

Care infrastructure in Bucharest: A case study on libraries

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Abstract

This paper explores how neighborhood libraries in Bucharest function as spaces of care within the urban fabric, proposing that they serve as vital components of social infrastructure that foster trust, inclusion, and community resilience. Drawing on feminist care theory and urban sociology, the study reframes libraries as relational and spatial actors that support everyday life beyond their educational function. The research is part of Care Infrastructure in Bucharest: An Urban Culture Research, a project led by Zeppelin magazine, involving an interdisciplinary team of architects, urbanists, and anthropologists. Through participatory methods—including mapping, field observations, and interviews—the project analyzed the accessibility, condition, and perception of libraries across several Bucharest neighborhoods. A comparison with Prague provides insight into alternative strategies for library development. By integrating cross-disciplinary perspectives and user input, the article demonstrates how collaborative design processes can help reimagine underutilized urban spaces as active infrastructures of care. The study contributes to the conference theme by highlighting the role of architecture in enabling inclusive, care-centered urban practices.

Keywords: Architecture, Collaboration, Trust, Convergence, Libraries, Care Infrastructure, Participatory Design, Community.

Introduction

In recent years, "care" has emerged as a critical lens for rethinking urban spaces—not merely as a backdrop for daily life, but as infrastructures that support human well-being, inclusion, and trust. Bucharest faces ongoing challenges related to fragmented urban development and unequal access to public services, which together contribute to the limited visibility and presence of care infrastructure across the city. This paper explores how the concept of care has the potential to act as an important framework within the socio-cultural landscape of Bucharest. In this light, libraries, often overlooked in architectural discourse, can be reinterpreted as spaces of care and crucial urban actors within the city. The central aim of this research is to investigate the potential and capacity of libraries to act as spatial nodes of care in the urban context—shaping an infrastructure where architecture, social function and community participation converge—and how they can elevate the current state of Bucharest, offering valuable insights into its unique typology.

The study is part of "Care Infrastructure in Bucharest: An Urban Culture Research", a project led by Zeppelin magazine, that brought together an interdisciplinary team of architects, urbanists, and anthropologists. The goal was to map and analyze how care is spatially manifested in Bucharest, with a particular focus on libraries as case studies, through which it aims to understand, where we actually stand—both quantitatively and qualitatively—regarding the needs of residents as well as in comparison with other cities similar to Bucharest. Drawing on participatory methods—such as interviews, workshops, and spatial mapping—the project enabled a collaborative exploration of how architecture intersects with social needs, addressing both the elusive average person and those who deviate from that norm.

This article contributes to the FAST 2025 "Convergence" conference theme by illustrating how cross-disciplinary collaboration and participatory research tools can uncover the latent social potential of everyday public infrastructure. It argues that libraries are not just

service providers or educational institutions but key nodes in the urban care ecology—spaces that can inform a more inclusive, trust-oriented approach to architectural problem-solving. A comparison between Bucharest and Prague reveals how differing urban strategies shape the visibility, accessibility, and function of care-oriented spaces, offering broader insights into the role of design in fostering social infrastructure.

Literature Review

This paper is built upon the premise "What is the spatially equivalent of care in the city?". In the attempt to give an answer to this question, the research is strongly grounded in the care theory, particularly the work of political theorist Joan Tronto, who defines care as "everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto, 1993). This definition expands care beyond interpersonal relationships, positioning it as a civic and spatial practice embedded in the everyday life of the city. Studies (Klinenberg, 2018) highlight that the future of democratic societies rest not simply on shared values, but on shared spaces. In this light, libraries can be understood not merely as knowledge depots, but as key nodes in the urban care infrastructure—spaces that support emotional well-being, education, social connection, and generally access to public resources. Tronto's five phases of care—caring about, taking care of, caregiving, care receiving, and caring with—offer a useful framework for analyzing how libraries have the potential to be considered spaces of care.

For instance, neighborhood libraries in Bucharest "care about" the needs of their communities by offering inclusive programming, "take care of" vulnerable populations by providing digital access and a communicative space, and "care with" the public by hosting collaborative events and civic dialogue. By applying this ethical framework, the article reinterprets libraries not as neutral public utilities, but as political and deeply spatial care places that contribute to the city's capacity to sustain life for all its residents. These spaces

serve not only their primary function but also fulfill informal, social, and often unstructured roles that tend to remain invisible in official narratives.

In addition, comparative studies on public libraries in post-socialist cities can offer a valuable source of information regarding different approaches, such as development strategies, public investment and public policies, that have been implemented since 1990s. In particular, Prague has often been referred to as a model for how good strategies and investments can sustain the libraries network as multifunctional public spaces. While Bucharest's library system has remained largely stagnant, Prague has actively pursued policies over the past decade that recognize libraries as pillars to education, social understanding and public well-being.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative analysis of neighborhood libraries in Bucharest through the lenses of care ethics to explore how does cross-disciplinary collaboration redefine architectural and urban problem-solving. Conducted as part of "Care Infrastructure in Bucharest" project coordinated by Zeppelin magazine, the research brought together an interdisciplinary team of architects, urbanists, anthropologist and students. The study was structured around two main components, a theoretical-comparative analysis and an empirical investigation. The first component, grounded in ethical care theory, drew a typological and policy orientated portrait of the library systems in Bucharest and Prague. The city of Prague was chosen for this comparison due to its contrasting trajectory in developing libraries as active public institutions. Moreover, The Czech Republic is internationally recognized for having the highest number of libraries per capita, reflecting a long-standing cultural and policy commitment to accessible public knowledge and community infrastructure. However, the comparative analysis between Bucharest and Prague is grounded not only in Prague's globally recognized library infrastructure but also in the cities' shared historical and socio-

political trajectories as post-socialist capitals in Central and Eastern Europe. Both cities experienced decades of centralized cultural policy under socialism, followed by periods of economic liberalization and urban transformation after 1989, but their approaches to cultural and public infrastructure diverged significantly in the post-socialist period. Selecting Prague as a point of comparison therefore provides an opportunity to explore how differing policy frameworks and investment strategies shape not only the physical condition of libraries but also their public perception, accessibility, and capacity to function as care-oriented infrastructure in different urban contexts.

The second component consisted in fieldwork in Bucharest, investigating the actual state of the neighborhood libraries through participatory tools such as semi-structured interviews with the librarians, site visits to selected libraries and mapping workshops. These methods sought to document both physical accessibility and users' perceptions of library spaces. The project focused on six neighborhood libraries – Mediateca, Artoteca, Sonor library, Alexandru Odobescu, Lucian Blaga and Ion Neculce – located along the main boulevard connecting Obor Square and Dristor, which served as a geographic framework for the spatial analysis. By integrating the theoretical-comparative analyze with the findings on site investigation, the methodology foregrounds the social role of libraries and establishes their potential as care-oriented spaces within the urban infrastructure.

Results

The findings in this paper are presented in two interconnected layers, qualitative insights and spatial mapping. First, the qualitative data highlights significant differences between Bucharest and Prague in terms of the public policies and strategic approaches shaping the development of their respective library systems, addressed at a national level. In the Czech Republic, the topic of libraries is part of a well-formulated national initiative and strategy, with implementation of the development strategy starting as early as 2017, with a vision

extending to 2030. In contrast, the situation in Romania regarding library development strategies reveals the consequences of lacking a national strategy. Thus, we are faced with a centralized strategy and development model (Prague) comparing to independent programs with their own strategies at the level of each individual library (Bucharest). These two situations directly influence how the administration and communities perceive libraries, based on the roles they play in everyday life. While in Romania the general development direction is focused on digitalization and improving the physical space of libraries, in the Czech Republic, libraries are viewed from three perspectives related to their potential as spaces of sustainable inclusion, grounded in the rights of a society to communicate, learn, and relax. This comparison highlights the potential for Bucharest to adopt lessons from Prague's centralized, future-oriented approach while adapting them to its own local governance and community needs.

However, even though the situation in Bucharest is not as well organized compared to the Czech Republic (Prague), the field visit revealed that there is a strong sense of attachment to these neighborhood community spaces, and at the same time, a genuine desire for development from both the library staff and the people who frequently spend time there. Semi-structured interviews with librarians uncovered the deeply relational potential of these places, especially in relation with their positioning in the city. Neighborhood libraries often function in relation with their community, being sometimes absorbed and self-intituled as their own personal space. For instance, the Alexandru Odobescu branch, located within a block interior rather than on a main street, serves a hyper-local function—supporting schoolchildren with access to summer reading materials while offering retirees a space for informal socialization and regular interaction. These uses, though not formally programmed, reflect the library's role as a care space, tailored to neighborhood-specific needs. Librarians also pointed out the dissonance between the official profiling of branches and their lived realities: while certain branches are nominally specialized, in practice they operate more flexibly, responding to the everyday demands of users. The hosting of public

events and community programming is often shaped by the physical affordances of each space—its size, furniture, and accessibility within the city. Recognizing these spatial and social dynamics is essential for developing more inclusive urban strategies that align with how libraries are actually used and valued by their communities.

Findings	Prague (Czech Republic)	Bucharest (Romania)
National Organization	Centralized national strategy (2017-2030)	No national strategy, resulting a fragmented approach at a local level
Number of metropolitan libraries	MKP - 46 branches + 2 mobile libraries for 1.28 mil population, equally distributed across districts	BMB-29 branches for 1.70 mil population, unequally distributed across districts
Institutional Role of libraries	Three pillars in a community: civil society (community center), education and cultural wealth, grounded in knowledge	Viewed mainly as cultural/educational resources
Funding	Publicly funded with consistent municipal and national backing	Limited funding, without a national backing, mainly relaying on local budgets
Programs and activities	Structured and coherent inclusive activities across all municipal libraries	Differs from one branch to another, often informally organized, depending on staff initiative
Public perception	Libraries seen as active hubs for community life and social infrastructure	Often underrecognized by administration; valued informally by local communities

Table 1 Comparative data between Prague and Bucharest based on findings.

Discussion

The findings of this paper align closely with the themes outlined in Section "S1: Convergence of Disciplines in Participatory Design Practices", particularly in how architecture and spatial planning intersect with sociology, public policy, and participatory methodologies. The comparative analysis of Bucharest and Prague highlights how cross-disciplinary frameworks—or the absence—shape the spatial and social functions of public libraries, as exemplified in the case of Prague. This approach illustrates how a centralized strategy at a national level, coordinating architecture, policy and urban planning can serve as a "nexus for integrating insights from multiple fields". On the other hand, in Bucharest, the absence of a unified national strategy results in a more fragmented, bottom-up model of development where individual libraries rely heavily on the professional initiative of librarians and the informal needs of their communities. This reflects how user input and local context—key themes in participatory design—become central to the library's function, even in the absence of formal programming. Through semi-structured interviews, the research employs a participatory method to expose local spatial practices and needs that conventional top-down approaches often miss.

The spatial mapping and ethnographic insights reinforce the importance of understanding how space is actually used, not just how it is intended to function. Through these research methods, field observations were structured along two key dimensions: the physical accessibility of libraries and their social function within the community. The spatial mapping was conducted by the research team after engaging with library staff, who provided contextual knowledge about daily operations and challenges. The team drew detailed plans for each library branch, highlighting observations about accessibility, internal circulation, furniture layout, and physical deficiencies of the space. In addition, photographs were systematically taken and annotated, allowing direct observations to be made on images and later cross-referenced with site plans.



Fig. 1, 2, 3. Field observations, "Alexandru Odobescu" Branch Library. Source: Ghenoiu Andra



Fig. 4, 5, 6. Field observations, "Alexandru Odobescu" Branch Library. Source: Ghenoiu Andra

This combination of plan drawings and annotated photographic documentation provided a layered visual record that revealed how spatial configuration, material conditions, and maintenance issues affect the capacity of libraries to function as care-oriented spaces. From an exterior assessment, inadequate accessibility conditions for individuals with mobility impairments were clearly evident—an issue that could be mitigated through modest yet thoughtful interventions, ideally coordinated by interdisciplinary teams.

Through the informal activities hosted within its premises, the library assumes multiple social functions in practice, extending beyond its

conventional role as a reading space to become a site of recreation and social inclusion. These lived roles resonate with the conference's first section focus on socially responsive design and the redefinition of architectural problem-solving through interdisciplinary collaboration. While the flexibility and informality of Bucharest's neighborhood libraries allow them to respond creatively to local needs, this model also carries significant risks. The absence of institutional frameworks means that much of the burden of care falls on individual librarians, whose ability to support diverse communities depends on personal initiative rather than systemic support. Thus, this study advocates for a model where library planning and design are informed by both spatial affordances and social realities, echoing the methodological synthesis and collaborative implications. It suggests that public infrastructure like libraries cannot be effectively developed without considering the convergence of urban design, social care, cultural policy, and community engagement.

Conclusion

The research frames libraries as outcomes of collaborative praxis—spaces shaped through the convergence of architectural thinking, urban planning, sociological inquiry, and community engagement. "The Care Infrastructure in Bucharest" project exemplifies this convergence, bringing together architects, anthropologists and local users in a shared investigation of how care manifests in the city. Through the participatory tools mentioned in the article, the project not only documented the condition of neighborhood libraries, but also facilitated an open dialogue about their future potential as "third spaces" in the urban fabric of Bucharest. One of the many possible ways to integrate libraries into the care infrastructure may lie in understanding a well-structured and organized system and implementing it through meaningful projects that reach the level of public administration, thereby fostering a healthy and inclusive community around these spaces. In this way, the article addresses significant real-world challenges in post-socialist urban contexts and contributes to understanding how cross-disciplinary collaboration can

redefine architectural problem-solving, not through large-scale interventions, but through small, deeply human-scaled networks of care and spatial understandings.

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Infrastructura de îngrijire în București: Un studiu de caz despre biblioteci

(rezumat)

Acest articol explorează modul în care bibliotecile de cartier din București funcționează ca spații de îngrijire în cadrul țesutului urban, propunând că acestea reprezintă componente vitale ale infrastructurii sociale care promovează încrederea, incluziunea și reziliența comunitară. Bazându-se pe teoria feministă a

îngrijirii și pe sociologia urbană, studiul reîncadrează bibliotecile ca actori relaționali și spațiali care susțin viața de zi cu zi dincolo de funcția lor educațională. Cercetarea face parte din proiectul "Infrastructura de îngrijire în București: O cercetare a culturii urbane", coordonat de revista Zeppelin, implicând o echipă interdisciplinară de arhitecți, urbanisti și antropologi. Prin metode participative – incluzând cartografiere, observații de teren și interviuri – proiectul a analizat accesibilitatea, starea și percepția bibliotecilor din mai multe cartiere din București. Comparația cu Praga oferă perspective asupra strategiilor alternative pentru dezvoltarea bibliotecilor. Prin integrarea perspectivelor interdisciplinare și a contribuțiilor utilizatorilor, articolul demonstrează cum procesele de design colaborativ pot contribui la reimaginarea spațiilor urbane subutilizate ca infrastructuri active de îngrijire. Studiul contribuie la tema conferinței prin evidențierea rolului arhitecturii în facilitarea practicilor urbane inclusive, centrate pe îngrijire.