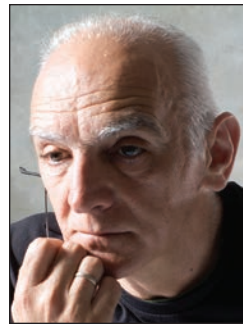# BUCHAREST

Designing the Future

An Interview with Dorin Stefan,
Architect and Principal, Dorin Stefan Birou Arhitectura

EDITORS' NOTE *In 2011, Dorin Stefan qualified among the top five shortlist tenderers for stage two of the "Taiwan Tower" International Competition, Taichung, Taiwan. His other accomplishments include First Prize in the "Taiwan Tower Conceptual Design International Competition", Taichung, Taiwan in 2010; The Prize of the Biennale – Union of Architects of Romania in 2006; and Order of Architects of Romania Prize, Bucharest branch in 2003. In 2002, he received his Ph.D. in Architecture.*

Dorin Stefan (above) and his Taiwan Tower design (right)

He also became Vice President of the Order of Architects in Romania. Stefan has been teaching since 1979 at the University of Architecture and Urban Planning "ION MINCU" in Bucharest.

COMPANY BRIEF *Dorin Stefan Birou Arhitectura was founded in 1990 as a follow up to Dorin Stefan's architectural practice started in 1975. During the communist era, he designed proposals for a series of international competitions and public buildings in Romania, and participated in various art & architectural exhibitions. After the fall of the communist regime, he started a private practice, D.S.B.A., which addresses various challenges in the field of architecture, urban planning, national contests, and international competitions and art events.*

How has Bucharest progressed since the fall off of communism?

"Palatul telefoanelor" – "the palace of telephones" – is the emblematic building of Bucharest. It is a beginning and an end. It's the building of a new paradigm, from the "Little Paris" to the "New York of Europe". The completion of this building was the last city progress for Bucharest. It followed the royal dictatorship, the Second World War, the communist dictatorship, and the past 20 years of great confusion. Unfortunately, in Bucharest, discomforts have been amplified due to the underdeveloped infrastructure, the most serious being the traffic and the inadequacy of the parking system, of roads and intersections, and of ring roads to the number of cars that have almost reached critical mass.

After 80 years of attempts and a lot of unresolved problems, Bucharest is faced with a challenge but also a dilemma: to become a regional metropolis in Southeastern Europe or remain "Little Paris". There is competition with

Belgrade, Sofia, and Kiev, which also stagnate for various reasons, but Bucharest's steps toward developing a new airport in the south part of the city and the local government's declared intention to modernize infrastructure – especially roads – may help us gain an edge.

A new urban plan will be approved over the next few years. Which areas will be most relevant for investment and development?

We are in a crisis. Investment pressure has fallen close to zero. A political decision is missing. The drafting of a new urban general plan for Bucharest has not yet begun, although the old one expired a year ago. Elaboration and debate over it could take several years and the approval by the General Council one more year, maybe two. At this pace, we could have this plan in four to five years, but the experience the developed cities have gone through must be taken into consideration by local authorities, architects, and private developers. Architects and developers expect much more legislative and administrative coherence, including an efficient system for tracking the compliance of building permits. Otherwise, the mess will persist, existing mostly because of an incoherent system of laws for urbanism.

Cities are challenged by the conflict between "green/ecological" and "green/money". How is Bucharest tackling this debate and what is being put into practice?

The challenge of "green" has a double connotation: 50 percent ideology and 50 percent practice.

After the failure of the red ideology, there was a need for another ideology to balance the free market and cope with the "bad guys". I do not believe in ideologies. For those in Eastern Europe, this phase with the imposed ideology from the center –even if it is green – leaves us a bit skeptical.

The practical side, in which I believe, is in fact a return to the rationalist-functionalist principles of building space coupled with the actual technological progress (materials, recycling, alternative energy). And in urbanism, "green" is also a rationalism-functionalism minus the obsession of the demiurge architect/city planner. The ethic prevails. One of the recent Biennale of architecture in Venice took place under the slogan "more ethics less esthetic". There is the eternal challenge of the "bad guys"
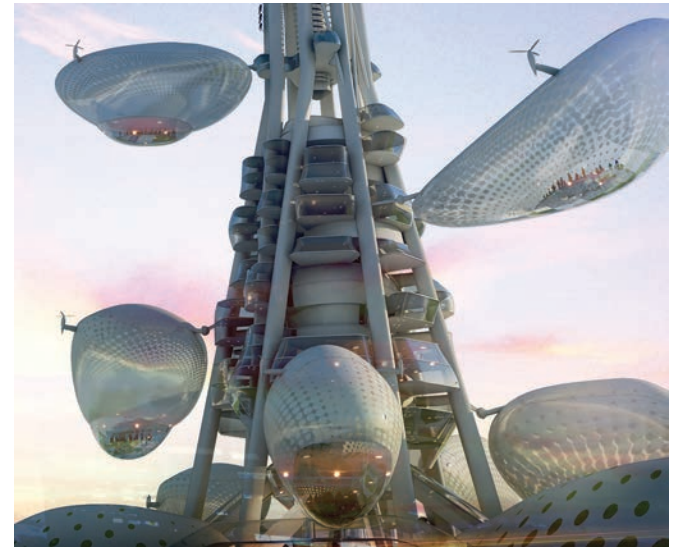
(development) and "good guys"(conservation). But at this point of choice, we have a dilemma.

The selection of buildings that we protect is made by aesthetic criteria. We do not intervene in the central areas of Bucharest in an attempt to solve traffic problems but to protect the existing property heritage. We transfer the traffic problems to the suburbs: we cut marginal ring roads through marginal neighborhoods and introduce highway belts among the villages around Bucharest.

You have designed buildings in Romania and Asia. What has been your experience in both areas and what have you learned from each?

It's great to design for two worlds so far apart but that embrace the same cultural values. I was pleasantly surprised by the openness to experimental and critical objectivity in the Competition for the Taiwan Tower; it is an experience that I want to develop further – to work under a global influence to customize what you know or discover about the locals. I abide by this on projects in Romania and in Asia. I was never tempted in quartering only in the vernacular.

What future projects are you working on and which projects is Bucharest primarily focused on developing?

Today, the infrastructure is on the agenda in Bucharest, in particular the traffic, which creates major dysfunction due to accumulation of a critical mass of cars imposed over a completely unprepared system. Defusing this critical mass can be made through a few immediate interventions to decrease the pressure from certain critical points. I now deal with two such projects: parking and passages for both cars and pedestrians under Charles de Gaulle Square and the Presei Libere Square. Both function as intermodal hubs – pedestrian traffic, subway stations, bus stations, and parking lots. In the country, I'm working on two architecture projects; an orthodox church in Alba Iulia, already built and covered, and in Craiova, a project for a Brancusi pavilion in the extension of the Art Museum. ●