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**Two Decades of Evolution in Cluj-Napoca's
Suburbs**

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Two Decades of Evolution in Cluj-Napoca's Suburbs

Paul Mutica

Abstract

Sixteen years ago, Cluj was little more than a post-socialist backwater town in one of the poorest countries in Europe. Despite having a University tradition, few westerners could really pinpoint it on the map and even fewer ventured here as tourists or students. This was partly the fault of local administration policy that emphasized an introvert and overly nationalistic attitude. Foreign investors were also deterred in their intentions to start a business here so the city fell behind many other Romanian cities that opened their doors to foreign capital. All this was about to change radically in the few years that followed. In a slingshot effect, in just a short period of time, spanning from 2004, Cluj became known for its booming economy, high real estate value, it became the Romanian "Silicon Valley", a hub for youth culture and a home for many cultural events culminating in it being named European youth capital for 2015. All this meant that Cluj made up for its lack of progress the years before and made the existing city overcrowded. People, especially youngsters, decided that, in order to stay and work in Cluj, they had to move to the suburbs. The metropolitan area of Cluj experienced a continuous growth these years and real estate value skyrocketed to the highest level in the country, even above Bucharest. The purpose of this paper is to offer a succinct overview of the development of these suburbs, all of them derived from former rural settlements that grew rapidly in just a few years. Was this quantitative growth matched by a qualitative increase in the welfare of Cluj's citizens or was it more the object of real estate speculation?

Keywords: Cluj-Napoca, Suburban Development, Urban Sprawl.

Introduction

Central and Eastern Europe are affected by a downward trend in their total population due to a mixture of small overall birth rate and emigration towards richer countries in Western and Northern Europe. This trend means that most areas suffer a major population decrease and Romania is no exception. From 22.8 million in 1992 to roughly 19.7 million in 2016, the resident population has decreased by roughly 15% in two and a half decades.¹ Yet there are few exceptions that have actually experienced an almost overnight increase in population, notably some large cities, the metropolitan area of Cluj-Napoca being one of them.

Cluj has always been the unofficial capital of Transylvania and a major university center in Romania but only lately did this increase in population become somewhat spectacular, especially if corroborated with the aforementioned national downtrend. For example, last year alone the county of Cluj saw the authorization of more than 1 million square meters of residential area, placing it first on the national list, above Bucharest.²

During the communist regime, Cluj was forcefully changed into a heavy industry center, with loads of new citizens/workers who were dislodged from the countryside and moved into newly built blocks of flats in the new neighborhoods of Gheorgheni and Grigorescu and later Mănăştur and Mărăşti. It was the first major expansion of the city into adjacent territory, sometimes engulfing surrounding rural settlements, like the old village of Mănăştur in the process. It was a planned expansion, similar to that of other important cities in the communist era and meant that the city now developed along the Someş river valley, stretching 10 km from the West to the East.

Due to its location between several steep, forested hills that are very complicated (and expensive) to build upon, this practice came to a halt after 1990. Not only the physical barrier but the political context also meant that the city would stagnate for more than a decade, as local authorities failed to grasp the opportunity foreign investors might actually mean for the city's wellbeing. As such, Cluj remained dormant for another decade and a half until the mayor changed and new opportunities began to arrive.

With the nationalistic and chauvinistic tendencies of the former establishemnt gone by 2004, Cluj actually started to open its gates to investors, tourists and even foreign students. Following 2007, the University of Medicine alone has been well known to accomodate more than 2200 foreign students that have a viable alternative to studying medicine in France, for example, and can eventually return there as their diploma is now fully recognized.³

The city's overall economy shifted from the heavy industrial to service providing and consumer based. The middle class started to become proeminent and land value rose to a maximum. The city expanded rapidly to

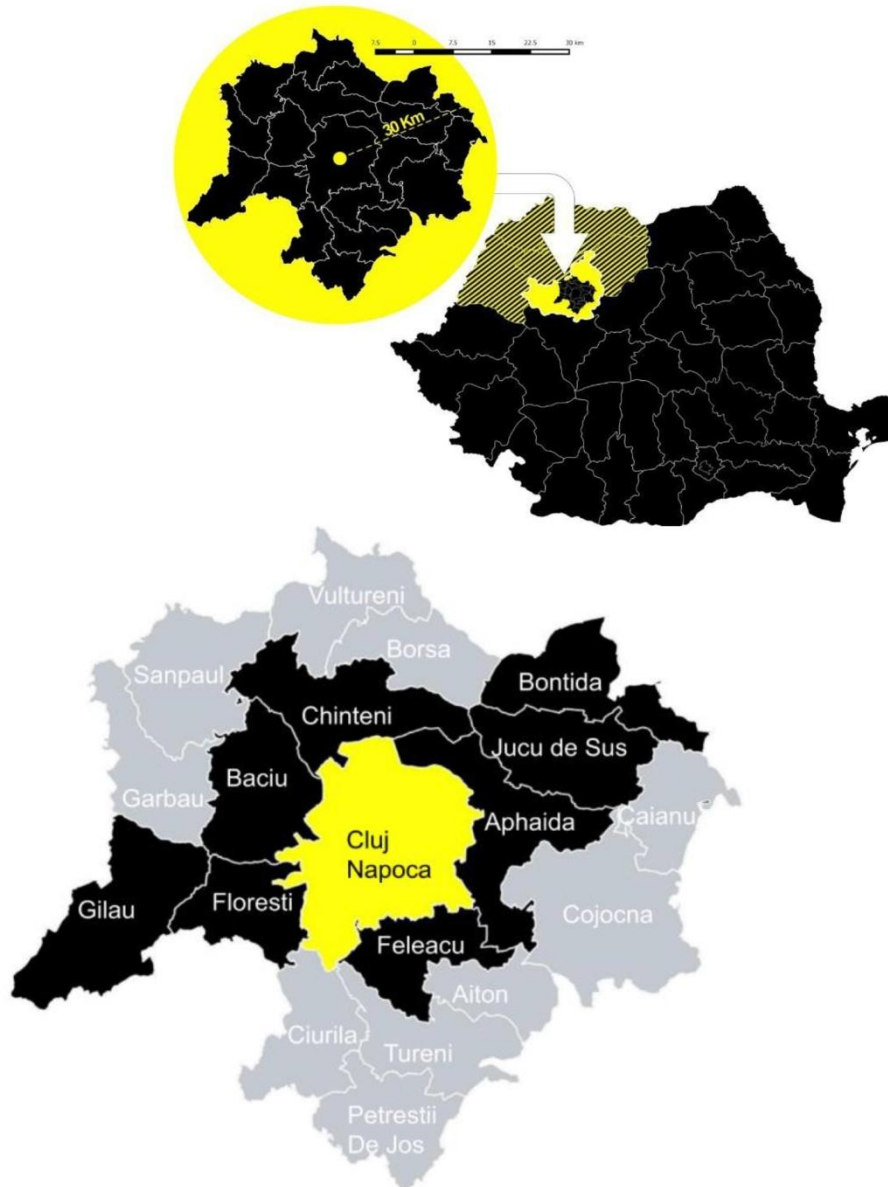
¹ *Institutul Național de Statistică [National Statistics Institute]*, TEMPO-Online Serii de Timp [Time Sequences]: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/>, accessed April 2017.

² Ibidem.

³ According to UMF (University of Medicine and Pharmacology, Cluj-Napoca): <https://www.agerpres.ro/comunicate/2017/04/11/comunicat-de-presa-umf-iuliu-hatieganu-cluj-napoca-17-40-45>, accessed April 2017.

encompass almost twice an area than before but a lot of it was off limits for construction so the need for expansion moved even further in the surrounding area. This is when the neighboring communes, where land value was far lower, actually started to house people that worked and lived for the most part in Cluj, effectively turning them into suburbs.⁴ Figure 1 shows the Metropolitan Area of Cluj and its constituent localities.

Figure 1. *The Metropolitan Area of Cluj and its Constituent Localities*



Source: Urbasofia, Integrated Strategy for the Development of Cluj Metropolitan Area <https://urbasofia.eu/ro/proiecte/planificare-strategica/plan-strategic-integrat-pentru-zona-metropolitana-cluj-napoca/>, accessed April 2017.

⁴ Pocol, C. B. & Jitea I. M. "The Residential Function of the Countryside and the Development of the Peri-Urban Area of Cluj Napoca City" in *Bulletin UASVM Horticulture*, 70(2)/2013, p. 371.

This was coupled with a gentrification process in which richer classes replaced former residents who also had to move to the suburbs as, either local cost of life grew too much, or it was simply more profitable to sell.⁵

In 2008, for the first time, the municipality undertook a strategy to form a metropolitan area with these neighboring communes that have started to develop rapidly during this period.⁶ It was only then that the first public transportation was designed to better link these unofficial suburbs to the city core on a frequent basis. What is remarkable is that although the city core didn't actually register a spectacular percentile growth in population *per se*, these *ad hoc* suburbs increased rapidly, some of them even doubling or tripling in population.

Methodology and Structure

This paper tries to sum up some of the recent research that delved into the evolution of these suburbs from an interdisciplinary point of view. While demographics and population movement is the most important aspect, it does not really provide the big picture alone so aspects of sociology, anthropology, economics, architecture and urban planning will all hopefully add to it.

Recently there have been plenty of doctoral theses on the subject of suburban Cluj,^{7,8,9} dealing with the issue from a sociological point of view. This paper cannot entertain the same depths but it could emphasize the need for multiple perspectives on the matter, hopefully paving the way for further interdisciplinary research. As such, one cannot ascertain the physical aspect of the suburbs without the sociological or psychological aspects of the community, nor does the economic data alone pose much interest unless linked with the geographical and geophysical aspects of the land surrounding Cluj that provide its background.

Therefore there are several aspects that need answering and the structure of the paper is based on these emerging questions. Firstly *how were these suburbs formed* - a question that has many answers as there are social, economic, historic, political and geophysical causes. Looking at population change diagrams, inhabitant age and education might also help shed some light on the matter.

⁵ See also Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 5-9.

⁶ Consiliul Județean Cluj [Cluj County Council], *Cluj Metropolitan Area - Urban Strategies and Development*, <http://www.cjcluj.ro/zona-metropolitana-urbana/>, April 2017.

⁷ Lelia Papp, *Centre - Periphery Relations in the Urban Area of Cluj County*, PhD Thesis at Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, 2013.

⁸ Gyöngyi Pásztor, *Segregare urbană. Abordări cantitative și calitative ale fenomenului la nivelul orașului Cluj [Urban Segregation. Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches of the Phenomenon at the Level of Cluj City]*, PhD Thesis at Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, 2013.

⁹ Mircea Troc, *Post-Socialist Neighborhoods and Urban Development. Habitation and Mobility in the Florești Neighborhood from the Cluj-Napoca Area*, PhD Thesis at Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, 2014.

Secondly *how do these suburbs look* from an urban and architectural point of view? This analysis deals with several scales, from the large urban scale, street logic and space syntax to the very small details of individual dwellings. The physical aspect is an unwritten testimony of the market tendencies as well as of the ideals and limits a community might accept. A comparison with other European examples is also needed here to understand the particulars.

Of further interest is *how people feel about living in these suburbs*. *Superbia*,¹⁰ a catalogue written about six years ago for the Venice Biennale of Architecture comprises a few interviews with newcomers that offered interesting perspectives on what living here actually is like and what their former expectations were. Some of these new dwellers have actively started online communities and check for solutions and discussions among themselves.¹¹

And finally, as a conclusion, the question of *what are the real problems of Cluj's suburbs* emerges and, knowing them, what can be done in the future.

Results and Discussion

How Were these Suburbs Formed?

Cluj is a city of extremes. While not particularly populated until the 19th century, it started to grow rapidly afterwards. This actually means that its historical centre consists mostly of low houses - one or two stories high with but a few exceptions while many of the newer neighborhoods developed during communist time have multiple story blocks of flats. Due to the poor soil in neighboring hills, it was forced to develop along the West - East stretching valley of Someş river.

As such most of the easily buildable land has already been occupied by the end of the 1960's and the second expansion during the communist era is marked by densification of the existing urban tissue by building new apartment blocks among already built towers and even demolishing and replacing older residential areas with higher density ones. Nowadays this practice is thought of in retrospect as abusive and destructive for the city but back then there was no arguing with party policy and right of property was subordinated to what the political regime thought of as "the common good". The amplitude of this endeavor was so large that by the year 2000 more than 80% of the city population lived in former socialist homes,¹² a majority even today.

This is one of the causes many of Cluj's citizens today abhor instinctively the collective interest and desire only to satisfy individual

¹⁰ S.Aldea et al. (ed) *Superbia*, ICR, Quaderni della Casa Romana di Venezia, 2010.

¹¹ Paul Mutică. "An Anthropological Approach to Cities" in *Acta Tehnica Napocensis Civil Engineering and Architecture*, Cluj-Napoca, UT Press, 2016, p. 219.

¹² Dana Vais, "From House to "Residence". Peripheral Growth in Post-Socialist Cluj" in *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Sociologia*, LIV, vol. 1, 2009, p. 67.

needs, falling altogether in the other extreme. Newly developed residential areas and suburbs promote, at most, personal comfort but seldom if ever take into account the importance of public space. The socialist logic of urban development has been replaced by a capitalist one.¹³

Nowadays, Cluj promotes for itself the brand of a "Romanian Silicon Valley", offering a place to work for many graduates in the IT business but not only. For the 66,534 students in its universities,¹⁴ remaining here after they graduate is a distinct possibility, albeit a costly one. The city provides plenty of employment opportunities and adequate pay but this also means that land value in a physically limited environment has skyrocketed. Most of these graduates can find a job, maybe they can even afford a car but a new (or old for that matter) apartment in the city is another thing altogether. With buildable terrain valued between 100 and 300 euro per square meter and built apartment valued at more than 1200 euro per square meter on average,¹⁵ these price ranges are prohibitive for the young employees, even with the help of a real estate loan. A secondary effect well felt in the city core is gentrification, with many of the old residents being either forced or motivated to sell their city apartments and move to the suburbs themselves.

It is in this context that the neighboring communes, featuring prices twice as low than the city proper, proved to be a more appealing alternative. Newcomers would build or buy their homes there but commute to Cluj and spend most of their day in the city, often returning home only at night. Personal cars are inevitable as public transportation is scarce at best. It was a compromise. Almost overnight, many of these former villages turned into full grown suburbs, often before the infrastructure could actually keep up with the building of additional homes.

Few people would have predicted the amplitude of this phenomenon before it actually happened. It seems that just a few years ago, authors dismissed the suburban expansion around Cluj as unsubstantial.¹⁶ Yet a closer look at the figures gives us a different picture: just four neighboring communes, Florești, Apahida, Baciú and Gilău have registered an increase by 31,101 inhabitants, effectively doubling them in size.¹⁷ That is roughly 10% of the current population of Cluj in just 20 years from 1996 until 2016 (most of them from 2004 onwards), a process that doesn't seem to have reached its end yet. In the meantime the population of the city core has increased by just 2,750 from 319,156 to 321,916.¹⁸ Florești is now the largest commune in the country with 28,163 official inhabitants in 2016

¹³ Mircea Troc, op. cit., pp. 34-38.

¹⁴ Cluj is the second largest university center in Romania after Bucharest, according to Institutul Național de Statistică [National Statistics Institute], *Anuarul statistic 2016* [Statistic Yearbook for 2016].

¹⁵ According to the Real Estate index for Cluj-Napoca, https://www.imobiliare.ro/indicele-imobiliare-ro/cluj-napoca?gclid=CN_C1IiMu9MCFUJAGwoduP8Apw, accessed April 2017.

¹⁶ D. Vais, op. cit., pp. 60, 74.

¹⁷ Institutul Național de Statistică [National Statistics Institute], <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/> accessed April 2017.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

(almost five times more than in 1996 when it registered 5,893.)¹⁹ Table 1 shows the resident population changes in the Metropolitan Area of Cluj.

Table 1. *Resident Population Changes in the Metropolitan Area of Cluj*

LOCALITIES	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016
CLUJ-NAPOCA	311674	319156	319333	315266	316715	320042	321916
Aiton	1736	1448	1412	1317	1212	1111	1043
Apahida	7329	7442	7822	8278	9103	10456	11927
Baciu	7783	7670	7735	7891	8236	9600	10814
Bontida	4378	4251	4245	4521	4797	4853	4880
Borşa	2148	1891	1757	1697	1611	1500	1381
Căianu	3109	2815	2662	2588	2519	2422	2386
Chinteni	3470	3070	2919	2771	2728	2952	3147
Ciurila	1899	1658	1548	1443	1347	1406	1461
Cojocna	5019	4582	4416	4330	4302	4187	4189
Feleacu	4419	4000	3701	3581	3572	3664	3766
Floreşti	5616	5893	6354	6771	7973	17371	28163
Gilău	7519	7502	7496	7645	7947	8398	8704
Gârbău	2776	2475	2420	2457	2448	2390	2318
Jucu	4156	3910	3903	3880	3969	4153	4319
Petreşti de Jos	2281	2057	2017	1913	1768	1656	1541
Tureni	2875	2603	2576	2505	2415	2335	2235
Vultureni	1982	1705	1587	1509	1456	1449	1367
TOTAL	380169	384128	383903	380363	384118	399945	415557

Source: Institutul Național de Statistică [National Statistics Institute].

If we take into account that all other communes not linked to Cluj Metropolitan Area in the county have consistently lost population during the same period, we can safely assume that these figures might have been even greater if we were to deduct the decreasing rural population these new residents are actually replacing.

And these are the statistics that do not take into account the fact that many youngsters actually purchased an apartment in Floreşti, for example, but kept their ID with a residence in their parents apartment in Cluj so they could eventually send their own children to kindergarten or primary school in the city as it has better education facilities than the suburbs. For all purposes they are residing in Floreşti, though and this is not an isolated account but the norm.

If we would analyze the statistics again we would see that most of these new inhabitants are aged 20 to 39, mostly with higher education,²⁰ meaning that they are recent graduates with jobs in the city and that they either have or are very likely to have children in the near future.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

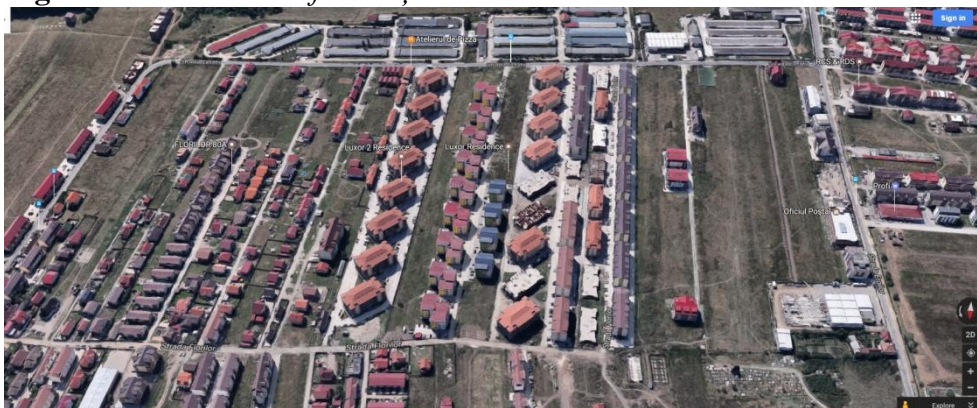
²⁰ See also Vlad Coheci, "Typical and Distinctive Characteristics of Suburbanization in the Metropolitan Area of Cluj-Napoca" in *Acta Tehnica Napocensis Civil Engineering and Architecture*, Cluj-Napoca, UT Press, vol. 58, no. 4, 2015, pp. 63, 64.

Furthermore, many inhabitants in Florești are tenants and they do not register in these statistics either, especially if their landlords actually have a residence in the city core or own more than one apartment.

Given all these data, estimates are that in reality around 40,000 to 50,000 new suburban residents (around 1/7 of the resident population of Cluj) actually live in Florești alone and commute daily,²¹ an estimation that could actually be supported by the increase in housing statistics that register 17,981 individual homesteads in 2015, an increase by exactly 8 times more than the situation in 1996. This figure represents 13% of the total number of homesteads registered in Cluj in the same year and 16% of the total number of homesteads in 1996 in Cluj,²² making Florești comparable to the largest neighborhoods in the city.

But demographics alone cannot give the full impression of the phenomenon. Indeed this exponential growth happened in stages and the houses themselves are witnesses of this process. At first, most developments in the periphery of Cluj were scarce, individual sprawls of houses built by adventurers that saw great benefits in having their dream home away from the hustle and bustle of city life. Buying or inheriting agricultural land, turning it into a buildable plot and then building a house for the family long before any infrastructure was developed were all cheaper than buying an already built house in one of the older neighborhoods of Cluj. Also it had the advantage of letting the owner express themselves by choosing the architectural form of his new home. Furthermore, the 1990's and early 2000's were a period when authorizing and following an architectural project in order to build your home were considered optional by many. No demolitions of illegally built houses ever occurred so far. The result was a chaotic sprawl as conjectural neighbors fed up with communal living in apartment blocks chose to buy into and invade former picnic areas with colorful and most often dissonant houses. Figure 2 shows the Aerial View of Florești and the transition from agriculture to suburb.

Figure 2. *Aerial View of Florești*



Source: *Google Maps*

²¹ 92% of the commuters from Florești go to Cluj almost every day according to Rodica Cadar et al. "Travel Behavior in Cluj-Napoca Suburban Area" in *Mechanics, Energy, Environment - Energy, Environmental and Structural Engineering Series*, Università degli studi Roma Tre, 2015, p. 87.

²² Data from Institutul Național de Statistică [National Statistics Institute].

This first stage that peaked around 2004 and was identified by Dana Vais as the *house trend*, was followed by two more stages, with increased size and impact, namely the *residence* and the *suburbia trends*.²³ While the first one was characterized by individual families building their own home, sometimes for several years, the last two are developments made by speculators who saw an opportunity for profit in buying cheap land, dividing it up into parcels and building rows of houses and, later, blocks of flats with ever increasing density which they could then sell for huge profits. The first two trends happened between the boundaries of the city proper while the third one, as the name suggests, invaded the neighboring communes, drastically changing their aspect. All of them are characterized however by a lack of available infrastructure and turning former arable land into buildable plots with very little space for access streets and public space in general. Most interventions were chaotic and avoided dialogue with the local authorities that couldn't enforce a coherent vision.

Another key factor is the total dependence upon the city for amenities which translated in these developments being clustered as close to the city as possible, this being the cause that meant Florești (closest among the neighboring communes and well situated on the West entrance to the city) was actually the most popular of these new suburbs. In fact Florești is the only suburb where large shopping centers including one of the two city malls developed concomitantly with residential areas, but for the same reason: proximity to the city meant easy access from the inside as well.

How Do These Suburbs Look?

The former communist neighborhoods were shunned for the grayness of their apartment buildings, for their high density and often low quality finishings.²⁴ Public space was residual space that fell in no one's direct care and, therefore, deteriorated. The new suburbs started out as a dream of individual fulfillment for the emerging middle class, much like Western suburbia was born. But in the end, due to speculative practices by the so called "real estate developers,"²⁵ a lack of power and implication of the local authorities and even the lack of principle shown by some architects and engineers, it proved to suffer paradoxically from the same setbacks as the communist interventions of the 1970's, if not worse.

Although a product of the market economy (buildings were made to be sold for profit rather than for personal use), as opposed to previous communist developments,²⁶ Cluj's suburbs were subject to the same problems/compromises: ensuring a maximum amount of dwellings for a minimum

²³ D. Vais, op. cit., pp. 57, 58.

²⁴ V. Mihăilescu, (ed.), *Etnografii urbane [Urban Ethnographies]*, Iași, Ed. Polirom, 2009, p. 54.

²⁵ See also Gabriel Troc, "The Post-socialist Neighborhood: Florești" in Aldea, Silviu et. al (ed.) *Superbia*, ICR, Quaderni della Casa Romena di Venezia, 2010, p. 1/9.

²⁶ See also Norbert Petrovici, "Fabricating the Superbia. Where Does the Chaotic Urbanization Come From?" in Aldea, Silviu et. al (ed.) *Superbia*, ICR, Quaderni della Casa Romena di Venezia, 2010.

amount of space (albeit because of a different logic) and making sure the commuters had easy access to the road network. Infrastructure was often neglected and all new residents were heavily dependent on personal cars for access to the city on a daily basis which meant rush hour traffic jams, pollution and many hours lost on the road as well.

From an architectural point of view, most post socialist interventions have a less than optimal aesthetic quality. They are often apartment blocks disguised under an overgrown villa veneer and roof, of a dubious post-modern inspiration. In the words of Gabriel Troc:

*“the neighbourhoods built after 2000 lacked both a building-type pattern (the ‘block of flats’ increasingly became a hybrid, at the intersection of a modernist block and an obscure-origin villa) and a strict general town planning. The result, of which Florești is a good example, is a chaotic form of residence, only structured in the context of private property over the land, pursuit of fast profit, introduction on the market of architectural forms that meet the uneducated taste in the field and schizophrenic relationships between the local administration and private real estate ‘developers’.”*²⁷

Thus the middle class suburban dream was distorted by profit hungry investors that sought to maximize financial gain and to minimize land they had to allot for amenities. The villas built in a sprawl fashion in the late 1990's were engulfed by the densest of developments and now faced many apartment windows opened in their previously peaceful backyards. New streets cut out to assure access to the new plots were often minimal 3 meters wide dead ends making morning traffic a problem also. Since everybody travelled by car, little care was given to pedestrian lanes and children rarely had dedicated and safe playgrounds.²⁸ Sidewalks were optional.²⁹ Ironically, what started out as the smallest elements, *foam bubbles* as Andrea Branzi called them the "degree zero" of urban planning³⁰ ended up being more dense than the communist neighborhoods they thought to escape from.

On the other hand, if we were to refer to the public space and civic appeal of these suburbs, two studies come into mind. The first, advocated by Leon Krier, is the ratio of public space (streets, squares and parks) as compared to private property. Krier identified an optimum of 25 to 35% public to private or semiprivate space as being optimum for civic life and vibrancy.^{31,32} Not surprisingly most historical cities have this ratio.

Although the quantitative aspect of public space is not enough to ensure its quality, it is nonetheless a necessary requirement. So if we were to

²⁷ G. Troc, op. cit., p. 3/9.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 6/9.

²⁹ Șerban Văetiși, “The Material Culture of the Postsocialist City. A Success/Failure Perspective” in *Martor* no. 16, 2011, p. 84.

³⁰ Andrea Branzi apud D. Vais, “Superb Suburbia. The Degree Zero of Urban Space” in Aldea, Silviu et. al (ed.) *Superbia*, ICR, Quaderni della Casa Romana di Venezia, 2010, pp. 1,2/4.

³¹ Leon Krier, *The Architecture of the Community*, Washington DC: Island Press, 2009, p. 169.

³² See also Octav Olănescu, “There is no Urban Design for the New Post-Socialist Developments” in *Acta Tehnica Napocensis Civil Engineering and Architecture*, Cluj-Napoca, UT Press, vol. 59, no. 3, 2016, pp. 184-186.

calculate this ratio in these new suburbs, we would find staggering results. Olănescu's study compared basically three types of developments in Cluj from the 20th and early 21st century. Firstly, the historical neighborhood of Grigorescu featured a percentage of 26.1% of public space, confirming the local appeal of the area. Next, the socialist developments offered too much public space (Gheorgheni 78.7% and Mănăştur 80.2%) meaning it was too dispersed and finally, the post-socialist developments on the outskirts of the older city featured a meager 4-10% public to private space.³³ Basically the streets are so minimal that they are used solely for automobile traffic and no public life can actually take place there. Obviously there are no civic squares or parks. Thus, though apparently similar, the socialist and post-socialist developments are two extremes of the same problem, the inadequacy of public space for the inhabitants.

The second method is space syntax, namely analyzing the street structure in terms of intelligibility and synergy as introduced by Dalton,³⁴ following the work of Hillier.³⁵ The findings only come to further the previous conclusions: the street logic is superficial at best. Not only are the streets too narrow, but they often constitute dead ends. The structure is fishbone like, with many tertiary streets spilling into secondary streets that, in turn, empty themselves into the main roads linking the suburbs to the city. Naturally this is a traffic nightmare at rush hours and offers little or no alternative for the residents. No flexibility and sometimes poor street conditions could be compared to a clogged up circulatory system.

In the end, the market economy alone failed to provide quality spaces because the demand was so high that new residents could not afford to be picky. Local authorities blamed the lack of funds to develop the new street infrastructure like sewage and street lighting by themselves and invoked this as a cause for various quality compromises they conceded to great investors in exchange for them to tackle the infrastructure problem instead.³⁶ For example, in an interview, a new resident complained that when he moved in Floreşti, the mayor had promised he would take care of the poor road condition only to find out that the next year local authorities conceded the road into the care of the regional County Council in order to avoid dealing with the problem themselves.³⁷ Thus the general tendency of the authorities to privatize social policies and executive functions is consistent to the general deterritorialization trend³⁸ ever present in emerging countries.

Developments were undertaken at such a velocity that older residents were actually relieved when the economic world crisis of 2008 caused all investments to freeze overnight.³⁹ For many young people that enlisted for real estate loans this was a disaster: they were forced to pay for several more

³³ O. Olănescu, op. cit., pp. 187-192.

³⁴ Nick Sheep Dalton. "Is Neighbourhood Measurable?" in *Proceedings, 6th International Space Syntax Symposium*, Istanbul, 2007, pp. 088-02, 088-03.

³⁵ Bill Hillier. *Space is the Machine*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 92-99.

³⁶ N. Petrovici, op. cit., pp. 6,7/9.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 1/9.

³⁸ Gabriel Popescu, "Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization" in Warf, B. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Geography*, Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2010, pp. 722-724.

³⁹ Petrovici, op. cit., pp. 1,9/9.

decades for an apartment that rapidly lost its market value. Basically they became prisoners of the suburban compromise.

However, as it turns out, the effects of the crisis were short-lived in the suburbs and the real estate market seems to have recuperated, though nowhere near the astronomical prices of 2007, and now the real estate firms show a market preference for even smaller apartments.⁴⁰ In fact as the demographics have shown, many more dwellings have been finished in the suburbs following 2010 than before 2008 and although it is still an ongoing process, the final shape of these suburbs is finally being crystallized.

In fact these developments, of which Florești is the exponent, are nothing more it seems than a real estate experiment, a "shopping for apartments type of mall" with the sole purpose of selling.⁴¹ They match bit by bit the compromise between what people can afford and what they minimally need in order to subsist. And it is not surprising that once the euphoria of purchase is over, most inhabitants find the hidden flaws of their newly purchased home, be they lack of amenities, public space and green areas, infrastructure of all kinds or extreme density and, therefore, a total lack of intimacy.

So, to sum up, how can one interpret today's aspect of these suburbs? Probably the best course of action would be to compare them with similar developments in Central and Eastern Europe. Kiril Stanilov found several aspects that most Central and Eastern European suburbs have in difference with their Western European counterparts and grouped them into six topics. Thus, he found they have *a condensed evolution, simultaneous suburbanization of housing, retail and offices, speed of decentralization, suburbanization patterns, a lack of administrative separation and fragmentation* and finally, *social homogeneity*.⁴²

Indeed, the suburbs of Cluj are marked by condensed evolution as can be seen clearly, having some of the densest quotas as opposed to Western sprawl like configuration, although primacy of individual and private over public or collective interest is a common characteristic also for Cluj-Napoca's Metropolitan Area.⁴³ Prices in the suburbs are actually lower than in the city core as well, further emphasizing concentric gravitation around the city center. Figure 3 shows the Eroilor Street in Florești.

⁴⁰ According to imobiliare.ro in *Monitorul de Cluj*, 03.05.2016, http://www.monitorulcj.ro/economie/52189-cum-s-a-schimbata-pia%C5%A3a-imobiliara-dupa-criza-economica_#sthash.ichEz14I.dpbs, accessed April 2017.

⁴¹ G. Troc, op. cit., p. 6/9.

⁴² Kiril Stanilov apud V. Cochei, op. cit., pp. 56-61.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 58.

Figure 3. *Highest Possible Density on Eroilor Street, Florești*

Source: Ziar de Cluj, Eugen Olariu.

As for the simultaneous suburbanization of housing, retail and offices, in most cases it is true. Especially as far as shopping centers and malls are concerned, the opening of Polus Center in Florești preceded and probably encouraged further developments of that particular area, acting out as a pole of interest.⁴⁴

For the speed of suburbanization, although generally speaking Eastern European suburbs tend to take more time to develop than in the West, Cluj seems to be an exception to the rule as seen from the speed of dwelling development in the suburban area the past few years (as mentioned before). The suburbanization patterns are again similar to other CE examples, featuring higher densities because of a combination of high land value and lower average income than in the West. The density in the three most populated suburbs of Cluj has been increasing steadily. For 2016 the figures are: 57.99 people/ha in Apahida, 60.72 people/ha in Baciú and 98.33 people/ha in Florești, comparable to the 102.05 people/ha of the city itself.⁴⁵ Florești will most probably surpass Cluj in density this year and continue in the near future.

Strangely, whereas most suburbs in CE and EE have centralized administration and are practically takeovers by the main city of former neighboring rural areas, Cluj's suburbs are still independent entities with local administration of their own, politically speaking. While construction in Cluj is somewhat more complicated to authorize, Florești seems to be a haven for compromises resulting in poor and unsustainable urban design and only now do the local authorities in Cluj realize the imperative for a coherent strategy in the whole metropolitan area, not just the city core.

Finally, social homogeneity is indeed present as most new residents of Cluj's suburbs tend to be young graduates with high education and an average income, exponents of the lower middle class. Although they come to live practically in the same habitat as the rural population already present there, it is quite clear that the latter has a tendency to decrease rapidly and, therefore, be replaced by the former entirely in the years to come.

⁴⁴ See also Manfredini et al., “«Transductive Urbanism» A Method for the Analysis of the Relational Infrastructure of Malled Metropolitan Centres in Auckland, New Zealand” in *Athens Journal of Architecture*, vol. 3, 2017 for a similar case study in Auckland, New Zealand.

⁴⁵ Data from Institutul Național de Statistică (National Institute for Statistics).

How Do People Feel about Living in These Suburbs?

The final puzzle is how to the new residents perceive their new habitat and if it differs from the way they envisioned it prior to moving here. We must take into account that some are tenants while others are owners but most of the latter have to reimburse a real estate loan as well. Also we must take into account that the context is still changing, a lot more than the situation in the city that is more stable.

While some aspects have and will continue to improve (like street infrastructure that is slowly reaching more and more of the built apartment blocks), others will deteriorate because there still doesn't seem to be any sign the local administrations in these communes will stop authorizing practically everything that the investors want to do, in total disregard for quality of life or traffic issues. Still no sign of conditions to include amenities or at least allot the necessary land from big developers either. Florești for example has the size to become a town but lacks most public services required.⁴⁶

In a few interviews with residents either personal or taken from the *Superbia* catalogue and other articles, more issues appear. When asking the new residents about their inside opinion, feelings tend to be mixed. One thing is for certain, the scale in discussion tends to shift more to the smaller size, to the intimacy of the apartment or the house and garden, to individual problems as opposed to public policy. People do what they can to make their life easier and some are surprisingly happy.⁴⁷ The urban quality unachievable on the exterior somehow finds its way in the interiors of these residences, some of them quite appealing and homey. This is the degree zero of urban planning and it starts from the bottom up this time, in total contradiction to what the public space lacks:

Superbia: Does it give you joy to invite someone into a beautiful home like yours?

*Adriana: Yes, provided you close your eyes till you get here, and open them when you are inside.*⁴⁸

High density and lack of intimacy sometimes turns for the good also making neighbors see each other more and, in a few fortunate cases interact more. For example a journalist tells the *Superbia* team that, compared to his former stay in one of the communist neighborhoods of Cluj for six years, when he didn't know any of his neighbors, living in Florești among people

⁴⁶ As postulated in Law 351/2001, annex 2. Among others, a town must have a high school, public library, sports and entertainment halls and Florești has none of the above. Therefore the residents are totally dependant on Cluj for their cultural, educational and recreational needs.

⁴⁷ See also Silvia Butean, "Configurația relațiilor de vecinătate constituită prin expresia spațialității, în cartierul suburban Florești, județul Cluj" [Neighborhood Relation Configurations through Space Expression in Suburban Florești, Cluj County] *Sociolink*, <http://www.sociolink.ro/configuratia-relatiilor-de-vecinatate-constituata-prin-expresia-spatialitatii-in-cartierul-suburban-floresti-judetul-cluj-situl-cercetat-doua-blocuri-din-cartierul-suburban-floresti/>, accessed April 2017, pp. 14-20.

⁴⁸ Silviu Aldea et al., *Superbia*, ICR, Quaderni della Casa Romena di Venezia, 2010, interview with Adriana, 25, architect, Florești.

of the same age actually meant an improvement in his neighborly relations.⁴⁹ A young family testifies to knowing everybody on their street as most of them have small children and they visit each other for play.⁵⁰ It is strange how some unexpected relations occur. During the communist regime, social ties between neighbors were stronger because of a myriad of factors including loads of spare time, lack of available entertainment, social hardship and equality in subsistence, the need for barter and so on. Nowadays the same happens in these newly formed suburbs that lack amenities and sometimes infrastructure, are still remote from the city core (only accessible by car), promote high densities and the people are roughly the same age. Perhaps the overall picture is not so grim as one would see it from the outside.

It is true however that the constant evolution gives an amount of uncertainty and risk. You never know when among the small houses a new block will pop up simply because it's more profitable and has even higher density.⁵¹ You never know when your beautiful perspective upon the city will be obstructed by a developer's grand gesture and this lack of urban rules is probably the most disturbing factor for the residents. Figure 5 shows Mierlei Street in Baciú; despite its high density and traffic it is nothing more than a dirty road that floods every time it rains.

Moreover, you cannot choose your neighbors and sometimes customs and norms are broken by eccentric newcomers:

When we bought and started building our house here there was nothing but a dirt road. Shepherds used to settle here temporarily with their sheep and it was a little bit scary to live in such wilderness. Nowadays the place is packed full of houses as you can see. Old rural habits die hard though and many choose to leave their dogs to roam free on the streets. They form in packs and get quite territorial though not aggressive to people. A few days ago they entered our backyard and killed our bunny that we bought for our daughter on her birthday. Another day a neighbor started burning his lawn as the peasants burn stubbles in spring. It quickly became a smoking inferno and the local police came and fined him for endangering the neighboring houses, pollution and arson attempt. You never get bored around here.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibidem, interview with Elöd, 31, journalist, Florești.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, interview with Ancuța, 28, economist and Cosmin, 36, electronics engineer, Florești.

⁵¹ Ibidem, interview with Andrei, 37, economist, Baciú.

⁵² Dorin and Ela in Florești, interviewed by the author.

Figure 5. *Mierlei Street in Baci*



Source: Google Street View.

But every cloud has a silver lining as some who have moved in from the very beginning remember before the apparition of apartment buildings, most alleys were covered in thick mud and only after the larger developments have the streets been paved and publicly lit.

*I can't explain you how it used to be here before. What we have gone through...hmm....During one year it was a nightmare. It was mud all around here. Going to the office, wearing suits and rubber boots, putting the boots in a plastic bag and then putting on shoes.*⁵³

Some younger people choose to move here in groups, many maintaining an active online presence where they engage in discussions of their common perspectives regarding the newly built neighbourhoods, sometimes clashing with the views of the municipality and performing small acts of what Lydon calls DIY or even guerilla urbanism,⁵⁴ such as paving the streets themselves without authorization.⁵⁵

Clearly the suburbs of Cluj are far from perfect. Traffic and pollution are but the first problems that come to mind. But social inquires into the lives of these residents are only at the beginning, for all we know.

Conclusions

Without attempting to exhaust the problems of suburban developments around Cluj or even pretending to give a complete perspective on the subject, this paper simply states the need for an interdisciplinary approach on the matter in order to unveil all nuances. The complexity of the problem

⁵³ *Superbia*, interview with Andrei, 37, economist, Baci.

⁵⁴ Mark Lydon and Anthony Garcia. *Tactical Urbanism, Short Term Action for Long Term Change*. Washington DC: Island Press, 2015, p. 6-8.

⁵⁵ See also Paul Mutică, "Urban Identity Crisis in Segregated Neighbourhoods" in *10th International Scientific Conference – VSU 2010*, Sofia (Bulgaria), June 3-4 2010, vol. II, ISSN 1314-071X, no. 4/2010, pp. III - 127.

and the ethic imperative cannot be tackled by the architect, sociologist, anthropologist, economist or geographer alone.

At first glance, the suburbs that developed recently around the city of Cluj seem to be a sign of prosperity; an exponential growth in population, a steady increase in land value, and a lot of publicity from real estate developers trying to sell the idea of a suburban dream life similar to Western ideals of the 1950's. While urban sprawl has been considered a scourge of urban developments in the West for quite a while,^{56,57} it did not have such a negative impact in the East until the last decade⁵⁸ as cities remained compact for the most part.

Beyond this shallow image lies a total different reality. Some have called Florești a ghetto and this seems only slightly exaggerated. People flock here indeed but most still consider it a temporary solution or feel they have been deceived into buying an apartment here. Others accept the financial constraints that made it an inevitable compromise. One thing is certain; these new suburbs will continue to grow while there is still demand for them as the market dictates. The main issue is whether or not the local authorities will realize their crucial role in regulating the market and providing better conditions for the residents, and whether these residents will understand to replace corrupt local officials that directly affect their wellbeing by their indifference.

The most obvious result after this introspection is the chaotic nature of the phenomenon, proving the lack of any strategic foresight from above. While the West has its own problems with monotonous urban sprawl, traffic and urban segregation, the East seems to add overcrowding and lack of public space or comfort to it. Perhaps in time many of these short backs will be addressed or, perhaps the solution will lie in massive demolitions. Who knows?

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⁵⁶ Richard Peiser, "Decomposing Urban Sprawl" in *The Town Planning Review*, vol. 72, no. 3, July 2001.

⁵⁷ Gregory D. Squires, *Urban Sprawl: Causes, Consequences, & Policy Responses*, Lanham MD: Urban Institute Press, 2002.

⁵⁸ *Urban sprawl in Europe. The ignored challenge*. European Environmental Agency Report, 10/2006, European Commission Joint Research Centre, p. 28.

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