

CAROL I PARK IN BUCHAREST IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Ileana Maria PANȚU

University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest,
59 Mărăști Blvd, District 1, 011464, Bucharest, Romania, Email: ileana.pantu@gmail.com

Corresponding author email: ileana.pantu@gmail.com

Abstract

Carol I Park is the oldest park of Bucharest (est. 1906) and is representative of the evolution of the Romanian landscape architecture. Its history is comprised of three main phases of development, which reflect different political, cultural and social contexts, the first one at the beginning of the 20th century and the second in the '30s. This paper is the third in a series documenting and analysing the development of the Carol I Park's and covers the second half of the 20th century, which is politically characterised by a communist regime in Romania. The ideological communist vision, as in other totalitarian systems of different ideology, aimed to use public space and national symbols as poster icons. As a consequence, in 1960, Carol I Park underwent radical modifications, being cut apart by the Communist regime's approach to public spaces. The park lost its original character and became a platform for Socialist propaganda. Stylistically, this translated as a strong monumentalism typical for totalitarian architecture, which was based around vast empty spaces, designed for large crowds. The 1960 project brutally transformed the layout of the park. Its original mixed style, with its Romantic French landscape garden dominant, became geometrically-oriented. However it was not the classic geometrical style representative of the Royalty designed at the human scale, but instead a monumental geometrical design erasing human scale. In spite of the subsequent changes and evolutions during different periods, the Carol I Park remains an incontestable gem of Romanian cultural heritage.

Key words: public park, geometrical style, monumental style, totalitarian landscape architecture, communism.

INTRODUCTION

Carol I Park is the oldest park in Bucharest. It is located in the city's southern part amongst the hills on the way from the Cotroceni to the Văcărești districts. It was conceived in 1906 to host the *General Romanian Exhibition* and to celebrate 40 years since Carol I became king of Romania, 25 years since the proclamation of an independent Romanian Kingdom and also 1,800 years since Trajan's conquest of Dacia (Parusi, 2007 and Potra, 1990). The French landscape architect Édouard Redont designed this elegant Belle Époque park in a mixed style with predominant French Romantic motifs, as explained in earlier published paper *Carol I Park in Bucharest at the Beginning of the 20th Century* (Pantu, 2011). Most of its many expo pavilions disappeared over time, but in 1935 the park experienced a renaissance for another exhibition event. In this second phase of development, there were a few modifications which I analyzed in *Carol I Park in Bucharest in the '30s – Celebrate Bucharest Month* (Pantu, 2011). Once the Communists came to

power, the park was renamed Liberty Park - a kind of dark irony - and was radically transformed. Most of its monuments vanished or were relocated in order to erase all remnants of royal symbolism.

STATE OF THE ARTS

In 1960 Carol Park was radically restructured in order to fit the new program of Communist propaganda, which sought to appropriate all public space and national symbols. In terms of style, this translated into a pronounced monumental character, typical of Soviet totalitarian architecture, with its vast empty spaces designed to accommodate the crowds, "the people" (Pantu, 2012).

The project was conceived by a collective from the *Proiect Bucuresti* Institute, led by the city's chief architect, Horia Maicu (Studiul privind grădinile istorice din R.S.R., 1973). They spared no effort in this unprecedented uprooting of the park's compositional structure. Its style went from predominantly French Romantic to geometrical and orderly (Figure

1). Classical geometry did exist before, but the totalitarian take on it deprived it of all human warmth by favouring exaggerated monumentalism. The latter geometric style received a share of 55% of the park's total surface, as

opposed to the initial 42%, according to my calculations based on specialized maps and surveys (Pantu, 2012). Thus the park was given a new guise and a new fate.

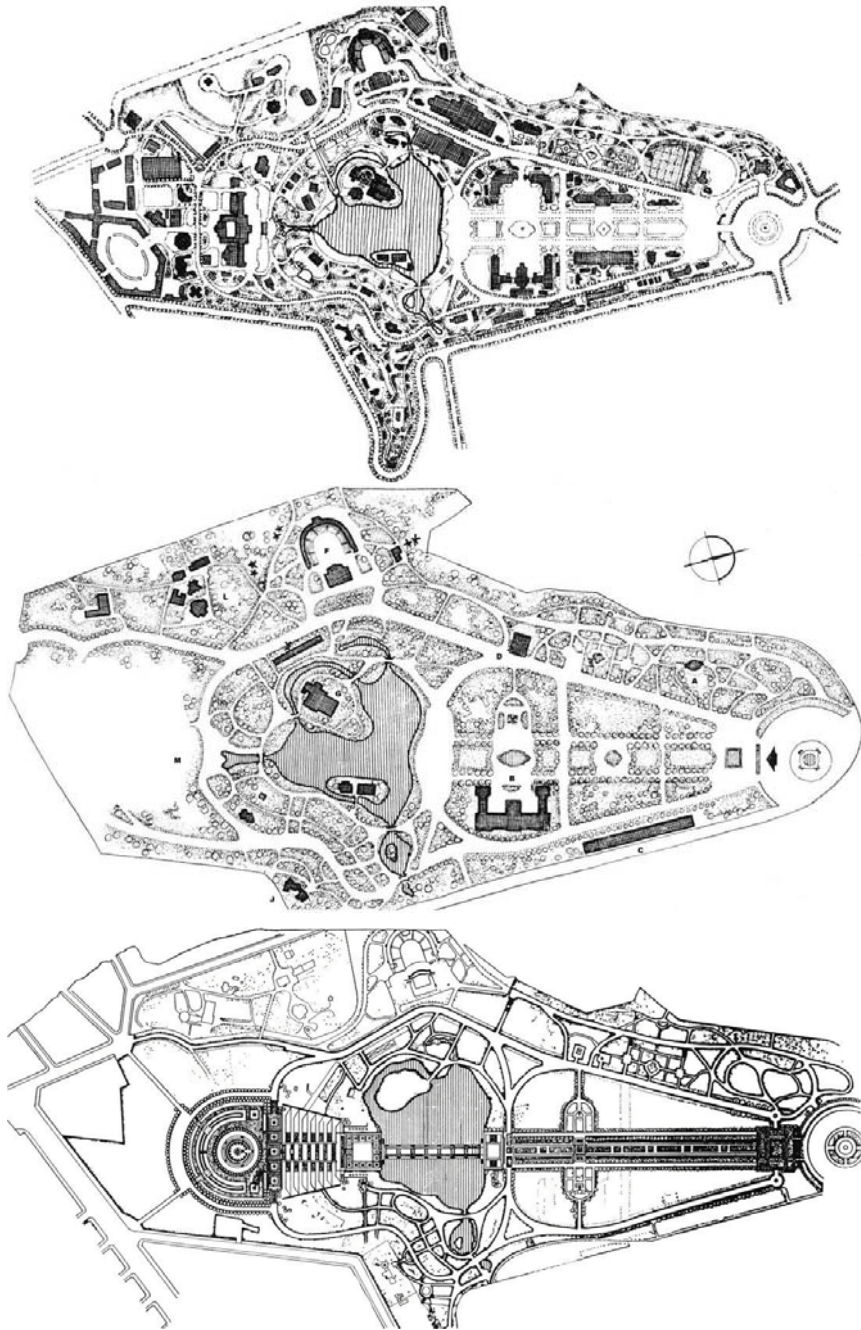


Figure 1. Carol I Park – phase 1, 2 and 3 of development – plans from 1906, 1957 (Marcus, 1958) and 1963 (Arhitectura R.P.R. journal, 1964; Răducan and Pantu, 2004)

The dramatic changes involved the amplification and extension of the main axis, both transversally and longitudinally, adding a monumental bridge extending over the lake, and ample stairways and esplanades reaching up the slope to the new end focal point. The previous focal point used to be the Palace of the Arts, a valuable building from an architectural standpoint (built in the Art Nouveau style and a symbol of the Royalty at the time), which was replaced with an elegant, streamlined mausoleum dedicated to the heroes

of Communism (Figure 1). Its planners were architects Horia Maicu and Vasile Cucu (List of Historical Monuments, 2004). The monument is 48 metres in height, which was also - probably coincidentally - the length of King Carol's reign (Majuru, 2007). It is gracefully proportioned, which matches its role as an end focal point to the great axis: while the original element dominated by its mass, the one replacing it dominates by its height (Figures 2-5).



Figure 2. The main axis towards the slopes in 1906 (Zaharia, 1906) and august 2012

The sloping area was thus severed from its Romantic concept, Redont's original thoughtful

design of its waterfall grotto and statuary group (Figures 3-5), and turned into a monumental,

geometric space lacking in human scale (Figure 3). The waterfall grotto was destroyed, the rock garden earth mounds were replaced by an ample stairway, and the sides of the terrain were terraced into a trapezoidal planimetry. Here the disruption of the Romantic image was

the most brutal, as the landscape style was eliminated from the most important and visually accessible area in the entire park. The statuary group was dispersed, and therefore lost both its unity and coherence and its significance.

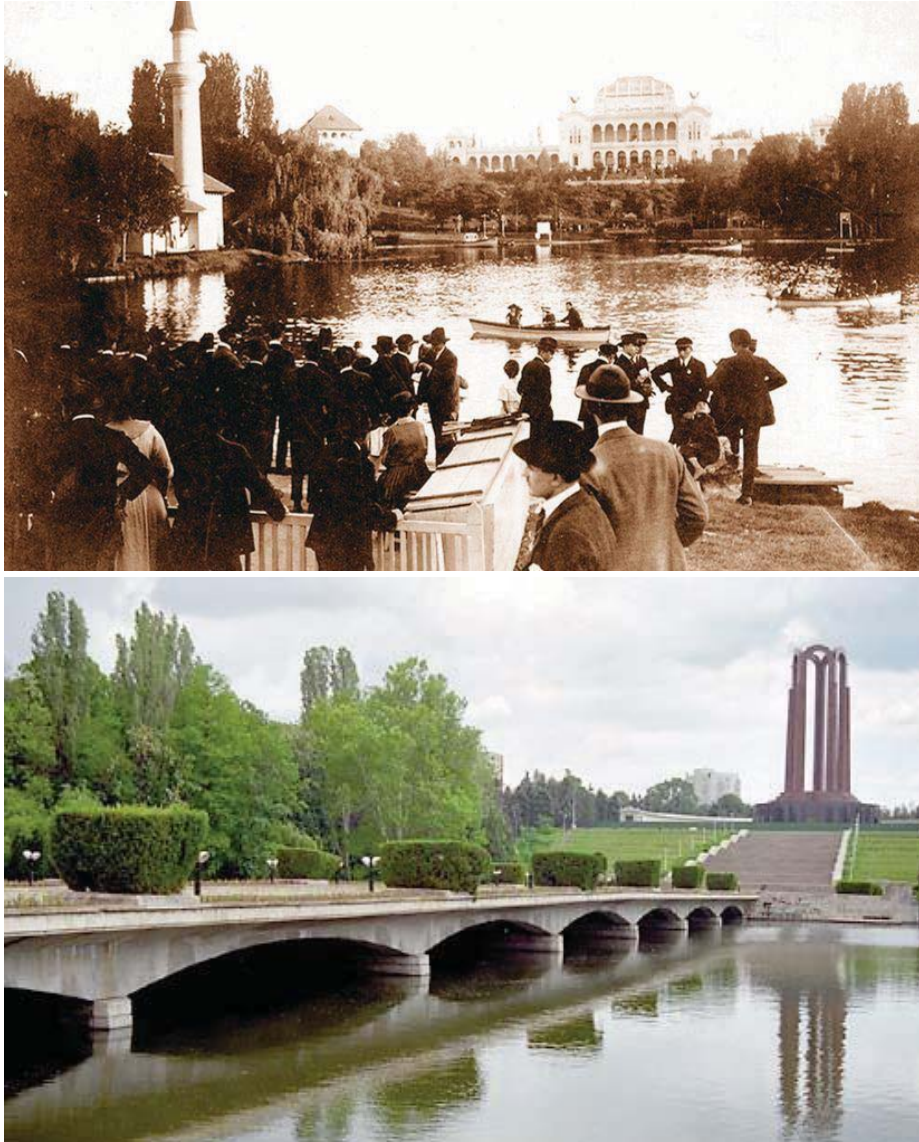


Figure 3. View towards the slopes (between the wars – National Romanian Library Archives and sept. 2004)

The main axis was widened, its central parterre discarded, so it was made into a pedestrian walkway along its entire width, to which two additional, narrower lanes were added, separated by tree alignments. The axis was also

punctuated by ample esplanades which highlight its importance (Figures 1, 3, 6,7). This is a statement of power expressed in the public space. Just like Louis XIV used the spectacular grandeur of his gardens at

Versailles to make such a statement, so did the Romanian Communist dictators use Carol I Park to make theirs. However, the result itself is nowhere near as brilliant as that found in France: the pedestrian walkway is monotonous,

lacking animation, the proportions are clumsy when compared to the original version, while details like materials used, lighting fixtures, etc., are inadequate.



Figure 4. The Palace of the Arts in 1906 (Noica, 2007)

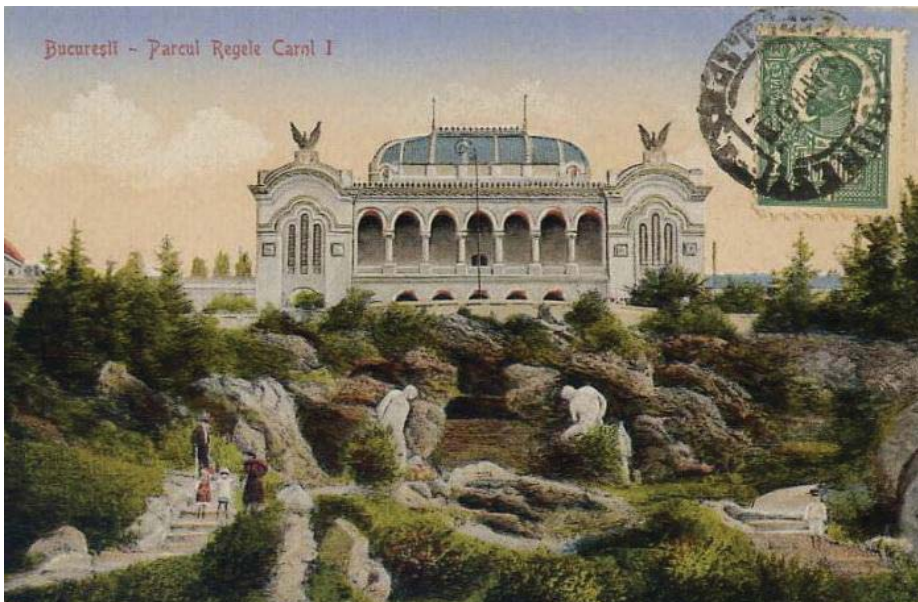


Figure 5. Palace of the Arts and the waterfall with grotto and statuary group in the twenties (postal cards)

The pedestrian walkway can accommodate up to 13 rows of visitors, being 10 meters wide. It has become a largely shadeless path, lacking human perspective (Figure 6-7). Unfortunately,

it is not even used for walking. Visitors prefer the more protected, shaded lateral lanes (Pantu, 2012).

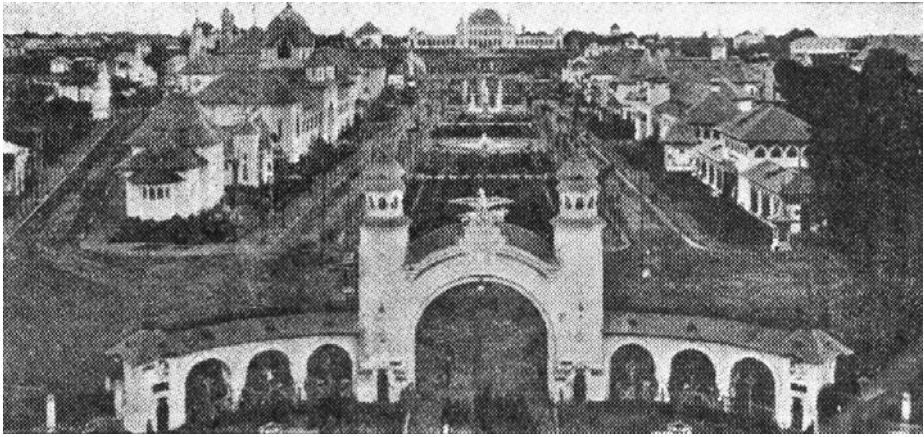


Figure 6. The main axis from the entrance in 1906 (Răducan, Pantu, 2004) and 1977 (postal card)

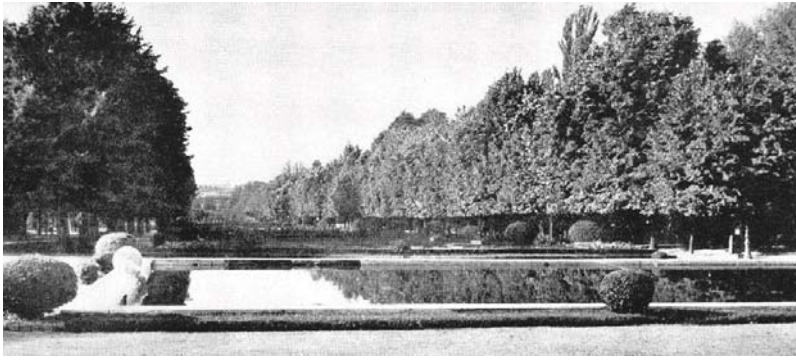


Figure 7. The main axis from the entrance in 1957 (Marcus, 1958) and in 2012

The monumental bridge severs the lake in two. Raised over 10 metres above the water, it excessively diminishes the lake's importance and

visual access to the water surface, which likewise subdues its original Romantic concept (Figure 8).



Figure 8. The monumental bridge and geometrical vegetation in the '70 (Donose archive)

Throughout its evolution, with every transformation, Carol I Park served as a tool for advertising power, for propaganda. At the beginning of the century it was the royal business card - created to display the accomplishments of King Carol I during his 40 years of reign. Up to the Communist period, the park played this role in royal publicity, by hosting various events which celebrated Romanian kings, whether directly or indirectly. *Bucharest Month* was also an event which celebrated this type of power, in this case Carol II, though indirectly. After the war, its publicity value was seized violently by the Communists. In 2004, the park was singled out as a site for erecting a monumental Cathedral of the Nation. Fortunately, this decision was revoked; but had the plans gone through, the park would have become the propaganda tool for the Romanian Orthodox Church. Thus, the fate of Carol I Park was never separate from the publicity of power.

CONCLUSIONS

Even though the Carol I Park was violently restructured in its third phase of development, it remains an indisputable gem of landscape architecture, steadily breathing both direct and indirect French influences: Redont, the park's creator, was one of the most important French landscape architects from the beginning of the twentieth century, while interwar approaches included the use of Art Déco by Romanian architects. Even the Communists' rigorous geometry was originally based off French Neoclassicism.

Due to its complex history, Carol I Park exhibits all the stylistic changes that were happening in the twentieth century, in one place. It is a perfect recording of the park urban program evolution in Romania and, at the same time, a witness to the upgrades in Romanian landscape architecture during the twentieth century.

During its evolution, Carol I Park was permanently loaded with historical and political symbols. These were influential in the radical

transformations to which it was subjected over time. Most of these symbols are those of the monarchy versus the socialist republic, as could be observed in the replacement of the old Palace of the Arts with a Communist mausoleum. Although the system and its symbols appeared to change, the park itself maintained its overall political role as propaganda.

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