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Post-secular Bucharest?
The Politics of Space in the Case of the 'Cathedral of National Redemption'

The idea that the world might be stepping into a ‘post-secular’ age and that religion is in the process of becoming public has caused a lot of debates among scholars in recent years. Not only does this imply that religion is given increasing importance in the public sphere and thus in the political field, too, but the post-secular thesis goes further and questions even the political arrangement of Western states, based on a secular modernity ideal. Well known authors such as Habermas (2006) and Taylor (2007) have started to speak of a ‘post-secular society’ and to experiment with the idea of a ‘post-secular turn’ (Habermas 2008, McLennan 2010), according to which religion has to be granted more attention in the public sphere than before.

It is the purpose of the present article to critically engage with this debate and to contribute to the discussion by introducing a case study that reveals alternative interpretations of the post-secularism thesis. Within the broader understanding of ‘post-secularism’, indicating that “within secularized social structures of modern late capitalism, religions […] are very much present and will not disappear […]” (Beaumont in Molendijk, Beaumont and Jedan 2010: 6), I will focus on the re-emergence of religion in cities, because I share the opinion that using religion “as a distinct conceptual category in the relational conceptualization of urban diversity” (ibid.) can lead to novel results in the analysis of urban spaces. But even with respect to cities, the discussion has to be more detailed because the way in which religion becomes relevant does not follow a uniform pattern and does not always lead to urban diversity. Indeed, in most cases that have been studied in the recent academic literature (Baker and
Beaumont 2011), what is “qualitatively new […], that might be caught by the term ‘post-secularity’, lies in the processes of global mobility that result in the presence in all global cities of religious sub-populations who have not been shaped by the secularization formed by the cultural history that made the West ‘secular’.” (B. Martin in Molendijk, Beaumont and Jedan 2010: 63)

This article will deal with a case in which the re-spiritualizing of urban space has very different reasons, where global mobility is not the only cause for a qualitatively new understanding of the city through the filter of religion. In contrast to the experiences of migration in the cities of the West, religion has re-emerged in Eastern European cities as an act of re-negotiating an already present tradition. Religion had not necessarily disappeared in Eastern Europe; however, what is meant here by re-emergence refers to an attempt of the established churches to become political and regain their influence in society after the fall of socialism. This implies the opposition of the global trend of privatization of religion and taking up a strong anti-secular stance (Hann 2000).

Particularly in countries where Orthodox Christianity was the main religious denomination, re-politicizing religion after the fall of socialism was attempted by reconnecting it to the mythologies of the nation. The strong link between nationalism and Orthodoxy had already been present long before the modernist secularizing experiment of socialism. It can be argued that even during socialism, at least with regard to the Romanian case, the Orthodox Church did not lose its privileged position in relation to the state, although other religious denominations had to suffer repeated persecution (Stan and Turcescu 2007). After the collapse of socialism, this link was reinvented by the Orthodox Church, just as the trope of martyrdom was invented by transferring the responsibility of all social evils to socialism and by portraying the Church as an anti-socialist national Messiah1. The condemnation of socialism by both the Romanian post-socialist governments and the Orthodox Church re-established the close ties between the two institutions, having direct consequences on the production and representations of urban space. Even if the relation between churches and the state during post-socialism has been approached from a variety of disciplinary perspectives in different countries in the region (Hann 2000, Naumescu and Mahieu 2009, Papkova 2011, Stan and Turcescu 2007, Steinberg and Wanner 2008), it is my point of contention that the very important level of the city has been, with very few exceptions (see, for example Sidorov 2000), mostly ignored by the debate and needs further research.

This article picks up this story for the Romanian case by looking at the most ambitious project of the Romanian Orthodox Church after the fall of so-

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1 This leads to a theological question of redemption that the Orthodox Church is re-interpreting in post-socialism, according to which redemption is not possible on an individual level, but at the level of the entire nation (See Stan and Turcescu 2007, pp. 18-25).
cialism: the construction of the patriarchal “Cathedral of National Redemption”. The question mark in the title is explained first by the uncertainties in the concept of ‘post-secular’, an issue which has already been briefly presented, but also by the fact that up to the moment of publication of the present article, the construction works for the cathedral have not started. It is still unclear whether the Romanian Orthodox Church will have the funds to build such an imposing structure, but what is clear is that after twenty years of conflicting claims over certain sites in Bucharest, the Church has finally settled the solution of building the cathedral next to the Romanian parliament. Whether or not the cathedral will be built is not very relevant for the main question of this article, because the negotiations behind the locations and the repeated claims for spaces in the city have actually fulfilled their scope of establishing the position of the Church as a serious political player, powerful enough to shape the city in an important manner.

The first section of this article will give a short historical overview of the connection between Orthodox churches and nation-building in Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and then focus on the particular story of Bucharest. It will be argued that the project for a patriarchal Orthodox cathedral in Bucharest is not an idea that has gained contour after the fall of socialism, but goes back as far as the modern Romanian state. The second and the third section will be ‘archaeologies’ of two sites in Bucharest, sites that have been very important in the cathedral debate after the fall of socialism: Carol Park and the Civic Center. Both are important for the discussion of the connection between religion and the city, because they reveal two different aspects of the story. One site reveals the relation between nationalism and religion, which manifests itself in a struggle with conflicting claims over public monuments located in Bucharest. The other site is important because of the relation of religion to socialism, which it reveals from the perspective of the built environment. It is somehow ironic that the faith of the Civic Center of Bucharest, the reference point in terms of ‘high modernist’ (Scott 1998) urban planning schemes in Romanian socialism², will be sealed by adding a grand patriarchal cathedral to the already existing complex of monumental buildings of the state administration.

Before going on with the first section it might be important to note that I do not perceive the ‘Orthodox Church’ or ‘the state’ as monolithic actors, but as institutions that have conflicting internal power dynamics and diverging interests. At the same time, these two collective actors are not alone in the political field, be it at the urban, national or global level, but have to interact and negotiate with other secular and religious actors. It is not only the cathedral project that makes up for Bucharest’s candidacy for post-secularity, but also numerous other religious construction projects, like smaller parish

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² See Section 3 for details.
churches, houses of worship, theological institutes or public shrines belonging to different religious cults. However, I argue that in contrast to other religious cults that negotiate their relation to the state in post-socialism, the case of the Orthodox Church stands out, due to the fact that it claims a privileged position as a ‘national’ church in its relation to the state, a claim it has successfully consolidated during post-socialism.

1. A Cathedral for Every Capital

There is a long tradition of shared responsibility in exerting power between the secular and the religious authority in Orthodox Christianity. The notion of *symphonia* in the Byzantine Empire stood for a very close interconnectedness between the Patriarch and the Emperor, ideally even for the overlapping of the two functions (see Papadakis in Ramet 1988). By the end of the 19th century, the political environment in Eastern Europe had substantially changed due to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, and most emerging nations in the region turned to religion in their self-identifying endeavors. Romania was no exception to the trend and this situation created the opportunity for the Orthodox Church to reinvent its *symphonic* ideal and adapt it to the new political circumstances.

The modernizing process generated a double movement that redefined the relation between the Church and the state. In order to be able to explicitly play a role in defining Romanian national identity, the Orthodox Church had to gain independence from Constantinople. This opportunity was provided by a series of laws meant to modernize the country, mainly by the *Secularization Law* from 1863 (See Stan and Turcescu 2007, pp. 18-25). The Orthodox Church became a state institution as part of this process and the clergymen received the same formal status as state bureaucrats. As an institution, the Orthodox Church became central in the spreading of Romanian national identity, because of a very well developed institutional infrastructure that enabled access to the most remote areas of the country. Some authors even argue that the Orthodox Church, just as the ‘nation’, was the product of the state (Barbu 2004: 289). The Romanian Orthodox Church did not develop in opposition, or even simultaneously with the state, according to a liberal secular formula. It was the liberal Romanian state that gave the Church its *autocephaly* (1872), the promotion to the status of a *Patriarchate* (1925) and the domination over other religious denominations, through the constitutions of 1923, 1938 and even the later constitutions drafted during socialism (see Barbu 2004, pp. 277 onwards). The Romanian case was not unique, but rather fitted a general pattern that was observable in Eastern Europe from the end of the 19th century onwards.

Together with the emergence of new nation states, new capital cities came into being, cities that became the sites of new constructions for state institutions
and for monuments reflecting the hegemonic public memory. At the same time, the new capital cities were also the seats of the newly emerging ‘national’ Orthodox churches. The new dynamics between Orthodox churches and nation states had immediate consequences. For instance, cathedral building became the most common way to celebrate the newly acquired national independence, thus influencing the built environment of the new capital cities in a decisive manner: in Sofia the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral was constructed, celebrating the 1877–78 War, in Belgrade a commission responsible for building the Saint Sava Cathedral was formed in 1895, while Moscow already had its national religious monument by that time, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, celebrating the Russian Empire’s victory over Napoleon. Around the same period Bucharest also witnessed the organization of several commissions responsible for constructing a grand orthodox cathedral. Even if this cathedral was not constructed, it signaled the beginning of an ongoing struggle over conflicting urban narratives between secular and religious groups.

After the First World War, this struggle became intensified and expanded over other sites, ranging from public parks or monuments commemorating the First World War, up to any kind of sites in the capital city that were important in shaping the public memory of the nation. The Romanian Orthodox Church also expanded its authority and started to have different claims for representation in a country that had almost doubled its territory after the war, incorporating regions where other ethnic groups and religious denominations represented the majority. Along with the annexation of Transylvania to the national territory, a major competitor, the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church emerged, which threatened the domination of the Orthodox Church over official narratives of national identity (see Stan and Turcescu 2007, chap. 5). Due to these reasons, Bucharest became a prominent space of struggle over representations in commemorating the First World War.

The Romanian Orthodox Church picked up the idea of a grand cathedral immediately after the war and made it one of its main claims. After its promotion in 1925 to the status of a Patriarchate, the highest institutional rank in Orthodox Christianity, the claim split in two: first, the need for a new patriarchal seat, second, as already mentioned, the need to celebrate the nation’s successes in the war. The name for the building, the ‘Cathedral of National Redemption’, which has not been given up by the Orthodox Church up to this date, had also been decided upon around the same period.

3 See Sidorov (2000) for details about the construction after the Napoleonic War, destruction during socialism and reconstruction in post-socialism of the ‘Cathedral of Chris the Saviour’ in Moscow.

4 An explanatory note regarding the etymology of the name of the cathedral is necessary: the original Romanian name ‘Catedrala Mântuirii Neamului’ is not entirely captured by the English ‘The Cathedral of National Redemption’. In Romanian, ‘nation’ has the equivalent ‘națiune’, while it is very difficult to find an English correspondent for
The interesting point to be made here is that the Orthodox Church has tried to continue the symphonic tradition, as if attempting to re-establish a long lost harmony between church and state, by stressing not so much the necessity of a patriarchal seat, but mainly the role that the Orthodox Church has played in defining national identity, a role that, as the argument went on, had to be properly represented in the built environment of the capital city. In terms of actual struggle for space, this meant that several key memorial war sites were attempted to be brought under the hub of the Church. One of the most important, which will be the subject of the next section, was the monument of the ‘Unknown Soldier’, a crypt containing the earthly remains of an unidentified World War One hero, symbolizing the people that had sacrificed their lives for the country.

The negotiations for the actual start of the cathedral construction project peaked around the time of the outbreak of the Second World War, in the context of the nationalist discourse based on orthodoxy of the legionnaire’s movement that took hold on power. Yet the developments of the war hindered the commencement of any actual construction works. After the end of the war the project for a patriarchal cathedral completely disappeared from the agenda for a long period of time, only to return after the fall of socialism in a transformed manner.

The following two sections will deal with the re-emergence of the cathedral debate in the Romanian public sphere after the fall of socialism, by focusing on two key sites of the city which came into consideration for the future construction. The example of the first site, Carol Park, will retire the ways in which the Orthodox Church enters into an alliance with the Romanian post-socialist regimes, in a common political program of condemning socialism. The Orthodox Church starts to act as the only institution capable of ‘healing’ the experience of socialism, by re-spiritualizing sites that were invested with symbolic meanings during socialism. The second case will deal with the projects for the cathedral in the ‘Civic Center’ of Bucharest, another highly politicized space in the geography of the city, and will look at the way in which, after the unsuccessful attempt to claim Carol Park, the Church actually succeeds to re-negotiate its privileged relation with the Romanian state and receives land for the construction of its patriarchal seat next to the Ro-

‘neam’ that could fully capture the meaning of the term. The closest translation would be ‘kin’, or extended family. The use of this term by the Orthodox Church is very relevant for the discussion, because it reveals that the national ‘community’ is imagined according to blood ties, not according to a rights-based political definition, as in the case of the nation. This brings us back to the theological question of whether Orthodox canonic law actually considers redemption at the level of the nation possible. In a situation like the one emerging in Romania at present, where the Orthodox Church and the state tighten their relations, this persistent claim of the Church that the ‘nation’ is to be identified with the ‘kin’ (‘natjune’ with ‘neam’) has direct effects on the urban production of space, very often refusing the right to alternative narratives on urban diversity.
manian parliament, in the core of the political-administrative district of Bucharest.

2. The Cathedral in Carol Park

As early as 26 January 1990, only one month after the Romanian revolution, the Orthodox Church sent an official request to the City Hall demanding an adequate location for the ‘Cathedral of National Redemption’ (Gabor and Petcu 2004). Among the preferred spaces that the Church was proposing, one in particular stood out: Carol Park. The park became the main space of struggle in the geography of Bucharest in the following years for a series of reasons, ranging from basic geography to national symbols, that the Orthodox Church tried to capitalize upon. After the fall of socialism, the Romanian Orthodox Church picked up the subject of the ‘Cathedral of National Redemption’ and made it one of the main issues on its agenda. In addition to the claims already present in the interwar period, the lack of a proper seat for the Patriarchy and the ‘traditional’ closeness between church and state, a new one was added, namely the need for reparations from the side of the state after the unjust treatment of the socialist regime towards the Church. The open anti-communist discourse that the Orthodox Church adopted became one of the main symbolic claims over spaces in Bucharest, spaces that could be suitable for the construction of a grand cathedral.

Carol Park is located in a central area of Bucharest, close to the ‘old’ seat of the Patriarchy – a small church located on an elevated site – and to the building of the Romanian parliament, having one of the few elevations in an otherwise flat city, which would have made it suitable for a monumental construction. However, Carol Park is also important for its symbolic value. It was designed and firstly opened to the public in 1906, celebrating the 40 year long rule of Carol I of Hohenzollern, the first monarch of Romania. It was meant to be an expositional park with national character, inspired by the wave of national and universal exhibitions taking place all around Europe at that time. After the First World War, the ‘Monument of the Unknown Soldier’, already mentioned in this paper, was taken to the park and placed on the esplanade overlooking the city, next to an ‘eternal flame’. Even today, visitors to Carol Park walking up the esplanade are reminded by golden

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5 This continues to be a sensitive issue, because among the religious denominations in Romania, the Orthodox Church had a rather privileged position in relation to the socialist regime and high ranking Church officials were in close collaboration with the upper ranks of the communist party. As a consequence, the Romanian Orthodox Church enjoyed a series of privileges even during socialism, as opposed to a number of other churches, like the Greek-Catholic Church, which was openly persecuted by the regime (see Stan and Turcescu 2007, chap. 5).
plates that ‘this is not a playground’, but a ‘sacred area’ (See Fig. 1). Two permanent military guards watch over the ‘Unknown Soldier’ and the eternal flame, underlining the importance of the place for the public memory of the nation. The history of Carol Park became even more burdened with diverging pieces of heritage during socialism, when the ‘Unknown Soldier’ was moved to another location, outside of town. In 1962 the regime inaugurated another monument, this time dedicated to the ‘Socialist Hero’, on the same spot where the ‘Unknown Soldier’ was located before. The new monument was in fact a mausoleum, an ensemble of crypts containing the earthly remains of the first generation of Romanian socialist leaders, flanked by an imposing statue that oversaw the park (See Fig. 2).

Fig. 1: ‘Attention, sacred area!’\(^6\) – Warning sign for the tomb of the ‘Unknown Soldier’ on the esplanade in Carol Park (photo by author)

\(^6\) The full translation of the warning sign is: ‘Attention, sacred area! / The tomb of the Unknown Soldier / Access with bicycles, rollerblades, scooters forbidden / This is not a playground!’
Fig. 2: The esplanade in Carol Park, with the monument of the ‘Socialist Hero’ in the background and the monument of the ‘Unknown Soldier’, with permanent military guard, in the foreground (photo by author)
In 1991 all crypts were opened up and the ‘heroes of socialism’ were removed and transferred to regular cemeteries across Bucharest. The same year, in a symbolic gesture, the ‘Unknown Soldier’ was taken back to the esplanade during a religious ceremony, headed by the Patriarch, in the presence of the president, prime-minister and the head of the Romanian senate, among other high state officials. Already at this early stage a certain path dependency could be observed, through which the Church attempted to take over the responsibility for putting things back in ‘order’ after the fall of socialism.

“The transformation now taking place in the former state socialist nations is path dependent, that is it is shaped by cross-nationally (and sub-nationally) variant historical legacies and current conjunctures. Rather than some simplistic and immediate process of abolition of the economic, political and social structures of state socialism and their replacement by those of an idealized Western capitalism, we see a conflictual and contradictory complex of social actions in which differing groups deploy what resources they have available to secure their position in the new order.” (Harloe in Andrusz et. al 1996: 10)

One of the ways in which the ‘reordering of worlds’ takes place, is through a process of what Verdery calls re-politicizing ‘dead bodies’ and endowing authority and politics with sacrality or a ‘sacred’ dimension (1999: 36). I think that the same point can be made for more than just the re-politicizing of ‘dead bodies’, but for re-politicizing urban space in general, just that space was not an empty container waiting to be filled with meaning after the fall of socialism, but had already been highly politicized by previous regimes.

Claims by the Orthodox Church for Carol Park had precedents already in the interwar period, when Miron Cristea, the first Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, demanded that the new cathedral had to be built either next to the ‘Unknown Soldier’ in the park, or that the monument had to be moved to where the cathedral would be built. The name of the building, ‘The Cathedral of National Redemption’, was actually given by Cristea and was explained by the first Patriarch’s attempt to create a bond between the Orthodox Church and the victims of the First World War. In spatial terms, this bond could have been created only by bringing the monument of the ‘Unknown Soldier’ and the cathedral in proximity to each other. Furthermore, the Orthodox Church in the early nineties was clearly experimenting with strategies that were supposed to bring back the status of an important political player for the institution. In order to be able to claim the right to build in the park after the fall of socialism, the Church had to learn how to deal with the complicated heritage that the park was embodying.

Carol Park was a major site of struggle for a series of reasons: the monarchical legacy and the socialist interventions in the landscape, which were still very present through the imposing statue and the ‘Socialist Hero’. In terms of ‘competing politicizations of space and time’ (ibid.), the strategy that the Romanian Orthodox Church used in order to claim Carol Park followed the same line of pursuing the ideal symphonic relation between church and state.
The Church was able to use the opportunity created by the collapse of socialism, in order to establish itself as a close partner of the state.  

“Part of reordering meaningful worlds is to sacralize authority and politics in new ways. A ready means of presenting the post-socialist order as something different from before has been to reinsert expressly sacred values into political discourse. In many cases, this has meant a new relation between religion and the state, along with a renewal of religious faith. […] Among the conflict’s many facets are struggles over the sacralization of politics […].” (Verdery 1999: 37)

The fact that public monuments became ‘symbolic vehicles’ (Verdery 1999) as part of a political act meant to empower certain actors in times of radical political change was not something specific for Romania. The same process could be observed in other former socialist countries, or even in other localities around the world where abrupt political changes occurred. While similar elements of the equation were identifiable from Berlin to Moscow, their combination very much differed from case to case, according to the specific local histories, interests and political alliances and the particular configurations of secular-religious spheres that came into question. The case of Carol Park suggests that Bucharest tends to follow the path of Moscow, where dealing with the socialist past in terms of the built environment became the ‘mission’ of the Orthodox Church. The case of the reconstructed Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow (Sidorov 2000) represents the most pertinent example in this respect. The case of Bucharest adds to this example by the fact that in Bucharest one does not speak about a re-construction, because the city did not have a cathedral which was demolished during socialism. However, the planned cathedral is still perceived as an act of restoration by the Orthodox Church, and by this mainly intended to be a symbolic restoration of the state-church relation and a return to an idealized form of political alliance between the two.

Furthermore, in Bucharest, as opposed to Moscow, the Church faced a series of obstacles that hindered the project. The result was that throughout the 1990’s the location for the future cathedral was changed several times, with several committee’s and public architectural contests being organized, all of which ultimately failed to reach a decision.

One of the most surprising obstacles, closely connected to the story of Carol Park, was that the cathedral project faced public opposition. In 2004 the Orthodox Church made a second request for land in Carol Park, after an unsuccessful attempt in 1997. 2004 was the year of the general elections and the center-left government granted the request, counting on the cooperation of the Church in the coming elections. These hasty pre-election agreements had become the established norm for negotiating particular interests between the Orthodox Church and governing parties in the post-socialist transition period. The fact that the park, including the socialist monument, was listed as a national heritage site was not a serious obstacle for the planned cathedral.
The minister of culture took the matter in his own hands and personally declassified the monument from the heritage list, even if from a legal point of view this decision should have been only possible with the written agreement of the independent National Committee for Historical Monuments, an agreement that never existed.

The attempt to disassemble the socialist monument was met by a large number of protesters. The public protest, articulated around the ‘Save Carol Park’ slogan, was not intended to be an anti-religious campaign and it did not aim directly at the cathedral project or at the Orthodox Church. The protesters motivated their presence in the park through the lack of transparency in the way the monument had been declassified and through the fact that a construction site would substantially reduce the green area of the park. Because it was formulated as a pluralist ‘right to the city’ protest, it attracted a large number of people and ultimately put the demolition works on halt. Soon afterwards the political party in power lost the elections and Carol Park was given up as a possible location. After the elections, the Orthodox Church started another set of negotiations with the new center-right government for yet another location for the cathedral; negotiations that proved to be more successful, as the following section will show.

3. The Cathedral in the ‘Civic Center’

There were not many alternate locations to Carol Park, which could have suited the construction of a grand cathedral. One of the few centrally located alternatives was the Civic Center, the new central area of Bucharest built during late socialism. The case of finding a place for the ‘Cathedral of National Redemption’ somewhere in the area of the ‘Civic Center’ of Bucharest proved to be at least as contested as Carol Park, but for different reasons. This part of the city represented the most prominent socialist legacy in Romanian architecture and planning, with its landmark, ‘The House of People’, present day Parliament of Romania, presumably the second largest public building in the world, which unwillingly became the main selling brand of the city after the fall of socialism. The monumental, and still unfinished, complex of administrative buildings, the never-ending ‘Unirii’ Boulevard, former ‘Victory of Socialism’ Boulevard, the still unfinished National Library, the empty lot adjacent to the boulevard, where the state celebrations should have taken place and, of course, the ‘House of People’, create a wasteland punctured, at considerable walking distances, by intimidating monumental buildings.

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7 The campaign also resulted in a lawsuit against the Ministry of Culture and Cults, which was won after it was proven that the monument was declassified illegally from the heritage list by the minister of culture.
Before focusing on the plans for the cathedral in this area, a closer view at what it stands for in the geography of Bucharest might be useful. The ‘New Civic Center’ was the result of a larger program of settlement redevelopment conducted in late Romanian socialism, called *systematization*, a program that was supposed to reshape the entire settlement network of the country, from villages to the capital city, according to the changing needs of the socialist society (Sampson 1984). As opposed to other socialist countries, like the GDR\(^8\), Romania did not show much interest towards urban centrality until the late sixties. The new perception of total planning, which started to be implemented in the early seventies, changed this situation. The effect was that several new grand construction projects for central urban areas were launched, *civic centers* that were supposed to redefine Romanian cities according to the ideals of the socialist city and take up main political-administrative functions. Among these projects, the one for the ‘New Civic Center’ of Bucharest was the largest and the most important on the priority list of the government.

After 1989 construction works in the area of the Civic Center were stopped and the project was left partly unfinished. The challenge for the new local governments was to somehow deal with this anachronistic part of the city. The first attempt in this direction did not have anything to do with the cathedral project. The ‘Bucharest 2000’\(^9\) project was meant to be the first master plan initiative for Bucharest after 1989, which should have provided alternatives exactly for the problem at hand: the desertedness of the unfinished new center of town. The winning solution mainly opted for crowding the area with more tall constructions, so as to cover the intimidating dimensions of the already existing public buildings.

After having announced the winning project, the ‘Civic Center’ was declared a ‘development area of national interest’, taxes were reduced in order to stimulate investments and a governmental agency called the ‘Bucharest 2000 Development Agency’ was formed, which was supposed to work in close cooperation with the city to oversee the project. However, the political environment and the conflicting interests made the realization of a project of such size impossible at that time.

\(^8\) “A principal characteristic of the socialist city concept is the dominance of the city centre. Its special significance is outlined in the *Sixteen principles of urban development*, established by the GDR government in 1950. These state: ‘The centre is the heart of the city, it is the political centre for its citizens. The most important political, administrative and cultural establishments are in the city centre. On the central squares, political demonstrations, parades and festivals on public holidays take place. The city centre with squares, main avenues and voluptuous buildings (skyscrapers in the big cities) determines the architectural silhouette of the city. Squares are the structural basis for urban development.’ (Häußermann in Andrusz et. al, 1996: 217)

\(^9\) See the volume Bucuresti 2000 (1997), that presents the idea behind the project, the actors involved and the winning solutions.
In 1999, after the first failed attempt of the Church to add Carol Park to its property, the city decided to allocate land for the construction in the Civic Center. This decision made it obvious that the local officials had no intention to push for the initial ‘Bucharest 2000’ plan anymore and that they were looking for new alternative solutions for the area. The site that was offered for the cathedral was ‘Unirii (Union) Square’, the main intersection of the Civic Center. The representatives of the Orthodox Church at first seemed very satisfied with this new location. They seized upon the opportunity of the first visit of Pope John Paul II to Romania in order to organize a common religious ceremony, where the Pope and the Patriarch blessed the location of the future cathedral. The same year a public architectural competition was organized by the Orthodox Church for the design of the new cathedral.

Participation in the public competition was very low, because experts considered the site in ‘Unirii Square’ to be unsuitable for the construction of a large building. The site is one of the busiest traffic nodes of the city and has two underground levels, one for the river that is redirected under the square, the other for the most important metro junction of the city. With no valuable projects in the competition that would have solved the difficulties imposed by the site and without public support, the location had to be given up.

One year later, in 2000, during the first months in office of the new mayor of Bucharest, who would become president of the country four years later, another detailed urban plan was decided upon in a city council meeting placing the cathedral once again in the Civic Center, but this time two blocks further away from the previous location, right in the middle of the ‘Unirii’ boulevard. The Church accepted this compromise and organized a new public competition in 2002, where local architects participated in high numbers. Augustin Ioan, the author of the winning project of this competition (Ioan 2003) explained in his statement the opportunity of a cathedral in that location in similar terms to those of the ‘Bucharest 2000’ project. His solution opted for placing the cathedral in the middle of the boulevard and directing the traffic underneath the building. By blocking the boulevard, the cathedral would have created a counterpart for the oversized building of the parliament, located at the other end of it. Furthermore, a complex of four urban squares would have been created, facilitating the mobility of pedestrians and considerably decreasing walking distances needed for crossing the Civic Center (See Fig. 3). This second and last public competition for the cathedral represented an interesting compromise between the Church and the architects that were involved. The Church, although unsatisfied with the location and with the somewhat modernist approach of the competing projects, went along with the partnership because it needed public support. Even one of the most radical conditions set by the architectural jury’s commission, to give up the pompous name of ‘The Cathedral of National Redemption’ for ‘Saint Andrews Cathedral’, was formally accepted by the Romanian Orthodox Church.
Soon afterwards the representatives of the Church engaged in negotiations with construction companies and started to search for possible funding opportunities for the cathedral. It seemed that the walk on the ‘via dolorosa’ of finding a location for the cathedral in Bucharest had finally come to an end. But this turned out to be wrong, because in the meantime the government had negotiated a more profitable investment opportunity with a development company from abroad for a modern multifunctional center, called the ‘Esplanada City Center’, in the exact same location where the cathedral was supposed to be built. The search for a suitable location continued with another failed attempt in Carol Park in 2004, already mentioned in the previous chapter and finally returned to the Civic Center one year later in yet another location.

The final location that is agreed upon by the Church in the Civic Center is next to the imposing building of the parliament, on the hill overseeing the city. The parcel of land that was transferred into the property of the Church by the state is located in the back of the parliament and is surrounded by the parliament fence. The Church has taken up the opportunity of constructing the largest religious building of the country next to the main institutions of the state, in order to spatially confirm its close collaboration (See Fig. 4). After all the other failed attempts, the Church has entered direct negotiations with the state government, refusing to involve urban experts or the local government in the matter. The authority granted to the Orthodox Church by the new government after
2004 made negotiations on almost equal terms between the two institutions possible and silenced or ignored the voices of other actors that were critical either towards the location of the future cathedral, or to the project itself.

Fig. 4: Vlad Nancă, ‘Proposal for the National Redemption Cathedral’ (2004).  

Building the patriarchal cathedral next to the parliament, in the monumental complex of the Civic Center, is interpreted by the Orthodox Church as a sort of settling of accounts, after the repeated injustices that previous regimes, especially socialism, had inflicted upon it. However, this decision runs deeper: at least in the present configuration of power, with the governing political party very much favoring the collaboration of the Church in matters that exceed its spiritual attributions, this decision comes as a confirmation of the successful redefinition of the Church-state relations, which was the main point on the agenda of the Orthodox Church since the early nineties.

10 The image shows a frontal view of the ‘House of People’, present day Parliament of Romania. Vlad Nancă came up with his artistic solution to the debate of where the future cathedral should be placed in 2004, at a point when the final location, next to the Parliament, was not yet an issue. Ironically, the last location that was decided upon for the cathedral confirms Nancă’s poster, because the building will be located behind the Parliament and will be taller than it.
4. Conclusion

While officially insisting upon the fact that a grand cathedral in the core of the political-administrative center of the Romanian state would come as a reparation of the injustices of socialism, the representatives of the Church do not question the fact that this political-administrative center is a product of the centralizing efforts of the same socialist state that they are blaming. It seems almost as if for the Church the problem with the ‘authoritarian high modernist’ (Scott 1998) Civic Center project of Bucharest is not the intimidating size, the unequivocal statement of power, or the fact that entire neighborhoods were destructed in order to build it, but that the Orthodox Church was not represented in the project from the very beginning. ‘The Cathedral of National Redemption’ is not supposed to constitute a counterpoint for the monumentality of the Civic Center complex, but it is actually supposed to compete with the ‘Palace of Parliament’, by being taller and even more imposing and thus only confirming the statement of power that the area already expresses.

The ‘Cathedral of National Redemption’, built next to the ‘Palace of Parliament’ in the Civic Center of Bucharest, will set the stage for a new understanding of the relation between state and religion. The cathedral does not ‘redeem’ the high-modernist project of the civic center, on the contrary, it enforces the ‘authoritarian gaze of the state’ (Scott 1998). The only difference is that the state starts to have an altered meaning through this process, stepping much closer to the symphonic ideal of shared state-religion rule that the Orthodox Church has always been aiming for.

Bucharest continues to be a site of continuous struggle of various social groups over representation in conflicting models of urbanity. It might be too much to say that the post-socialist transformation of the city will be completed through the construction of the patriarchal cathedral, leading to what has been referred to as a ‘post-secular’ city. However, placing the seat of the Patriarchy of the Romanian Orthodox Church at the core of the country’s political-administrative center will certainly shift the state-religion balance in favor of the Romanian Orthodox Church, both on an urban level, as well as on a national level, and radically change the cityscape of Bucharest for years to come.

References


