Religious History and Culture of the Balkans

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3. Expected and Unexpected Authorship of Religious Elements in Late Nineteenth, Early Twentieth Century Bucharest Architecture

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Abstract

The hodge-podge architectural heritage is among Bucharest’s most unique attractions, a result of the multicultural background of those who contributed to its modernization. In this respect, a paramount role was played by Jewish and Armenian architects, who designed emblematic buildings that still constitute today landmarks of the Romanian capital, but also businessmen who commissioned private mansions and public utility edifices (hotels, restaurants, hospitals, etc.) that transformed the city. From the nineteenth century onwards, and particularly in the interwar period, Bucharest was a crossroad of civilizations, where East met West, and various ethnic and religious groups coexisted. The best exemplification of this outstanding circumstance is the fact that during this time Christian architects designed not only churches, as one would expect, but also synagogues; while Jewish craftsmen decorated not only synagogues, but also churches. Moreover, Jewish businessmen commissioned Armenian architects to design their houses and decorate them with Armenian religious symbols. The
article brings to light several of the more interesting cases, demonstrating the complexity of religious presence in Bucharest’s architectural legacy.

Keywords: religion, churches, synagogues, identity, architecture, heritage, Bucharest, Jewish history, Armenian history

Introduction

Most historians assert that the history of Bucharest begins with a late fourteenth century citadel perched along the bank of the Dâmbovița river (Giurescu, 42). According to an extant 1459 document, the citadel expanded into a village surrounding the princely residence of Vlad the Impaler, also known as Dracula. In mid-sixteenth century, Prince Mircea Ciobanul made the city a true capital by establishing the royal court, the ruins of which are visible today, as well as other administrative offices. It was exactly at that time that Sephardic Jewish merchants from the Ottoman Empire began settling in Bucharest. Many of them rented shops from the Orthodox Church, the owner of much of the land, thus making available an array of foreign goods for the local elite. Also around that time – 1581, to be exact – the first Armenian Church was built. During the following centuries, Bucharest was plundered or burned down several times, but was rebuilt each time through the combined efforts of its rulers and citizens. Despite these recurring drawbacks, the city managed to undergo constant economic development, in large part due to its excellent location at the crossroads of the main commercial routes of Europe. Jewish, Armenian, Turkish, Greek, German, Croatian, and Russian merchants on their way to and from the Ottoman Empire, Russia, Poland, Germany, and many other destinations, chose Bucharest as a layover. Consequently, many merchants decided to settle there, boosting local as well as international economy and financial flows (Giurescu).

This influx of people of various cultural backgrounds, along with the temporary presence of various military and civil administrations, left their mark on the city’s image, producing the somewhat chaotic architectural heritage that today adds to the city’s special allure. Iorga’s mid-nineteenth century description of Bucharest provides a snapshot of this mixture:

. . . there were beer gardens, like that of K. Roth, “Italian and French restaurants,” managed by foreigners or by local Jews, Viennese coffee houses, such as Schedwitz’s “zum Mohren,” Western confectionaries, like Gh. Dertmann’s. This was the time when Western style high class hotels were built, like “Hotel de France” . . . Horaczek’s “Hotel zur Stadt Wien,” “Hotel de Londres,” Hotel St. Petersburg. The elegant women had their hair done by stylists, such as M-me Wagner “aus Wien,” dressed up at Viennese fashion designers like Amalia Eckerbach or “demoazel Maria” . . . there were perfume shops, such as that of Madalene Marcovici in the Villacrosse Passage, and luxury gardening stores such as that of Balmain. German tailors like Klenk, Singer, or Frank, who manufactured and sold, according to his portfolio,

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1 Bucharest was occupied by the Habsburgs in 1716, 1789, 1854-1856; the Russians in 1768-1774, 1806-1812, 1828-1843, 1853-1854; and the Ottomans in 1848-1851.

2 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Romanian into English are my own.
“underwear” and “Jacman gloves,” served the elegant men. Gloves could also be bought from a foreign manufacturer, a certain Schakowski (293).

The best example of the city’s architectural *mixtum compositum* is still visible along Calea Victoriei, perennially one of the main thoroughfares of Bucharest. There one finds two palaces facing one another across the busy street, built roughly contemporaneously around the turn of the century. The French-style building, which now houses the Savings Bank, was erected by the French Swiss architect Paul Gottereau, while the German-style palace, now the National History Museum, was designed and built by Alexandru Săvulescu, a Romanian architect. It was also around 1900 that two other important edifices were built, namely, the Austrian-style Bragadiru Palace, designed by Austrian architect Anton Shuckerl (1894), and the beautiful neo-Brancovan (neo-Romanian) style3 museum designed for the National Geological Institute by Romanian architect Victor Ștefănescu (1906). Despite Bucharest’s hectic turn-of-the-century urban planning, with architects and engineers imported from abroad (especially France, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and England), nineteenth-century Bucharest high life was mostly influenced by everything French – language, clothing, and overall lifestyle – so that by the turn of the century, Bucharest came to be called Little Paris, and Paris of the East.

“*It is only natural that Jews should build chapels in Jewish cemeteries . . .*”

The first Jew to make a significant impact on Bucharest’s urban landscape, regarded as one of the most important figures of his time, was Leon Schwartz (1857-1931), better known by the romanianization of his name, Leonida Negrescu. A graduate of the Bucharest School for Roads and Bridges (1879), and the second architect from Romania to obtain a diploma from the Institute des Beaux Arts in Paris (1887), Schwartz assumed the position of chief architect with the Romanian Railroads Company and, later, with the Ministry of Religious Cults and Public Instruction. He built extensively in the years leading up to World War I, employing a typically French style.

Many of his edifices, including the Orfeu music store, located near the Comedy Theatre (today the Odeon); Hotel Splendid; the Commercial Academy, with its Cinema Regal; and the Jockey Club, with its famous Café High Life, later Café Corso – all of which adorned Calea Victoriei around 1900 – were demolished, in part by King Carol II some thirty-nine years later, in order to make room for an esplanade in front of the Royal Palace, and the rest by the communists in the 1970s, in order to accommodate their unsightly, socialist-style high-rise apartments. Other Schwartz structures have survived, including the Roman Arena, an open air concert hall built in Carol I park, in cooperation with the French urban landscape architect Edouard Redont and Romanian engineer Elie Radu (1906); the Romanian Athaeneum, erected in 1886-1889 by French architect Albert Galleron and Elie Radu, to which Schwartz added an extension and a monumental marble staircase (1893-1897); the Café Amsterdam building on Covaci Street; the Negroponte Mansion on Negustorilor Street; the extension of the Filipescu

3 The neo-Brancovan (also known as neo-Romanian) architectural style is a mixture of Eastern Byzantine elements including short arcades and thick colonades integrated with local peasant architectural and ethnographic motifs, and adorned with traces of Ottoman and late-Italian Renaissance motifs. This traditional Romanian style was established by Italian architects building for the Wallachian prince, Constantin Brâncoveanu, around the turn of the eighteenth century (Mandache).
Cesianu Manor on Calea Victoriei, which today hosts part of the Bucharest City Museum; as well as his own family residence on Radu Calomfirescu Street.

The Roman Arena (1906)  
(Waldman and Ciuciu)

Despite his attraction for everything French, Schwartz never forgot his Jewishness. One of his most emblematic buildings that have survived to this day is the magnificent chapel in the Filantropia Jewish cemetery, a genuine monument of fine architecture. Erected in keeping with his plans in 1908, the chapel is an impressive construction that stands proof of its
designer’s determination to make a point of his faith at a time when being Jewish was quite challenging, to say the least.  

“... and that Armenians should build Armenian churches”

Armenian architect Krikor/Grigore Cerchez (1850-1927), a contemporary of Schwartz, offers a similar example. Cerchez graduated from the École Centrale des Arts et Manufactures in Paris. During 1876-1879, he served as municipal Bucharest’s chief engineer. Cerchez favored the neo-Brancovan architectural style, as exemplified by the Dissescu Mansion, built in 1910-1912 as a private residence, and the School of Architecture (1912-1927), an impressive public building. Cerchez was also commissioned to oversee the modernization of the royal palaces on Kiseleff Boulevard (1910) and Cotroceni Boulevard (1919), which he enhanced with neo-Brancovan architectural motifs. Thus with him we have an Armenian helping to make Bucharest look more Romanian.

Cerchez often designed his buildings on the basis of foreign models. This is evidenced by the Comedy Theatre (today the Odeon), inaugurated on Christmas Day, 1911, which boasts the only Italian stage with a sliding roof in all of Europe; the Niculescu Dorobanțu/Lahovary Mansion on Orlando Street, built in a French neo-Renaissance style, apparently a replica of

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4 This was a time when Romanian Jews were denied naturalization, despite many local and international objections, leading many Jews to convert to Christianity.
the Louis XII Castle at Blois; and the Niculescu Dorobanțu Mansion on Gheorghe Manu Street, erected in a similar French neo-Renaissance style, but with neo-Gothic accents. These latter two constructions, which differ in style, were built for the same family at roughly same time (1896-1911). A series of other private mansions designed according to his architectural plans are still standing. These include the Dr. Petre Herescu villa, on Dacia Boulevard, built with the assistance of Alexandru Clavel between 1911 and 1913; the Manu Palace, a replica of the Hotel Biron (currently the Rodin Museum) in Paris, built for General Gheorghe Manu’s family in 1915 on Aviatorilor Boulevard; and the neo-classical Academy of Economic Studies, built in 1916-1925, along with Arghir Culina and Edmond van Saanen Algi in Piața Romană.

However, like Schwartz, Cerchez, too, assumed a double religious and cultural identity and, besides these revolutionary architectural projects, contributed to the construction of buildings for his own Armenian community. Together with Dumitru Maimarolu, another Armenian architect, they erected the Armenian Church of Bucharest, a replica of the one in Vagharşapat, Ečmiadzin, Armenia (1911-1915). They also built the surrounding complex, which includes the Episcopal residence, a library, museum, conference hall, kindergarten, and school. Today it serves as the headquarters of the Armenian Union. In the church, one can see several paintings by Bassano adorning the inner walls. The mural painting was restored in 1971 by Romanian church painter Eugen Profeta (Stoica and Ionescu-Ghinea: 98-102).
“But what do we do with Christians who redesign synagogues . . .?”

In 1846, leaders of the Polish Jewish Community requested the mayor’s approval to buy a piece of land in the Sfânta Vineri (Holy Friday) quarter, with plans for building a hospital, a school, a synagogue, and a house for the rabbi. The Mayor’s office recommended that the request be approved on basis of the fact that Jews, too, have a right to maintain the welfare of their community. Thus, in December 1846, construction on the Great Polish Synagogue began on Saul Street (later renamed Dr. Schachmann Street, but currently Clucerul Udricani Street), at the intersection with Sinagogii Street (today Vasile Adamache Street) in the Popescu quarter. The synagogue was built according to the architectural style of brothers Israil Herş and Aşer Ancel, under contract with Anschel Hirsch. Unfortunately, construction was interrupted several times, the first when Christian residents of the Sfânta Vineri and Udricani quarters
petitioned the Mayor’s office that the Jews not be allowed to build a hospital and a synagogue in their quarter, prompting the Mayor to call a halt to the work until the conflict could be resolved. In April 1847, Gheorghe Bibescu approved the building of the synagogue and school, but not the hospital. Not long after that, the Internal Affairs Ministry approved the request that the State’s architect check the new synagogue’s stress resistance, since it was going to accommodate at least 2,000 parishioners. The Ministry asked the Mayor’s office to organize elections for the community’s leadership so that authorities could decide together with the new leaders concerning the organization of the new synagogue and the number of hevras and prayer houses to be demolished (Benjamin and Gyémánt: 426-28, 431, 446, 450-51). The synagogue was repaired between 1865 and 1867, and in 1903, Polish Catholic architect Julius D’Alfonce de St. Omer gave it a new look. In 1909 the building was extended according to Romanian architect Petre Antonescu’s plans. Between 1913 and 1915, it was electrified and refurnished, after which two new buildings were added to the complex, in 1926 and 1930. The synagogue was renovated in 1932, and in 1936 Gershon Horowitz painted its ceiling (Waldman and Ciuciu). Restored in 1980, the building is a historical monument, hosting the Holocaust Museum of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania.

In another case, in 1870, a Russian Synagogue began operating along Șelari Street, on a plot of land that had been purchased by the Mount Sinai Society three years earlier. Formerly, the site was the location of a prayer house built in 1806 by the Haberdashers’ Guild, which burned down in 1847, forcing the guild to move to temporary quarters in an improvised space in the Golescu Inn. A new building was erected for the synagogue in 1904, again following D’Alfonce de St. Omer’s architectural plans. Called Or Kadosh (The Holy Light), the synagogue was extended in 1917, restored in 1948, and demolished the communists in 1987, like so many others (Parusi: 309).

Julius D’Alfonce de St. Omer was the descendant of a Huguenot family that had fled France to escape persecution, spent time in Spain (where they acquired the name Alfons), and ended up in Poland, where they were granted the status of nobility under the patronage of St.
Omer. Julius and his brother, Alexander, came to Bucharest at the end of the nineteenth century and opened a small architectural services firm. They did not only design synagogues, but private mansions, like the beautiful Villa Pillat (1884), still standing on Nicolae Iorga Street; the Nae Filitti Manor (1893), on Romană Street; the opulent Costa Foru Mansion (1894) on Dealul Mitropoli, in the typically French “hotel particulier” style, today a historical monument; and a small house on Popa Soare Street, replaced during the interwar period by a high-rise apartment building.

“... and Jews who decorate churches?”

In 1897, about the time that D’Alfonse de St. Omer was redesigning synagogues, the Jewish brothers Itzik and Iosif Serafim were hired to repaint Popa Hieria church (later renamed the Church of All Saints, or the Church of the Sibyls) on Calea Moșiilor (Parusi: 84, 453, 461). The church, founded by Metropolitan Daniel in 1728 in memory of deceased members of his family, was adorned with unusual icons on its exterior walls. Painted around 1817, the frescoes depicted nineteen figures comprising philosophers and sibyls proclaiming the advent of the Redeemer (Pippidi). The sibyls appear in Romanian folk literature of the sixteenth century, but are less visible in iconography; however, the Greek philosophers were old acquaintances, since they adorn the Bucovina painted monasteries as well. Only one of the sibyls, Persica, is visibly identifiable today. Among the philosophers, apparently sketched by Jewish hands, one sees Aristotle, Plato, Plutarch, and Thucydides. It is also the case that most (if not all) church rooftops made of metal were installed by Jewish artisans, since they had an official monopoly on tinsmith works in the Romanian capital since the nineteenth century.

Church of the Sibyls, 1728, paintings from 1817
“And what about Armenians who build houses decorated with Armenian religious models for Jews?”

Yet another Armenian Christian architect who contributed significantly to the urban development of Bucharest was Cristofi Cerchez (1872-1955). Unrelated to the aforementioned Krikor Cerchez, Cristofi Cerchez obtained a diploma in construction engineering from the Polytechnic School of Bucharest (1894) and, breaking with the French tradition, earned a diploma in architecture from the Institute of Architecture and Fine Arts of Milan in 1898. Upon returning to Bucharest, Cerchez began building residential and public/commercial edifices. He authored the architectural plans of many important public buildings, most of which unfortunately have not survived. These include the National Archives (1908-1909), demolished in 1986, and the Ambulance Offices (1934), destroyed by bombs in 1944. Cerchez was known to have credited his creativity to both Romanian and Armenian influences. Like Krikor Cerchez, many of his works reveal a special passion for the neo-Brancovan style. This was the case with the two extinct public buildings mentioned above, but also with the Polizu Maternity hospital, still standing along Gheorghe Polizu Street, in Sector 1.

Cerchez’s statement about the source of his influences was especially true for his private residences, which include the Nicolae Minovici villa (1905), a genuine landmark of Bucharest’s neo-Romanian architecture; the Sofia Candiano Popescu villa (1911); the Moldovan and Wallachian villas built for the Ionescu brothers (1914); the Maria Răducanu villa (1923); the Cerchez villa (1927), built for himself and his family; the Eufrosina Mătășaru villa (1932); his brother, Nicolae Cerchez’s villa (1932); the Nicolae Georgescu-Ștefănescu villa (renovated in 1945); and the Micu Zentler villa on Mântuleasa Street (1911), built for the director of the Oil Products Distribution Company, one of the main financers of the Choral Temple and among the most prominent Jewish figures of his time. This building is neo-Romanian on the outside, but on the inside one can still see the original iron-wrought elements of Armenian influence (Marinache: 28), as well as the painted wooden ceiling decorations and lamps depicting Armenian entrelac motifs (77), which marked the beginning of a new era in the architect’s work. Then came the N. Stanovici villa (1914), whose interior decoration includes a mixture of Romanian elements, including the Wallachian coat-of-arms, as well as some Brancovan and
Armenian ones. The latter are represented by the uniquely Armenian mosaics, khachkar cross, and entrelacs (96). Finally, there is the N. Ionescu-Brăila villa (1926), which reveals the neo-Brancovan influence of the Potlogi Palace, as well as the Armenian influence of the Melik Mansion, one of the oldest houses still standing in Bucharest (152).  

In addition to this, Cerchez also built eclectic constructions, such as the building of the Franco-Romanian Bank, today the Czech Embassy (1909); the building at Carol I Boulevard 66, which he erected for his own family (1915); the Argetoianu villa (1920-1921); the Georgescu-Ştefăneşti villa (1945), and a few rather modernist buildings, including the Căpățână Building in the Cotroceni quarter. Perhaps most interesting is the fact that Cristofi Cerchez also contributed to the construction of Orthodox churches, including Popa Nan (1910-1916), and Orthodox parish houses, such as that of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul church (1926-1927), a neo-Romanian type building, and another at Mântuleasa church (1928), which except for the balcony is rather universal.

Conclusion

In sum, one can safely conclude that Bucharest presents a textbook example of diverse authorship of religious elements in its turn of the twentieth-century architecture. Despite being a nation plagued by nationalism and antisemitism between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, one finds, rather unexpectedly so, Christian architects redesigning synagogues for religious, political, and economic reasons, Jewish craftsmen painting figures of

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5 The Melik Mansion was built in 1760 by a local boyar. In 1815, the house was sold to an Armenian merchant whose granddaughter got married to the Armenian architect Iacob Melik, who refurbished the building in 1857; hence the name under which it is remembered today.
ancient Greek philosophers on churches, and Armenian architects building mansions decorated with Armenian religious symbols for notables of the Choral Temple, the flagship of the local Jewish community.

It is quite obvious that, for good or for bad, there is a complicated mixture of legacies at work in local inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations and in public policy, naturally reflected in the city’s image and architectural heritage. It is indeed a pity that despite the existence of some legal provisions for the preservation of historical monuments, monuments of architecture, and protected areas, local authorities today often grant developers authorizations to destroy them, either by changing their appearance to the point of unrecognition, or by demolishing them in order to build bigger and more profitable constructions. This will certainly deal an irreparable blow to Bucharest’s unique and irreplaceable character.

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