

Co-producing third spaces around Depoul Victoria, Bucharest

Alexandra-Elena Burtea^{1*}

¹“Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urban Planning, Bucharest, Romania

*ae.burtea@gmail.com

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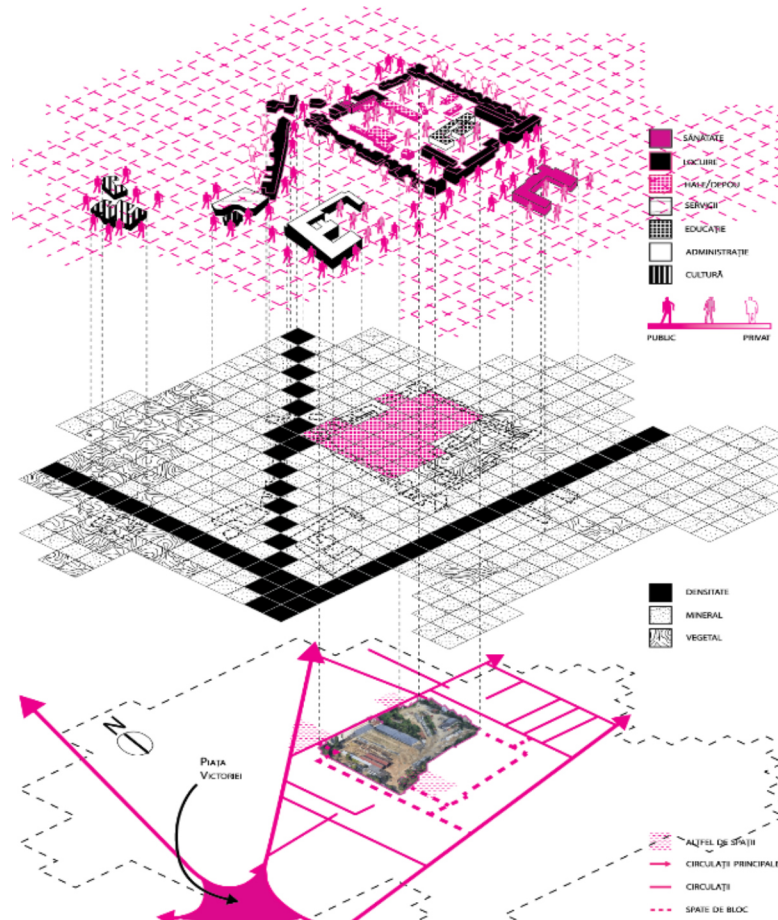
Abstract

This paper examines the Depoul Victoria project as a model for decolonizing architectural education and practice through participatory, interdisciplinary methods. By suspending a conventional design competition, the project enabled early engagement with local communities to reimagine an industrial site's future based on social realities rather than imposed briefs. Volunteers conducted historical, sociological, and spatial analyses, producing documentation that informed a shared, community-centered vision. This process legitimized often-invisible work like coordination and listening, highlighting its importance in architectural pedagogy. The initiative demonstrates how integrating residents' imaginative rights can build trust and generate social capital, redefining the architect's role beyond design. By analyzing these outcomes, the paper proposes a framework transferable to other Romanian urban contexts, advocating for systemic change toward a socially engaged, reflective practice that fosters inclusive and sustainable urban transformation.

Keywords: Participatory architecture, Adaptive reuse, Decolonizing education, Transdisciplinary methods, Community engagement, Differential space

Introduction

Fig. 1. The urban context of Depoul Victoria. Source: *Infrastructuri culturale-comunitare: Camera Urbană: Oraşul Negociat, Vol 3 Modele Alternative de Infrastructură Culturală, Bucharest, UNATC Press, 2025 p. 61*



The text advocates for detaching architectural knowledge from the territorial conditions that reinforce its hegemonic (and institutional) character. The process of unlinking can and must be, in virtue of fostering a critical consciousness of the profession, realized through transversal methodologies that surpass the customary discourse

centered solely on concept and presentation, the latter currently being imparted through formal education. In this sense, the term decolonization can be metaphorically used to empower professionals in the field to reflect on the complex realities of territories and the actors who socially produce architecture within them. Presenting the framework of the Depoul Victoria project aims to contribute to a national paradigm shift in architectural practice, while also promoting an interdisciplinary, sustainable methodology that generates social capital and redefines the role of the architect beyond design.

The URBOTECA FELLOWSHIP 2024 – DEPOUL VICTORIA CASE project enabled volunteers and professionals to make the public envision a non-totalizing, non-privatized future for the depot. The main scope of the action was to galvanize public awareness – reaching beyond the daily lives of those living directly within the depot’s vicinity – of the possibility of transforming the industrial site’s partial ruin into a constellation of third spaces. The case study was framed around the integration of the quintuple-helix model in the local context, thereby bringing together public and private sectors, academia, media outlets and local communities in the participatory planning process.

Victoria Depot was the first tram depot in Bucharest. The industrial complex was inaugurated in the early 1870s, initially serving as a warehouse for horse-drawn trams. It was expanded and modernized in the 1920s, succeeded by two incidents in 1944 and 1968 that heavily damaged its infrastructure, with only two truncated halls remaining. Over its 150-year history, the depot accumulated valuable documents and artifacts and occasionally served as a place for historical events. Although proposed for classification as industrial heritage, the two remaining halls are in semi-ruin, with improvised repairs, isolated within a closed urban block, and functioning independently from the surrounding city.

Literature Review

This paper examines the relevance of Henri Lefebvre's theory of differential space (Lefevre, 1991), understood as a socially produced alternative to the capital-oriented, simultaneously homogenized and fragmented, abstract space. What Lefebvre regards as the stark opposite of socially produced space, he identifies as the state-mode of spatial production, universally contingent on the abstraction of space. David Cunningham later on argues that the simple positing of difference against abstraction risks denying the possibility that differential space could ever emerge in concrete form (Cunningham, 2008). Indeed, some degree of abstraction is necessary in order to imagine an alternative mode of social life and to ground a politics of emancipation and transformation. In this sense, space must be grasped as a concrete abstraction in order to be differentiated.

The text articulates a framework that juxtaposes spatial theory with policymaking and the dynamics of power, with the aim of developing a legislatively coherent approach to socially produced architecture. By critically converging Lefebvre's insights across urban studies, law, and feminist geography (Massey, 1995), the paper identifies the conceptual intersections upon which the workshop's relational theory-based approach is founded.

Central to this approach is Lefebvre's notion of the right to difference, the active core of the right to the city (Harvey, 2008), without which the latter risks being deradicalized – either reduced to institutionalized principles of human rights or neutralized into a political tool for managing both reactionary and progressive agendas. The right to difference must therefore be directed toward concrete demands for the appropriation of space. Ultimately, the success of any project aspiring to create differential space lies in the conjunction between an enactment of the right to the city radicalized through difference and a right to difference grounded in political struggle.

Methodology

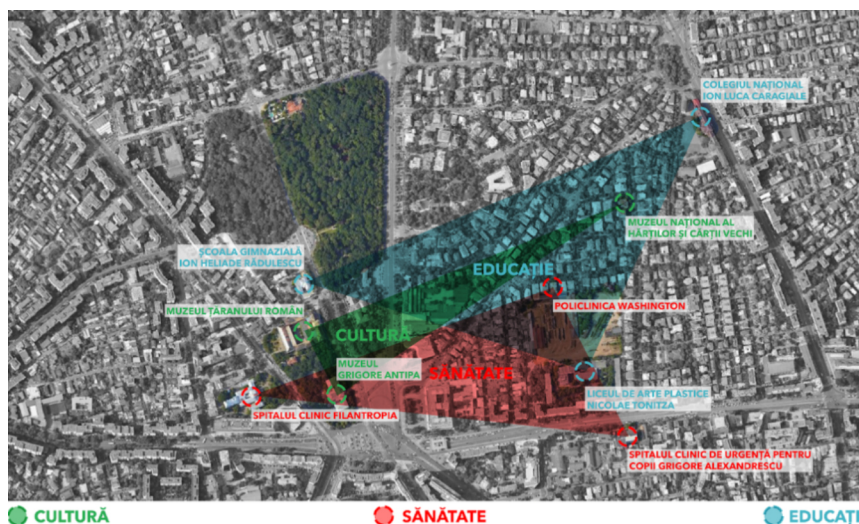


Fig. 2. Triangles of interest. Source: Author

Victoria Depot is currently administered by the Bucharest Transport Company (STB), which manages the public transportation network of the capital. Based on STB's claims that the depot has enough attributes to justify converting one of its buildings into a public transport museum, ADIZMB, together with the URBOTECA fellows, carried out actions to satisfy this overarching vision by articulating the necessity of developing a Zonal Urban Plan (PUZ).

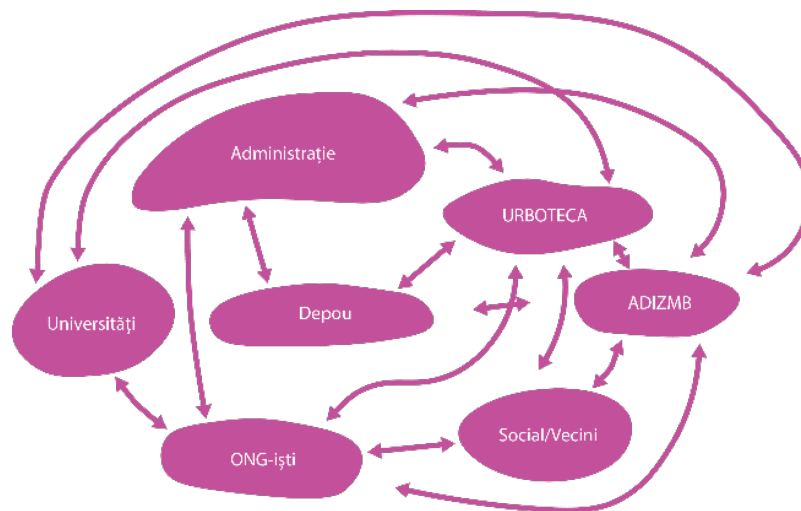
To initiate the process, ADIZMB convened a diverse group of stakeholders - including representatives from municipal institutions, transport authorities, consultants, and the associative sector - each contributing distinct and valuable perspectives. Their input ranged from honoring the history of public transportation and proposing a design competition, to advocating for public participation and analyzing the site's evolving urban function. In addition, independent actors from the arts and creative industries brought expertise gained from other heritage sites, while the Bucharest Community Foundation mobilized civic groups and NGOs. Educational institutions also played

a key role: students and teachers from the adjacent high school actively participated in envisioning its most socially meaningful transformation. The implementation of the Quadruple Helix collaboration model relied on the active engagement of all these parties.

The process employed a hybrid set of participatory research methods, combining photo-elicitation, semi-structured interviews, online and on-site questionnaires, and direct observation. These methods were complemented by historical, sociological, and spatial analyses conducted by volunteer teams from both technical and humanistic disciplines. Supporting documentation such as maps, interviews, and archival materials proved pivotal for establishing the participatory framework of the initiative.

In a subsequent phase, transversal communication technologies were deployed to engage a wider public and scale the initial local initiative to a city-wide audience. This included digital presentations showcased at cultural events and an online questionnaire designed to engage Bucharest's residents in a participatory, imaginative exercise aimed at shaping a socially responsive future for the depot.

Fig. 3. Relational map.
Source: Author



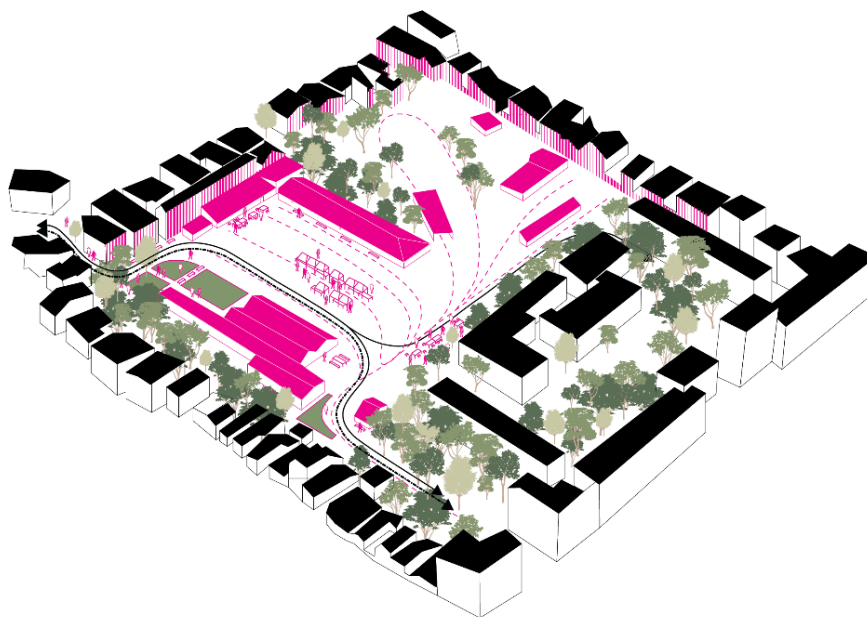


Fig. 4. Possibilities.
Source: Author

Results

The initiative fulfilled its primary objective – the deliberate suspension of the architectural contest in order to accumulate sufficient knowledge to enable a socially informed formulation of the competition brief, pursuant to which submissions attentive to industrial heritage and its potential for adaptive, community-oriented reuse could be developed. A detailed presentation of the results can be found in the collaborative volume *Infrastructuri culturale-comunitare: Camera Urbană: Orașul Negociat, Vol 3 – Modele Alternative de Infrastructură Culturală*. Two distinct conclusions emerge from this work, offering valuable guidance for future strategies in Romania's urban context.

First, our experience highlighted the vital role of detailed stakeholder mapping in ensuring the smooth progression of the collaborative process. The thorough identification of all relevant actors prior to the

project's initiation proved essential for structuring effective engagement and avoiding critical omissions. Equally important was the involvement of individuals already familiar with collaborative mechanisms, particularly within the Quadruple Helix framework, whose participation significantly facilitated the overall workflow. In parallel, developing a nuanced understanding of urban stakeholders – including their profiles, motivations, and interests – emerged as a prerequisite for establishing a meaningful and productive framework for dialogue. The research on actor's particularities enabled the design of communication and engagement strategies that resonated with participants and supported a shared vision. Our findings underscored the need to adapt approaches to stakeholders' varying levels of engagement: in the Romanian context, the population has generally not been accustomed to voluntarily assuming the role of an urban actor, and consequently, the formulation of attractive and context-sensitive development options tailored to each stakeholder group was pivotal for stimulating both interest and sustained commitment.

The second conclusion reflects the fact that the action was favorably received by policymakers and citizens. Following the initial actions at Victoria Depot, the Three District City Hall launched a questionnaire to gather public input on the "Republica" Pipe Factory near Laminor Hall, a historic monument within the Malaxa industrial complex. Prepared by SC URBAN SCOPE S.R.L., the questionnaire, like its predecessor, situates the site within its historical, urban, and architectural context while highlighting dysfunctions and challenges to urban regeneration – compounded by multiple stakeholders with divergent interests. This process, building on URBOTECA's earlier initiative, exemplifies the application of New European Bauhaus (N.E.B.) principles in Romania. By engaging all stakeholders in analysis, diagnosis, design, and implementation, N.E.B. fosters an inclusive and participatory framework that shifts architectural discourse from projects to processes.

Discussion

Regarding the initiative's pedagogical component, paramount importance lay in the diverse nature of individuals forming the team's horizontal structure. The consolidation of efforts from people of different age groups in a participatory action allows for the organic transmission of knowledge as an inherent consequence of interaction. Experiences such as this hold significant value for the student, as it allows them to position themselves in relation to the project – not regarded as a product shaped and directed by their professor, but as a negotiation between the actual, the possible and the bodies of knowledge they possess along with their contextual operationalization. This model of teamwork helps pupils develop a personal sense of responsibility, giving them the freedom to act on their own agency. In addition, participation in such collaborative and non-prescriptive processes as an alternative throughout the cumulative years of architecture school can, one might argue, generate a simple sense of satisfaction to the student.

As of now, architectural pedagogy itself is caught between architectural templates marked by territorial conditions and trans-local dialectics between form and concept that conservatively structure the curriculum. These same flawed pedagogies, after graduation, amplify the profit-first logic of design studio programs, which is already naturalized and difficult to critique without a foundation of social consciousness developed through pedagogical tools. It is for this reason that horizontal, non-institutionalized pedagogies play a crucial role in both the introduction of the student within the actual building-productive apparatus and its perversions and enabling the socially conscious educator to instill this sentiment in their students, thus preparing them for tackling the chaos inside the capitalist building economy.

Regarding the initiative's up-scale potential, of critical importance is the understanding of architecture as the material framework in which life unfolds. Introducing a notion of the "in-common" in architecture produces a series of reactive challenges from the political,

administrative, and economic systems. One of these difficulties is that actions in clear opposition to institutional structures, as well as informal, neutral ones, are usually eroded within the abstract space of capital flow. Tactical urbanism emerges in the context of the governance crisis of cities, where neither states nor market economies have succeeded in ensuring universal access to what should be considered fundamental public rights. The key vulnerability in this situation is assimilation into capitalist logic, which tends to neuter socially aware architectural initiatives by standardizing the linguistic frameworks and formats used in community participation. The right to difference must be grounded in political struggles for the right to the city, otherwise it collapses into a disembodied and reified concept of diversity, which remains in the discursive realm.

By bridging formal and informal approaches, participatory methods such as the one presented can be scaled up to systematically generate change within the system. For emancipatory social relationships to have a real impact, they must take material form through social modes of space production. The reclaiming of collective rights cannot occur in the abstract - it requires its own spaces and specialists.

A valuable consequence of these observations is the recognition that there is space within disciplines such as architecture, situated at the intersection of creativity, humanitarianism and engineering, to enhance their capacity to reproduce sustainably.

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Co-producerea spațiilor terțe în jurul Depoului Victoria, București

(rezumat)

Această lucrare analizează proiectul Depoul Victoria ca un model pentru decolonizarea educației și practicii arhitecturale prin metode participative și interdisciplinare. Prin suspendarea unui concurs de design convențional, proiectul a facilitat implicarea timpurie a comunităților locale pentru a reimagina viitorul unui sit industrial pe baza realităților sociale, în locul unor brief-uri impuse. Voluntarii au realizat analize istorice, sociologice și spațiale, elaborând documentații care au informat o viziune comună, centrată pe comunitate. Acest proces a legitimat munca adesea invizibilă, precum coordonarea și ascultarea, subliniind importanța acesteia în pedagogia arhitecturală. Inițiativa demonstrează cum integrarea drepturilor imaginative ale rezidenților poate construi încredere și genera capital social, redefinind rolul arhitectului dincolo de design. Prin analiza acestor rezultate, lucrarea propune un cadru transferabil altor contexte urbane românești, pledând pentru o schimbare sistemică către o practică angajată social, reflexivă, care să promoveze transformarea urbană incluzivă și sustenabilă.