

Grama, Emanuela. *Socialist Heritage: The Politics of Past and Place in Romania*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. 247 pages

*Maria Cristache, Justus Liebig University, Giessen, Germany*

A central theme in critical heritage studies is the political nature of heritage definition, exhibition, and management. Instead of reducing heritage to things or places with inherent and "objective" value, this field engages with topics such as the role of knowledge and power in heritage production and preservation. In her book, *Socialist Heritage: The Politics of Past and Place in Romania*, Emanuela Grama presents the fascinating case of the Old Town in Bucharest, raising similar questions about heritage regimes during communism and after 1989. Her analysis of power negotiations, criteria for belonging and practices of exclusion revealed by "heritage making (and unmaking)" (p.2) does not lose sight, however, of visual and material factors such as archaeological sites, ruins, building facades and scripts.

Drawing on archival and ethnographic research, the book is a detailed examination of the power negotiations between politicians, various professional groups, and state tenants as reflected in the valuation and devaluation of buildings in the Old Town. The introduction places the aim and objectives of the book into a wider historical context, starting from the emergence of the Old Town in the 19th century and until the beginning of the communist regime in Romania. It also outlines the conceptual framework consisting of the link between heritage regimes and state making, ethnographic approaches to aesthetics, and "heritage as the *propriety of property*" (p.20, emphasis in original). The introduction ends with a presentation of the research methods and the organization of the book.

The rest of the book is structured into five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one focuses on the plan for urban development in postwar Bucharest as an arena for the assertion of power and state formation. The case of the Old Court discussed in chapter two sheds light on the conflict between architects and archaeologists during the 1960s and on how the latter advanced from "the periphery of the political agenda" (p. 67) by helping the socialist state strengthen its legitimacy. The next chapter examines the attitudes and practices of architects, state officials, and residents towards the Old Town—seen as a potential historical district—between the late 1960s and the

1980s. In chapter four, the author focuses on the state authorities' neglect of the Old Town, a political and economic strategy they used in order to present themselves as democratic politicians removed from the communist past and to exploit the district as a source of cheap capital during the 1990s. Chapter five delves into the privatization of Bucharest in the early 2000s, as Romania sought EU integration, with the Old Town playing a role in Europeanizing the city at the expense of the social relations and community within the district. The conclusion successfully brings together the two heritage regimes, underlining temporal and spatial dynamics as well as postsocialist gentrification and privatization.

The author captures and presents the intricate relations between heritage regimes, knowledge production, political orders, and power in a captivating way. She skillfully integrates observations about architecture as an indicator and tool of modernization, archaeological valuation of objects as "raw matter" (p.90), forms of political communication between competing professional groups, and ruined buildings in the postsocialist privatized city into a convincing analysis of heritage production, preservation, and manipulation. The discussion about projects that never materialized—such as the proposal to redesign the facades of houses in the supposed architectural style of the 18th century (Chapter three) and the proposal of a British team of architects to renovate the Old Town (Chapter four) —as indicators of political visions is particularly intriguing.

Chapter five explores the link between privatization and heritage as Romania started to pursue EU integration. The author juxtaposes the efforts to transform "the Old Town into the historical center of a European capital aimed to cater to the aesthetic sensibilities of a neoliberal middle class" (p.208) to the erasure "not only of houses but also of social relations, of empathy, of connections, and of community" (p.210). This is an important point for understanding people's experiences in the fragmented postsocialist society. However, the author doesn't dedicate much space in the book to the points of view and experiences of people living in the decaying buildings of the Old Town. Focusing more on the perspective of residents would have helped understand the impact of heritage definition and management on the everyday lives of people. A more in depth exploration of how the (crumbling) material environment affected people's routines, social interactions, feeling of belonging and exclusion, quality of life would have led to a more convincing combination of ethnographic and historical perspectives.

This book contributes to the field of critical heritage studies with a perspective on the rather unexplored context of Romania. Giving more prominence to the voices of those who inhabit the buildings of the Old Town would have helped readers better understand how the abstract notion of heritage translates into everyday struggles in a polarized postsocialist society. Still, *Socialist Heritage* provides a complex and thought-provoking account of the changing meanings of heritage within different political regimes, power structures, and modes of knowledge production.