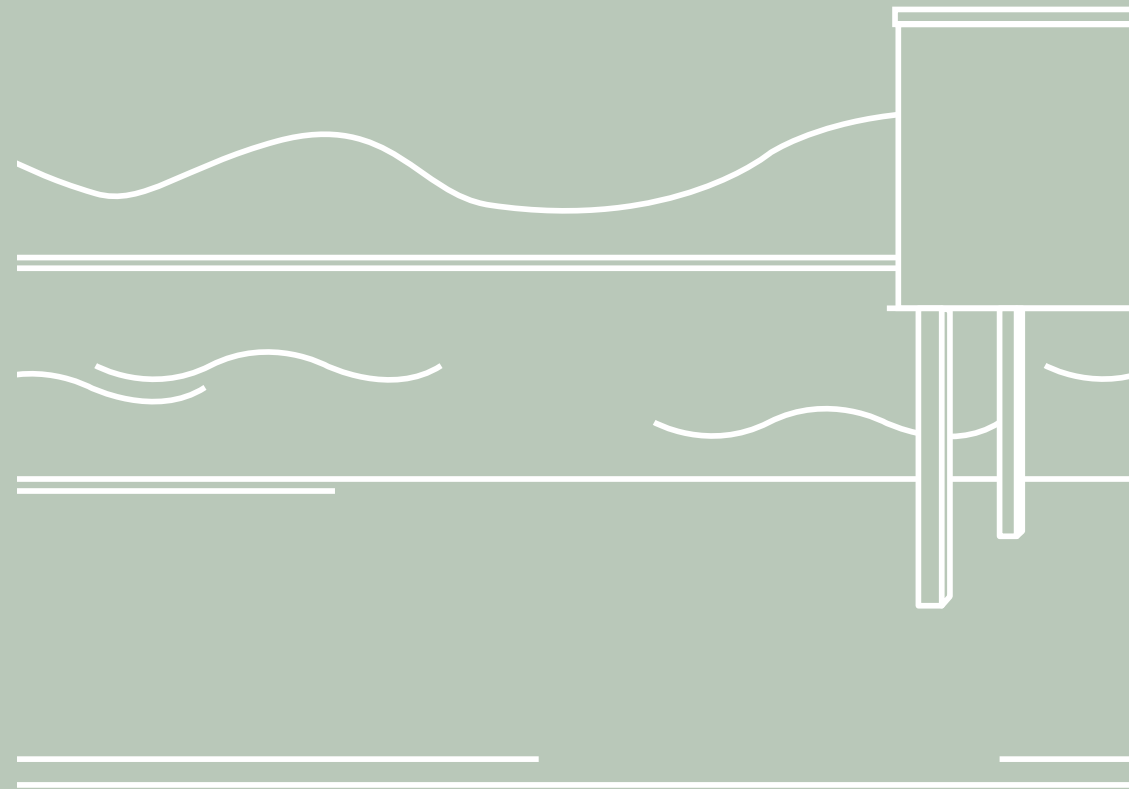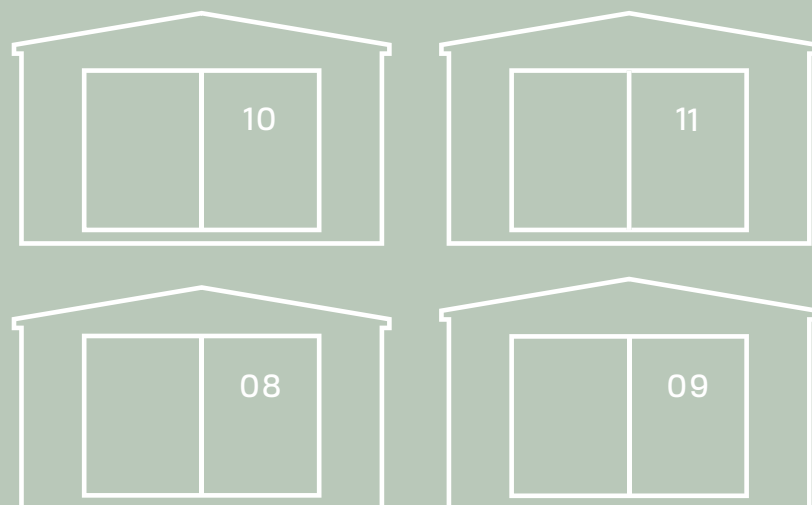
URBAN INTERVENTION IN BRĂILA

by Cătălina Ioniță

In architecture and urban planning, the organic process of city evolution and building is often considered to be natural and implicit for the understanding of the professional; so is the existence of objects in the organisation of architectural and urban space.

Both, due to the fact that they belong to what is natural, habitual, daily, and implicit, seem to be detoured by professional routine through theorisation, hidden under layers of metaphors, interpretations, processes and mechanised methods.

As it generally happens with things that enter a routine, they fall into depreciation or, on the contrary, are overused, are separated from their sense and their role in education; in both cases, the result is the same: loss of the useful meaning of daily experience for the education of future architects and urban planners. Although Romanian cities are marked by urban phenomena recently studied all over Europe – shrinking, conflict, peripherisation, abandonment, creative potential of inhabitants, new forms of micro-urbanism, temporary usage, the abundance of unused built-up areas, resulting from economic and demographic contraction etc. – they are too little, if at all, an experimentation field for students. "BRĂILA LABORATORY - Alternative approaches to urban peripheries within a shrinking city (B-LAB)" is a cultural cooperation project between two universities that, by moving on from the dead end of falling into a routine, has an interdisciplinary approach for a problem that is very important for cities today, starting from understanding the local context – Brăila, a city that, despite certain processes that indicate an economic and demographic decline, possesses a diffused capital of urban life that deserves to be discovered and leveraged.

This project can be considered a "live project" oriented towards spatial production through experimental, practical, and

collaborative approaches of reality. The direct experience, the new regard in the idea of (re)discovering those exact features of urban space that, when throwing it into daily life, make it not visible (any longer), that is considered by us essential for understanding urban space is, simultaneously, also a way of discovering the latent potential. Also, the intervention in public space is a way to make. The thus discovered potential operational, it adds the spatial, built dimension to the experience and understanding.

Concretely, the summer workshop that took place in Brăila between 22 July and 5 August 2015 culminated on the evening of 3 August with the presentation of 9 student projects and the inauguration of a pavilion in the "This place is pretty good" exhibit, in a public and interactive event on the Danube riverfront. The pavilion, raised on four pylons, attracted the attention of passers-by, brought questions and held the front page of local newspapers for days on end.

By reusing and repositioning an object seen daily in the Romanian urban space – the prefabricated garage – the authors created an urban intervention that connects to and catalyses the latent potential discovered in Brăila, but that can be easily identified in Romanian cities: the controversial phenomenon of individual closeness, of privatisation of common spaces through the disorganised building of prefabricated garages. Raising the garage, both physically – by framing a space open to spontaneous use – and symbolically – by transforming a simple, mundane object into a monument that celebrates private initiative in the peripheral urban space and, implicitly, in the city's social life.

Garage number 11 sits on the Danube bank halfway from the civic centre (the Prefecture Palace) and the historic centre (Trajan Square), offers shelter to passers-by, and is a stop on the riverfront used for its shade, raises people's curiosity, or simply gets lost among the roofs of buildings on the riverfront,

becoming invisible. In the evening of the inauguration, the pavilion in the garage had already hosted an exhibit about the city, a fast food and beer stand, a melon stand, and a lot of discussions, as a demonstration of the way in which daily life can be evoked in an ambiguous space: central in the city's history, but peripheral as usage and attention.

Appearing in the '90's, the precast concrete garage became a place of expressing private initiative, by installing one's own way of managing a space extracted from the public space, thus emphasising the need to organise space, as well as the creative potential and the diversity of individual gestures, that is beneficial for diversification. Without militating for the preservation of this disorganised manner of using space, but celebrating the way in which these objects have catalysed private initiative and social life, the garage pavilion evokes a part of the city dweller's social life.

Often used individually, as a space for keeping pickles, as a workshop space for hobbies, small businesses or, in common, as a "club" space (used more than once to watch a football match with the neighbours), this mundane object was also used as a playground – the roofs of lined up garages used as observation spots or bridges between the courtyards of blocks of flats, a place to spend the childhood and adolescence in the '90's, revealing the creative potential of the inhabitants and the need to break the standard.

Raising the garage on the riverfront proves that a mundane and simple object such as the precast concrete garage can represent, monumentally, the private initiative spread throughout peripheral urban spaces and, implicitly, its social impact. The idea of freeing up space is clearly shown by lifting it on an elegant, clean and very clear structure that supports the object presented in the state in which it was found. A (minimal) plinth that, beside the fact that it frees up / gives back the privatised space to public use, also frames

a valuable element of Brăila – the right bank of the Danube. Becoming an artefact – an object with historical, social, but especially cultural meaning – the raised garage evokes the way in which peripheral spaces can be easily animated, transformed, and altered, becoming, in an organic way, vital centres with social and cultural importance, a pertinent aspect and, why not, an identity one for Romanian cities and not only, that, continuously approached, can articulate the global discussion on the initiation and support of organic processes and/or participants to urban transformation as a legitimate approach in architecture and urban planning.

The mode of action, tested until this point, in the project is all the more interesting when related to the post-industrial city (defined by delocalisation of production and niche consumption) where we notice processes that are sort of in opposition with the ones that defined the industrial period (localised production and mass consumption), urban decline and shrinking being two of the most obvious and relevant at a European level. Economic dynamics, the pace at which technology becomes obsolete, population migration, the aspirations of social groups, the socio-political context and other such factors manifest themselves in the urban space through new ways of spatial and social organisation, emphasising a dynamic rapport between programmed changes and organic changes in the transformation process of urban space, the urban space being governed, more and more, by other laws than the ones that manufactured it.

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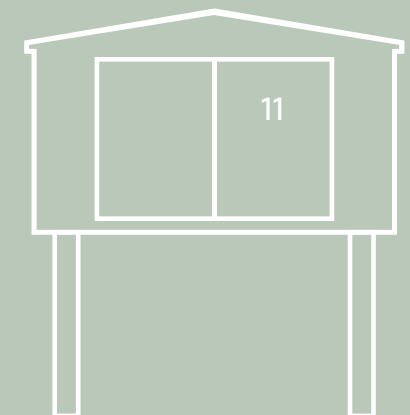
PRETTY GOOD[1]

Interview with Cristian Ştefănescu, by Maria Neneciu

M: Tell me a little about how this project was born.

C: The project was born out of an interest in how to approach architecture in contexts of economic and demographic scarcity. Limited resources demand an open and effective engagement with the specifics of a situation - finding diverse ways of doing as much as possible with as little as possible. This engagement often necessitates a broader notion of architecture that includes physical-spatial resources as well as urban, social, political and other forms of latent capital which are less likely to be accounted for in architectural work.

The format was first thought as a master course at the Bergen School of Architecture in Norway, where several project members teach, including myself. And later evolved into what it is today - a larger collaboration with several actors at the "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urbanism – Faculty of Urban Planning, which includes several courses, workshops and exhibitions.

M: It aims to generate alternative approaches to urban peripheries. How did you choose the theme and how did you come to work with the city of Braila for this project?

C: Urban peripheries offer a ripe yet overlooked field for investigation in the context of architecture and urbanism. When people speak about cities today, they are often actually speaking about city centers. For example consider how Manhattan (and maybe recently Brooklyn) stands in as the representation of New York City even though the city has five boroughs. These nuclei of urban life have come to embody the image of the whole city even though they constitute only a part. Their significance causes them to absorb much of the energy, investment and engagement dedicated to urban development. Which in turn reinforces their significance and establishes a closed circle of dominance. This is not to attack the significance of city centers – they are vital parts of a city's well-being. But to acknowledge the need for a more inclusive,

1 This text was initially published in The Institute Magazine #18/2016

balanced and nuanced consideration of all other areas of the city. These urban peripheries have their own identities, are often home to a significant number of a city's population and posses a variety of economic, ecological and social conditions that cities, and particularly city centers, depend and thrive upon. We found this under-representation of urban peripheries in need of a shake up.

We came to consider Braila as a possible field of investigation at my suggestion. At first it was more of a hunch based on my personal and somewhat professional familiarity with the city – I was born there and have followed its evolution relatively close. When we probed it a little further, we found it to offer potential. Braila is a shrinking city with a richly layered evolution contained within a clear and compact urban structure. A place that serves as a regional center yet is peripheral on the national stage. And it was asking the same question as many other post-communist, post-industrial cities are: where do we go from here? But it was only after we came in contact with the head architect of the municipality Marian Ion, as well as the authors of Braila's General Urban Plan that started to point clearly in this direction. There was a common interest and openness in all parties to pursue such an investigation and a wealth of resources at our disposal which made Braila the best option.

One thing worth mentioning is that as our work evolved and diversified, it became difficult to relate and continue using the term alternative. Alternative is something relative which draws its identity from opposition to a defined norm and often necessitates a complete disconnection from this norm to exist. We have come to find it of little relevance to firstly define a norm of architecture or urbanism, let alone claim to provide alternatives. Our work finds itself closer to engaging in an open and plural manner that does not position a norm and alternative but simply considers the most appropriate means to address the particularities of each situation.

M: Tell me a little about the concept of Shrinking Cities and why they are interesting to study.

C: The concept of shrinking cities served as a critical starting point and frame of reference for our work. It is an overlooked reality in much of Europe, often intertwined with urban peripheries and scarcity.

Many people are aware that the world's population is above 7 billion and growing, with more than half residing in cities or urban areas. This trend of urbanisation, the highest level in recorded history, is expected to increase particularly in developing countries such as India, China and Nigeria. Less known is that simultaneously over 40 countries are expected to experience population decline in the first half of the 21st century, many in Europe and North America. Over 500 cities are currently losing population and in Europe it is estimated that 40% of mid-size cities with a population over 200,000 have experienced significant population loss in recent years and many smaller cities, towns and villages are equally affected.

That said, shrinkage is not exclusively tied to the city scale. It can occur at multiple scales, be it at the national, regional, neighbourhood or personal scale. And very seldom can one cannot discuss shrinkage without discussing growth and vice versa. These concepts are interrelated conditions in a state of continuous flux. Take China as an example. It's image is one of significant growth centered around the numerous densely populated cities. Yet this growth is closely intertwined with (among other conditions) the migration of people from rural to urban areas. In which case a more accurate description of its growth at the national scale would be one of a series of" islands of growth within a sea of shrinkage". Similarly, if you were to zoom in to the Bucharest of the 90's, you would find multiple pockets of shrinkage such as the old city center. This within a city that was overall growing.

The multi-scalar and growth-dependant conditions of shrinkage was something we evolved as the project developed. This eventually led us to move beyond the term shrinking city, similarly as we did with the term alternative. At this moment I would say our work is more precisely focused on conditions of scarcity (which can of course be easily found in conditions of shrinkage) but which are not necessarily limited to shrinking cities or the city scale.

M: How did the research period unfold? How many times did you visit the city, what type of mechanisms or approaches were employed?

C: Our research is grounded on a dialectic relationship between studio work (in Bergen) and field work (in Brăila totaling one month).

On one hand we constructed a theoretical body of knowledge to address the larger thematics of the project such as scarcity, shrinkage and urban peripheries. A key result of this study is a "toolbox" of strategies that offer various examples of "how to" maximize effects within a restrained field of possibilities with most being derived from architecture, urbanism, and artistic practice.

On the other hand we applied, tested and evolved the thematics through direct engagement with the specifics of the context. Of particular importance was the need for each project to establish and nurture collaborative relationships with the owners, operators and users of the sites, spaces and buildings addressed by the work. This often helped to provide access and operationalize resources of a social, economic and political nature.

M: The projects are rather tactical urbanisms, where the communities in which the projects unfold become essential in shaping as well as implementing them. How were the "how to" questions, to which these projects

respond, generated?

C: The projects are born out of a close dialogue with the specifics of the physical and social context. Within this dialogue, the local people (owners, operators and users) form a central role in the direction, development and some cases implementation of the work. In this regard participatory and tactical forms of engagement, derived from artistic practice and social anthropology, are a critical component of all projects,. Particularly since the short term, small scale, cheap and temporary nature of such approaches afford a precise and direct ability to identify, define and activate latent potential embedded in conditions of scarcity.

Yet tactics fare less well in addressing the long term, large scale physical changes that the projects propose. Such aims require a more diverse and strategic level of thinking that employs a range of approaches. As a result, the projects are equally dependent on knowledge, tools and materials consistent with what one could say is more "traditional" architectural and urbanistic approaches.

The overall work is just as open to the "pure" architecture of Valerio Olgiati as to the tactics of raumlaborberlin or the urban ambitions of muf architecture/art. We don't see these approaches as contradictory but as equally valid and complimentary ways of engaging within an expanded field of architecture and urbanism.

M: What have you learned from this project?

C: It's maybe early to draw any final lessons or conclusions since the project is only half-way through. But there are a few key aspects, partly mentioned earlier, which have been fundamental in our work.

The work with scarcity has shown us the value of operating within an expanded field of architecture. Such considerate constraints force one to become more effective, more nimble.

And overall gain comfort in toggling between multiple scales and various approaches in an open manner as best suits each individual situation.

The importance of building and nurturing relationships with local actors has appeared as a common denominator among all of the successful projects. Particularly when they managed to establish mutually beneficial relationships. It may seem obvious but people are critical and valuable resources.

In practice, this form of engagement has proven to be a challenge as there is very little academic training in how to interact, collaborate, communicate and give value to architectural knowledge within a "live" situation. It demands one to be an architect-citizen, to listen, see and grasp with empathy and humility the nature of a situation. And requires a certain sociability and clarity in the act of engaging. But also a need to bring architectural knowledge and tools into the discussion. Our interest in collaborative and participatory approaches has not been to outsource our work and responsibility to the people by asking them to design but learning and translating their knowledge, experience and intentions into architectural proposals.

But maybe the greatest challenge has been in how to transfer the projects initiated out of these relationships, fully over to their respective actors. This is something we are still working on – how to ensure continuity and long term development by encouraging forms of appropriation and ownership.

BERGEN ARKITEKTHØGSKOLE (BAS) was established as an educational alternative to the public architecture schools of Norway in 1986. Since then, the program has developed a tradition of social oriented architecture that engages with reality through an experimental, hands-on and collaborative approach to spatial production. This approach is often influenced by complimentary areas of study such as art, anthropology and ecology. Multiple courses, workshops and events held over the years in Norway and countries across the globe have served to ground an open and active relationship between the education and practice of architecture as they relate to a contemporary local-global society.

UNIVERSITATEA DE ARHITECTURĂ ŞI URBANISM „ION MINCU" (UAUIM) is the oldest and most important academic institution within the architectural discipline in Romania. It continues a long tradition in architectural higher education, with its inception, in the second half of the twentieth century, strongly linked to the modern development of Romania and its new cultural structures. For 16 years the Department of Urban Planning UAUIM undertakes a permanent contact with Romanian urban reality through direct involvement in both urban life and in international academic cooperation.

BRĂILA LABORATORY - ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO URBAN PERIPHERIES WITHIN A SHRINKING CITY |B-LAB| is an interdisciplinary exploration of the conditions of shrinkage and scarcity faced by many of today's European cities, and particularly exemplified within the port city of Brăila, Romania. It seeks to identify and develop various forms of latent urban capital which go beyond economic and demographic growth, are not subject to centralized planning mechanisms, and are often cloaked within the banality of everyday life. Emphasis is placed on direct engagement within the field of operation (Brăila) and the involvement of local communities, institutions and individuals to construct new perspectives and architectural approaches which could define the future evolution of the city.

BERGEN ARKITEKTHØGSKOLE (BAS) a fost înfiinţată în 1986 ca alternativă la şcolile publice de arhitectură din Norvegia. De atunci s-a axat pe dezvoltarea unui program de educaţie în arhitectură cu orientare socială, devenit tradiţional, orientat spre producţia spaţială prin abordări experimentale, practice şi colaborative ale realităţii. Această abordare este, adesea, influenţată de domenii de studiu complementare precum arta, antropologia şi ecologia. Multiple cursuri, ateliere şi evenimente găzduite de-a lungul anilor în Norvegia şi în ţări din lumea întreagă, au constituit baza dezvoltării unei relaţii deschise între educaţia şi practica de arhitectură simultan în societatea locală şi globală contemporană.

UNIVERSITATEA DE ARHITECTURĂ ŞI URBANISM „ION MINCU" din Bucureşti este cea mai prestigioasă instituţie de învăţământ superior de profil din România (înfiinţată în anul 1892). Totodată, aceasta este singura Universitate din ţară care are în componenţa sa o Facultate de Urbanism (începând cu anul 1997), propunându-şi încă de la înfiinţarea sa menţinerea unui contact permanent cu realitatea urbană şi implicit cu toţi vectorii care o compun: sociali, economic, culturali, istorici ş.a.m.d.

BRĂILA LABORATORY - ABORDĂRI ALTERNATIVE ALE PERIFERIILOR URBANE ÎN CADRUL UNUI ORAŞ CU CREŞTEREA STAGNATĂ |B-LAB| abordează interdisciplinar o problemă importantă astăzi pentru oraşele europene şi se bazează pe înţelegerea contextului local şi pe creativitatea locuitorilor ca având potenţial de îmbunătăţire a vieţii în oraş. Brăila, oraş care, în ciuda unor procese ce indică un declin economic şi demografic, este posesorul unui capital difuz de urbanitate, meritând a fi descoperit şi pus de valoare. Proiectul comun al celor două instituţii de învăţământ abordează oraşul Brăila ca un laborator urban în care explorând şi testând noi tactici, micro-strategii, acţiuni de catalizare, intervenţii punctuale descoperim valoarea cultural-urbanistică a acelor "mărci" de potenţial local camuflate adesea în banalitate şi ignoranţă care nu fac obiectul planificării dar care pot deveni parametri de dezvoltare locală.