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Houses that Cry: Online Civic Participation in Post-Communist Romania

Laura Visan

Abstract

This essay explores the role of online communities and cyber-activism in fostering ‘real-life’ participation. It begins by revisiting a topic of controversy among citizenship studies scholars: the erosion vs. the expansion of citizenship and active participation instances in the past three decades. Arguably, participation in online communities is one of the most notable instances of reinventing active citizenship. While sceptics view the Internet and social capital as a contradiction in terms and deplore the waning of traditional communities, supporters of online participation emphasize the potential of the Internet to bring together people who would have otherwise never met in support of a cause. The second half of the essay will demonstrate that, in some cases, the actions of protest undertaken by online communities turn into “acts of citizenship” by challenging *habitus*, power and regulations (Isin, 2008). It will discuss the activity of Houses that Cry, a project created by architecture students in Bucharest in order to protect the architectural patrimony of the city. Their initiative can be considered an act of citizenship for two reasons: first, they shifted online protests from blogs and forums to the street, community and the media. Second, they transformed the protection of endangered historical buildings into a matter of public interest.

Keywords: cyber-activism, acts of citizenship, erosion/expansion of citizenship, Bucharest, architectural patrimony, historical buildings, Houses that Cry

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Introduction

A massive fire almost destroyed *Moara lui Assan*¹ (Assan's Mill) in May 2008. Built in 1853, this was the first steam mill in Bucharest and the tallest building in the city. A unique monument in the architectural patrimony of Bucharest, the mill was transformed into a dilapidated collection of bricks, "a terrifying place that smells horribly due to the piles of trash that fill all its corners" (Stefan, 2010). From time to time, Romanian media publish such stories about the dilapidation of Bucharest's patrimony monuments. Vandalism of historical buildings, destruction of their decorative elements or the abusive demolition of patrimony edifices are not new phenomena. However, this topic receives only sporadic attention from principal media outlets, which have largely adopted a tabloid-reminiscent approach that builds upon entertainment and sensationalism. When articles of this kind do appear, it is due to the pressure exerted by non-governmental activists, urban planners and architects, who voice their opinions on various blogs and forums. While hoping that this essay will raise more awareness on the dramatic situation of the architectural patrimony of Bucharest, I also wish to emphasize the potential of new technologies to function as civic activism platforms,

allowing a plurality of discourses to coalesce in support of the same cause. The role of new technologies becomes increasingly important in a context dominated by media conglomerates, with a discourse that leaves little room for difference or ‘non-commercial’ topics.

In what follows, I will explore the role of cyber-activism in fostering ‘real life’ civic participation. My essay will first revisit the notorious citizenship studies controversy regarding the erosion vs. the expansion of civic participation in the last several decades. Taking the “expansion” side, I will argue that we are rather witnessing a reinvention of civic participation, thanks to the online communication outlets now available. I will also explore the main debates surrounding cyber-activism, briefly touching upon the feisty scholarly controversy between “cyber optimists” and “cyber pessimists”, to borrow Pippa Norris’ terms². While the former argue that online civic participation has the potential to catalyze audiences toward public interest matters and to bring together people who would have otherwise never met, their skeptical counterparts regard online social capital as a contradiction in terms. According to them, we have come to join online communities at antipodes, but we no longer remember the name of our neighbour. The second half of this essay will explore the role of Houses that Cry, an online project developed by young Romanian architects, in bringing the critical situation of Bucharest’s architectural patrimony into public attention. This online database of historical monuments and houses facing either demolition or dilapidation due to authorities’ indifference has succeeded in shifting the public debate from online to the street and other spaces, conventional and unconventional. I will argue that all happenings and events initiated by Houses that Cry represent an active form of dissent against the authorities’ indifference and sometimes ill-will, or an act of citizenship, as Engin Isin (2008) would have it.

Erosion vs. Expansion/Reinvention of Civic Participation

In the last three decades, academic discourse on active citizenship has situated itself on two divergent positions: the erosion and expansion (reinvention) of civic participation. Peter Kivisto and Thomas Faist (2007) recommend that both perspectives be interrogated and whenever possible bridged, although “spokespersons for each of these positions seem deaf to the other discourse” (3).

In what follows, I will briefly revisit the main perspectives on the erosion and expansion of active participation, arguing that civic involvement is not in decline but under profound transformation. Many people appear to have traded the bowling leagues and bird watching clubs that Robert Putnam (2000) has made famous³, for online communities engaged in acts of citizenship.

The Erosion of Citizenship

Arguably, the erosion paradigm builds upon T.H. Marshall’s pioneering contribution on citizenship rights in post World War II Britain. He recommended the consolidation of welfare policies in order to challenge the inequalities of the capitalist system and recuperate the gap between individuals with high incomes and destitute members of the society. Marshall does not aim at a classless society but advocates one “in which class differences are legitimate in terms of social justice” (Marshall in Kivisto and Faist, 2007:55).

However, the main drawback of the British welfare system was the imbalance it caused between people’s rights and obligations. Marshall remarked that except for the compulsory duties, such as paying taxes, attending school and undertaking military service⁴, people adopted a relatively passive attitude towards community needs. Analyzing Marshall’s work, Kivisto and Faist (2007) note that a “Dunkirk spirit” has been British citizens’ everyday life after World War II. Should a crisis occur, people would promptly respond but in ‘ordinary’ times, civic

duties tend to remain confined to a purely conceptual level (Kivisto and Faist, 2007:56).

Neoliberal scholars have criticized Marshall's perspective arguing that the welfare state fosters inequality rather than actually helping people overcome their underprivileged status (Shields, 2002). But neoliberalism is not the best context for the flourishing of civic participation either. The neoliberal idea of citizenship has at its core a marked tendency towards self-centrism that comes hand in hand with an increased appetite for consumption (Shields, 2002). While the gratifications of consumerism are most often enjoyed within the small circle of family and close friends, interest in community activities fades. "Self-interest [...] trumps actions motivated by the needs of the nation, the local community, or the disadvantaged" (Kivisto and Faist, 2007: 65).

Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam's widely acclaimed book on community and civic participation, explores the alleged decline of civic involvement witnessed by the United States since the 1970s. Examining the concept of social capital, he argues that civic virtue "is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital" (2000:19). However, beginning with the 1970s, people have gradually lost their interest in civic participation, due to several factors: changes in family structure, with more people living alone; a suburban sprawl, entailing more time for traveling to and from work, but less time and disposition to involve in community activities; and the advent of modern technologies, especially television³. Critics of Putnam's work have noticed that he makes no explicit reference to the social and economic climate of neoliberalism, in which all these changes occurred.

In a similar vein, Henry Tam and John Shields note the decline of local democracy (Tam, 2001) and, respectively, the threat faced by the community sector and civic society in consequence of the guiding ideology of neoliberalism (Shields, 2002). Examining the British social context, Tam maintains that too many people reduce citizenship to a framework meant to

facilitate the process of acquiring wealth, forgetting the fact that “services which bind and sustain the public domain are the core elements of any civilized society” (Tam, 2001:123). Furthermore, an increasing number of citizens who used to get involved in local community bodies have chosen to discontinue this engagement, disappointed with their little (if any) influence upon decisions of the central administration. Canada has been struggling with similar challenges in the past decade; the contract, top-down relationship between government and the third sector have had “profound implications for inclusive citizenship, the health of civil society, the development of social capital, and the enhancement of social cohesion” (Shields, 2002: 142).

The Expansion/Reinvention of Active Citizenship

Scholars have approached the expansion/reinvention of active citizenship from a multitude of perspectives. Some have looked at globalization and the permeabilization of borders, resulting in new modalities of membership that transcend the nation-state system. Other authors, associated with the communitarian tradition of research, argue that the much-debated decline in civic involvement of the 1970s and 1980s has been partially recuperated in the 1990s (Etzioni, 2004). In turn, the transformation of citizenship ‘as we knew it’ into a consumer-oriented experience or into ‘workplace activism’, under the umbrella of corporate social responsibility policies, has also generated a consistent amount of scholarly thought (Wolfe, 2004). Last, a consistent number of works have touched upon the role of the Internet and online communities in refashioning active participation practices. Peter Day and Douglas Schuler (2004) emphasize the role of new technologies – including Internet mediated communication – in the processes of social transformation that has taken place on a global level. Both authors maintain that “the hierarchical and class-based power structures of industrial society are giving way to an age of networked social structures” (Day and Schuler, 2004:3). Rejecting Castells’ techno-economic agenda constructed on an economic

rationalist foundation, as well as his perspective on “multiple space of places” subjected to a more powerful “space of flows”, Day and Schuler (2004) recommend an alternative path, with an emphasis on the mobilizing potential of new technologies.

James Bohman (2004) emphasizes the capacity of online communities to act as public forums, even if their members do not meet face to face – at least, not from the beginning. Computer-mediated communication represents a forum, “a social space in which speakers may express their views to others who in turn respond to them and raise their own opinions and concerns” (Bohman, 2004:133). Second, for better or worse, it is a form of conversation or debate between its members, whose voices are equally heard and respected. Later in his article, Bohman (2004) maintains that the Internet encourages a ‘distributive’ rather than unified public sphere, in that it creates a “public of publics”. The Internet-mediated public sphere is not a fixed one; rather, people who engage in debate and dialogue negotiate their own public sphere. Third, it addresses a spatially and temporally indefinite audience, correcting an important limitation of face-to-face communication (Bohman, 2004:133-5).

In a similar fashion, Oliver Boyd-Barrett (2004) mentions the potential of the Internet as “a powerful new means of expression to individuals and institutions” (28). He considers the World Wide Web realm closer to the theoretical portrait of the public sphere as imagined by Jürgen Habermas than the printed press. The German theorist had defined the bourgeois public sphere as the “sphere of private people come together as a public”, aiming to engage the public authorities “in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor” (Habermas, 1962:27). The Habermasian model was severely criticized for the misrepresentation of working classes, peasantry and women. Yet, Boyd-Barrett (2004) points to the progressive dimension brought on by the salon and coffee houses discourses and debates:

[...] integrated with opinions and information disseminated through pamphlets, periodicals and broadsheets about arts and, when authorities allowed, politics – focused on matters of public concern, and were independent of government, church, private interest, and the interests of capital, while contributing to more enlightened governance (26).

The printed press, including its online version, has witnessed continuous threats to its ‘watchdog’ status. Boyd-Barrett (2004) points at two particularly problematic aspects: state intervention, in the case of publicly-owned media channels (not even the BBC, a classical example of impartiality, has been completely free of state interference) and economic intervention, in the case of privately-owned media outlets. Profit-oriented, such publications often choose tabloidization and entertainment to the detriment of information and opinion and in time, as Boyd-Barrett (2004) notes, such commercial strategies shape audience expectations. Another significant consequence of media commodification is its growing incapacity to represent civil society, since processes of deregulation and privatization lead to the oligopolization of the press (Boyd-Barrett, 2004). In turn, notwithstanding the problematic areas mentioned below, the Internet may perform the functions of a public sphere; as Boyd-Barrett (2004) notes, this medium has provided “a powerful new means of expression to individuals and institutions” (28). The Internet offers unparalleled access to information and resources, allows users to generate content, facilitating their interaction with the public, and is not as vulnerable to censorship as traditional media. In the next section, I will explore the dilemma surrounding the potential of new technologies to foster acts of civic activism. I will argue that online debates do represent a form of civic activism, particularly when transferred from the virtual space to the ‘real world’.

A “Second-Best” Activism

Musing about the decline of social capital in the United States since the 1970s, Robert Putnam (2000) is unsure about the role of new technologies in people’s lives. Putnam’s (2000) *Bowling Alone* was first published when the Internet had not yet attained the mass phenomenon status it enjoys today, therefore his reserve is understandable. According to him, within a few years from the launch of the Internet, “simulacra of most classic forms of social connectedness and civic engagement could be found on-line” (2000:170). He even goes as far as to wonder whether virtual social capital is a contradiction in terms. Although community, communion and communication are etymologically connected, he prefers to stay away from the “utopian communitarianism” that views computer networks as a means of transgressing physical distance and class differences between people. While computer networks represent an uncontested means of exchanging information with physically remote individuals, Putnam (2000) doubts that the Internet is a generator of social capital, because it is not easy to build trust and goodwill online. Furthermore, he explains that computer-mediated communication between the members of a community requires frequent face-to-face encounters: “an extensive, deep, robust social infrastructure of relationships must exist so that those using the electronic media will truly understand what others are communicating to them” (176-7) without the help of non-verbal communication. Putnam (2000) concludes that social capital may be a prerequisite of computer-mediated communication rather than a consequence of it.

Other scholars believe that the Internet diminishes social capital, because the time spent online is lost to real communities. While online, people are less attentive to their surrounding environments (Nie and Sackman in Quan Haase and Wellman, 2004). The Internet weakens an individual’s ties with her friends and family, due to the time spent online, and even leads to social alienation (Kraut et al. in Miyata, Ikeda and Kobayashi, 2001). Sunstein and Schapiro consider that computer-mediated

communication cannot provide a true interaction, necessary for the functioning of a political public sphere (Bohman, 2004).

Eric Uslaner considers the Internet a neutral channel, at best, which “neither creates social bonds nor destroys them. It does not build up trust or destroy it” (Uslaner in Hooghe, Vissers, Stolle and Mahéo, 2010:409). The Internet in itself does not have transforming potential, as any revolution takes place offline. In turn, Boyd-Barrett (2004) observes that less commercial websites are not particularly visible, because they are retrieved less often than the “established sources”. At the same time, the message transmitted by less visible websites may appear as insufficiently reliable (Day and Schuler, 2004). Bruce Bimber argues that US citizens have not become more involved in political activities, in spite of the unprecedented technological advancements of the past five decades. Furthermore, surveys undertaken between 1996 and 1999 indicate “little evidence of a relationship between Internet use to obtain political information and any of several forms of political activity” (Bimber in Kelly Garrett, 2006:205). There is also a risk of demobilization associated to acts of dissent constructed on information and communication technology (ICT) platforms. If the politics of contention become too vocal, the forces that control the ICT infrastructure may restrict or complicate users’ access to resources (Kelly Garrett, 2006).

Michael Keren considers that bloggers’ truths rarely transcend the virtual realm of the blogosphere. Their posts often represent soliloquies, because the powers they are attempting to confront cannot hear them (Keren in van Zoonen, Vis and Mihelj, 2010). van Zoonen et al. counter Keren’s perspective by invoking the performative nature of citizenship acts. The acts of citizenship, in Engin Isin’s (2008) terms, are significant in themselves, and “should be interrogated for what they achieve, not only for a possible audience but for the speakers themselves” (252).

A New Tribune for Civic Activism

Anabel Quan-Haase and Barry Wellman (2004) contend that the Internet exerts a positive transformation of social capital,

thanks to the low costs of operation it incurs: “High levels of participation in on-line communities suggest that the Internet has become an alternative route to being involved in groups and pursuing interests” (118). Whilst media culture and media products have become deterritorialized and commodified, a US-made commodity exported throughout the world, the Internet is deemed to offer a more direct chance to individual participation, “free of supervision and largely beyond the reach of authority” (Cameron and Gross Stein, 2002:11).

The potential of new technologies to foster civic participation has been emphasized both in scholarly contributions and in extra-academic environments. Ellen Balka and Brian Peterson (2004) remark that Internet access has been paralleled to “new possibilities of citizenship” (140). In an earlier contribution, Janet Balas had emphasized “the democratic values in new computer and communications technologies”, while a 1999 Policy Research Initiative maintains that the Internet is seen by the government as a channel that provides “new opportunities to engage citizens in participatory democracy, be it through electronic townhalls or teledemocracy” (Balas in Balka and Peterson, 2004:141).

Synthesizing several key contributions on social movements and new ICTs, Kelly Garrett (2006) points to three mechanisms that link technology and participation: “reduction of participation costs, promotion of collective identity and creation of community” (204). Analyzing the mobilization potential of new technologies, Kelly Garrett (2006) concentrates on political forms of manifestation. However, his arguments apply to other forms of activism that are not directly related to politics but express a solid dissent towards different forms of power, be it public or corporate. By facilitating access to publishing and information, ICTs reduce the costs of civic involvement. Looking at such “new low-cost forms of participation”, scholars have referred to an “upsurge of participation” and the emergence of new activism instances (Leizerov in Kelly Garrett, 2006:205). The second mechanism refers to the creation of a “collective identity”, a perception among geographically dispersed individuals that they belong to “a larger community by virtue of

the grievances they share” (Kelly Garrett, 2006:205). Third, the advent of ICTs fosters community development, strengthens social networks and empowers collective action. Furthermore, this trend has generated “changes in the repertoires of contention, allowing activists to engage in new forms of contentious activity and to adapt existing modes of contention to an online environment” (Kelly Garrett, 2006:208). Later in his article, Kelly Garrett (2006) equates this broadening of perspective to an inversion of Foucault’s panopticon metaphor; thanks to a more open – albeit imperfect – access to information, challengers, dissenters and activists may scrutinize the elites, in a reverse mechanism of surveillance.

Sometimes online debates and protests move to the street. The public sphere gives room to acts of citizenship, whose core mission is that of transgressing the existing social and political order. It was Isin (2008) who brought forward this concept, aiming to challenge the straitjackets of legal citizenship. The ‘rights-obligations’ paradigm has become too narrow for the recently emerged forms of citizenship⁵. Then, due to the permeabilization of borders and the ever-increasing migratory fluxes, a multitude of people engaged in “social, political, cultural and symbolic” acts of citizenship without being legal citizens of their host countries. While rights and obligations are “passive and one-sided” instances, “acts of citizenship break with repetition of the same and so anticipate rejoinders from imaginary but not fictional adversaries” (Isin, 2008:2). Isin (2008) recommends a distinction between formal citizenship, understood as a set of rights and obligations, and substantive citizenship, which materializes in the form of “creative breaks”, acts of “courage, bravery, indignation or righteousness to break with *habitus*” (18). An act of citizenship represents an instance of disruption, calling laws and regulations into question, often in a non-violent fashion. Isin’s (2008) concept refers particularly to strangers, aliens and outcasts who fight to re-define themselves by challenging the way in which they have already been politically, culturally, socially or sexually defined (2-39).

The concept also applies to online communities whose actions of protest turn into acts of citizenship. It is the case of young Romanian architects and urban planners, who manifest online their disapproval towards the destruction of Bucharest's architectural patrimony. There are two reasons why their efforts towards saving Romania's capital could be understood as acts of citizenship. First, they shifted protests from online platforms such as blogs and forums to the street, to art galleries, and to the media. It was not a disruptive or violent form of manifestation. Rather, the architects counted on a 'snowball effect' of drawing public attention towards the bulldozing of patrimony buildings, some of them unique in Europe, and their replacement with glass-and-steel 'business towers'. Second, the architect-bloggers transformed the protection of Bucharest's patrimony into a public interest matter. The number of Bucharesters who protest or manifest their concern towards the destruction of historical buildings in their city is ever growing. More and more people sign petitions, manifest their disapproval on forums or in the online editions of newspapers, and attend the protests taking place (albeit rarely) in Bucharest. Various channels of Internet-mediated communication allow both specialists and ordinary Bucharesters to act as "creative agents", who "will always find new ways to express their citizenship, and new rights, duties and institutions will need to be constructed to give form to the changing needs and aspirations of the citizen and community" (Faulks, 2000:6).

Architecture and Activism

The Bucharest Institute of Architecture⁶ - *Institutul de Arhitectura Ion Mincu* IAIM - represented a bastion of dissent against Nicolae Ceausescu's *systematization*, a series of megalomaniac projects aimed to replace historical buildings with "standardized apartment blocks promising better living standards" (Stratford, 2001:219). Systematization was "more akin to a social engineering exercise, with the ultimate ideological target being "the homogenization of the Romanian socialist

society” (Giurescu in Stratford, 2001:219). The rhetoric of the *new* informed the entire public discourse beginning in 1965, when Nicolae Ceausescu became the president of Romania. It involved “the *removal of the traces left by the capitalist society*, and the creation of a new appearance. The whole country was under the sign of a *huge building site*” (Zahariade, 2003:62). The *new* architecture of the communist regime had at its core, a call for collectivism. Communist authorities sanctioned individualism and segregation and people had to stay together, to “close the ranks” around Nicolae Ceausescu, as a well-known communist propaganda cliché would go. The new high-rise buildings, bringing together thousands of persons in the same block, were intended to foster this state-imposed social cohesion. People had to live together under the same roof, separated only by the thin, prefabricate walls of their apartments.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the communist authorities initiated a large demolition program in Bucharest. At Ceausescu’s demand, several districts of centuries-old buildings were bulldozed, to make room for “the construction of the immense Boulevard of the Victory of Socialism, which was crowned by the paradoxically lavish and megalomaniac House of the People” (Stratford, 2001:219). Many Romanian and foreign architects criticized the ‘birthday-cake’ design of this house and its gigantesque dimension, in total disproportion with other buildings in the area.

Communism has negatively refashioned the practice of placemaking, “the way all of us as human beings transform the places in which we find ourselves into places in which we live” (Schneekloth and Shibley, 2000:132). This concept incorporates a note of sensibility, *querencia*, which refers to one’s attachment to a certain place “not because it is abstractly or universally understood as unique or even supportive, but because it is yours” (Schneekloth and Shibley, 2000:132). Communist authorities have attempted to subvert the spirit of *querencia* that urban Romania had managed to grow during the interwar period. Instead of individual houses or three-story Bauhaus-inspired

buildings, Romanians had to live in standardized buildings that would hardly allow for placemaking.

Students repeatedly manifested their dissent towards the principles of the *new* architecture. The Bucharest School of Architecture (Institutul de Arhitectura Ion Mincu (IAIM)) “provided an enclave of expression for work created in the early eighties. In relation to other academic institutions in Romania, IAIM was the most permissive.” A former student of this institute remembers how “a sort of frivolity [...] was accepted by the academic power and tolerated by the political authorities” (Stratford, 2001:219). The fact that IAIM students were permitted to be more rebellious than their colleagues from other universities was relatively well-known by Bucharesters, although the former would often express their dissent through exhibitions, installation art projects, competition projects, i.e., manifestations targeting a closed circle of specialists. As the same former student remembers, these acts were “rather discrete and codified, hidden and disseminated in time and territory” (Stratford, 2001:219).

The destruction of the architectural patrimony continued after the 1989 Revolution, although for different purposes. Post-communist authorities too often let their material interests prevail over the historical or architectural value of old buildings. Many historical edifices that survived the communist bulldozers have been abandoned, improperly renovated or demolished in the past twenty years of transition to capitalism. The Union of Romanian Architects insistently protested against such practices. Serban Sturdza, the president of the Romanian Order of Architects, well known for his competence in restoration and conservation of historical buildings and monuments, tells in an interview: “The Order of Architects is trying to compensate for others’ passivity. We are making historical studies for the houses we hear that will be demolished, and demand that they be included on the list of historical monuments. We are trying to save them from dilapidation and demolition” (Istodor, 2008).

The architects’ spirit of dissent was not lost after 1989. In 2006, a group of IAIM students initiated “Case care plang”

(Houses that Cry – HC), a project aimed to raise public awareness in regards to the destruction of historical buildings in their city. This is an online database with buildings facing demolition or abandoned in a deplorable state. Thanks to the rich collection of photographs it has assembled, the project functions as an epitaph for the buildings that cannot be rescued. The project includes edifices with significant architectural and historical value, built between mid 19th century and the Interbellum decades, in a multitude of styles, including Art deco, Baroque, Modern Eclectic, Modern Eclectic, Neoromanian Eclectic and Modern. Initially, the project covered Bucharest only, but recently it has been expanded to other major cities in Romania.

The initiators of the project deplore the absence of a legislative framework for protecting historical buildings. They also argue that many Bucharesters lack architectural education and are unable to understand the consequences of abusive demolitions and inadequate renovation processes. More than 75% of the current inhabitants of Bucharest come from other cities, and less than 10% have been residing there for more than two generations, therefore they probably lack the attachment, or *querencia*, toward the capital city (“Despre noi. Case care plang/About Us/Houses That Cry”, 2008).

There are several other groups and non-governmental organizations involved in protecting the historical buildings of Bucharest. Of all, I am mentioning HC for several reasons. First, it has succeeded in bringing the patrimony issue to the attention of a wider public than the architects’ circle. The initiators of the project declared: “We don’t want to just notice; we want to change mentalities, and this is not easy. We are talking about a ‘sense of value’, which, fortunately, Romanians have but it is numbed. It exists but it needs to assert itself” (“Case care plang”, 2006). Second, it represents an act of citizenship. From an online project designed to raise awareness of the threats against Bucharest’s architectural memory, HC has shifted to other activity including photography exhibitions in unconventional spaces, such as the busiest subway stations in Bucharest. As well,

constant partnerships with the Order of the Architects, with HC acting as an interface between specialists and the wider public, workshops with school and high-school pupils, co-operative projects with the Presidential Administration, happenings and other events.

Perhaps most importantly, HC has succeeded in getting an increasing – albeit insufficient - amount of media attention in Romania and abroad. Daily newspapers, news programs, online communities and blogs made reference to the HC project, commending its initiators. Most important, such articles helped in shifting the focus from the organization itself, to the cause it stands for. News and reports about historical buildings demolished for the value of the land underneath them, abandoned and serving as shelter for homeless people, or collapsing because of major decay are more and more often showcased by Romanian media outlets. For instance, an influential newspaper wrote about the “unfortunate metamorphosis” of Bucharest, where “massive buildings were erected in the quiet districts of old houses, patrimony villas demolished or crashed at nighttime, purposely evasive authorizations ghostly urban planning, illegalities known and approved by everybody: ministers, mayors, architects and real estate entrepreneurs” (Stanescu, 2010). Elsewhere, an article entitled “Bucharest, mutilated by the very institution that had to protect it” refers to the hundreds of old, patrimony, houses in Bucharest that were bulldozed with the approval of city hall and the Bucharest Directorate for Culture (Ivanov, 2010).

The HC project directed some of its activities towards pupils and teenagers. Many of the Bucharesters who responded enthusiastically to the HC initiative and joined it as volunteers are youth. Furthermore, after watching a news story about HC, a twelfth grade student decided to get involved in rescuing an old building in Bucharest. The house “has historical and architectural value, but it also represents a symbol for the Romanian science”, because it belonged to Costin Nenitescu, a renowned Romanian chemist (Salvati “Casele care plang!”, 2007).

Conclusion

The 2009 Report of the Presidential Commission for Built and Natural Patrimony asserts that the destructions of the built patrimony that have taken place between 1990 and 2009 are more serious than the similar destructions of the Nicolae Ceausescu era (Sbirn, 2010). Looking at this worrisome state of facts, it may seem that the activity of Houses that Cry and other similar projects or institutions is but a public relations exercise, a series of fine taste cultural events, with hardly any impact upon the architectural patrimony of Bucharest.

Houses that Cry managed to transform an online database of endangered historical buildings, as the project was modestly labeled, into a topic of public debate. Thanks to the activities undertaken under the umbrella of this project, Bucharesters understood that the fate of patrimony buildings should represent a topic of common concern. We do not dispose yet of figures to acknowledge this achievement. But the growing media exposure of builders and authorities' abuses of architectural monuments that may collapse at a minor earthquake or which were demolished 'overnight' without any public consultation, the number of hits and comments that online reports on the topic generate, and the increasing number of organizations fighting for the same cause demonstrate that something has changed in the public attitude vis-à-vis architectural patrimony. If, unfortunately, *Moara lui Assan* could not be saved in time, there is hope for the remainder of Bucharest's architectural patrimony, thanks to a more vocal attitude adopted by Bucharesters in regard to the architectural patrimony of their city.

Houses that Cry also demonstrates that online activism is by no means inferior to the 'traditional' forms of civic participation or disconnected from the 'real world', particularly when the Internet-mediated debates move to the street. Moreover, online communities have the potential to coalesce an impressive number of persons interested in a particular cause who would have otherwise never met. The project initiated by Romanian architecture students transformed the online public sphere debate

into a powerful act of citizenship. Less disruptive in nature than the acts Isin (2008) wrote about, HC has succeeded in challenging the abuses of Romanian authorities and real estate developers. Most importantly, it catalyzed the dissatisfaction of Bucharesters towards the urban planning policies enforced in their city. In a country with a less than consistent tradition of civic participation, this is a notable achievement.

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Endnotes

¹ See Appendix A for a brief history of Assan's Mill.

² For a detailed discussion of these two terms, see Pippa Norris, 2001.

³ See Robert Putnam's (2000) detailed discussion of the decline of civic participation in the United States beginning with the 1970s.

⁴ Peter Kivisto and Thomas Faist (2007) note that conscription no longer represents a compulsory duty associated with citizenship.

⁵ See Engin F. Isin and Brian S. Turner (2002) for a manifold typology of citizenship: "...various struggles based upon identity and difference (whether sexual, 'racial', 'ethnic', diasporic, ecological, technological or cosmopolitan) have found new ways of articulating their claims as claims to citizenship understood not simply as a legal status but as political and social recognition and economic redistribution" (10-11).

⁶ After the 1989 Revolution, "Institutul de Arhitectura Ion Mincu" was renamed "Universitatea de Arhitectura si Urbanism Ion Mincu" (The Ion Mincu Architecture and Urbanism University). For clarity purposes, I will use the IAIM abbreviation for the remainder of this essay.

Appendix A

An Historical Background of Assan's Mill

People knew Assan's Mill as "The Platen Mill", "The Fire Mill" or "Assan's Ship". They also knew it for the giant watch on the mill's tower that told time with much precision for several generations. During the interwar era, the mill was renamed Assan Factories, and comprised four different industries: milling cereals, vegetable oils, paints and colours, soaps and putty. In 1948, the communist authorities that had seized political power in Romania, nationalized the mill and hosted there a bread factory and an oil factory. After the 1989 Revolution that marked the end of the communist regime in Romania, the mill entered a bleak age. Unknown persons stole the wrought iron window frames; the lead and zinc decorations of the mill's tower disappeared; the machines that the Assan family had brought from Vienna in 1900 were dismembered and sold as scrap iron, although any museum of technical history would have been proud to have such artifacts in its collections. In 2005, several buildings of the mill were hastily demolished, without authorization ("Ansamblul industrial", 2001: 1). In 2010, another piece of Assan's Mill collapsed.

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