

Urban Space Patterns and Homelessness in Bucharest, Romania

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1 ABSTRACT

Urban poverty continues to represent a concern in cities' territorial planning as it alters the quality of life and it disrupts the development process in some cities. Homelessness reflects the extreme manifestation of urban poverty resulted from housing and social exclusion, even in developed European Union countries. The post-socialist transformation processes and the current economic crisis increased poverty and inequalities in Romania. Homelessness intensified and became visible after 1990, especially in Bucharest – metropolitan city that attracts both investors for development actions and poor population seeking for solutions to get out of poverty. The study investigates the urban space of Bucharest to differentiate the characteristics that influence the homeless living on the streets to locate in certain places in the city. The empirical analysis included a three-level urban space categorisation. The functional types of space were correlated to the homelessness presence according to three space characteristics: property type, physical structure and state of use. The resulted space typology was used to assess the Bucharest territory and to analyse the homelessness hot spots. The main findings argue that the characteristics that define the urban space correlate with the homelessness locations so that homeless people localisation in Bucharest depends on the urban space capacity to meet the homelessness housing and living needs. The analysis' conclusions evidence the homeless location patterns and they help urban planners and policy makers to understand the correlates between the homelessness behaviour and territory so that to include urban space modelling and to use the information to improve policies and actions to alleviate extreme poverty in Bucharest.

2 INTRODUCTION

Urban poverty represents a result of globalization and economic restructuring (Knox, McCarthy, 2012) that conducted to social polarization. Homelessness stands out as extreme poverty in the urban environments and it reflects the effects of long term unemployment, under-qualification, occupation in the informal economy and inadequate housing and living conditions (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). The homeless suffer from severe housing deprivation and social exclusion (Eurostat, 2010) and they lack any form of proper accommodation so that they are forced to sleep in unofficial places – derelict buildings, in informal places – outdoors, or in specially destined places – night and emergency shelters (Brousse, 2004).

Current research on homelessness includes mainly studies about the people living on the streets (May, 2009) – they explain the relation between different spaces (based on functionality) and homelessness and they investigate the conflict raised by the homeless presence in the public space (Cloke et al., 2010; Paasche, 2012; Radicchi, 2012; Schmidt, 2012; Tompsett, Toro, 2010; Young, 2012). While the international literature finds some correlations that explain the homeless location preferences (Lee, Price-Spratlen, 2004; Cloke et al., 2010; Rukmana, 2011; Radicchi, 2012), studies focused on homelessness in Romania (Dan, Dan, 2005; O'Neill, 2010) lack such a geographical approach to evidence the interdependencies and connections between homelessness and territory.

Based on the Bucharest territory assessment, we aimed to identify the urban space patterns that influence the homeless to locate in certain places in the city. The typology of spaces occupied by the homeless reveals the multilevel relation between population, extreme poverty and territory in the Bucharest urban environment.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study area

The restructuring processes during the transition period (Ceccato, Lukyte, 2011; Göler, Lehmeier, 2012) and the current financial crisis resulted in increased poverty and homelessness in Romania. Bucharest represents the homeless concentration area in Romania as a side effect of being the main investment area and the most populated urban area. Quantitative studies (Dan, Dan, 2005) estimated 11000 – 14000 homeless people in Romania, with around 5000 homeless persons in Bucharest. The profile of the homeless in Bucharest consists of adult men, between 31 and 60 years old, with secondary education (Paraschiv, 2012), but the

share of women and families living on the streets is increasing. Familial conflicts and former child care residents represent the main causes of homelessness in Bucharest and the main accommodation choices include the underground canals, the improvised shelters and the interior of blocks of flats (Cărăboi, 2011).

3.2 Urban space typology and homelessness

Based on direct field observation, the Bucharest territory was investigated to detect the main areas where the homeless concentrate (Fig. 1). Then, the urban space in these areas was assessed to construct a typology of the space characteristics that act in the homeless location options.

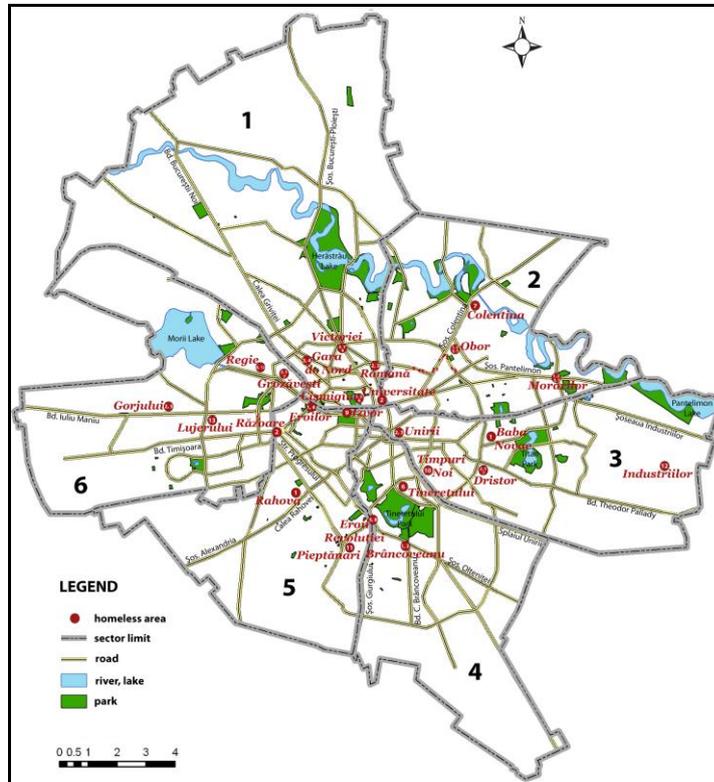


Fig. 1: The homeless concentration areas in Bucharest

The Bucharest urban space assessment was based on the urban space characteristics resulted from three criteria considered (Fig. 2). The property type of a certain space states for two main and two secondary urban space types: (1) public spaces – semi-public spaces; and (2) private spaces – semi-private spaces. According to their physical structure, urban areas may be open or closed spaces, and their state of use depicts used or derelict spaces. The interrelation between all these characteristics helped to evaluate the homeless areas and to identify the urban space patterns that intervene in the homeless territorial distribution within the city of Bucharest.

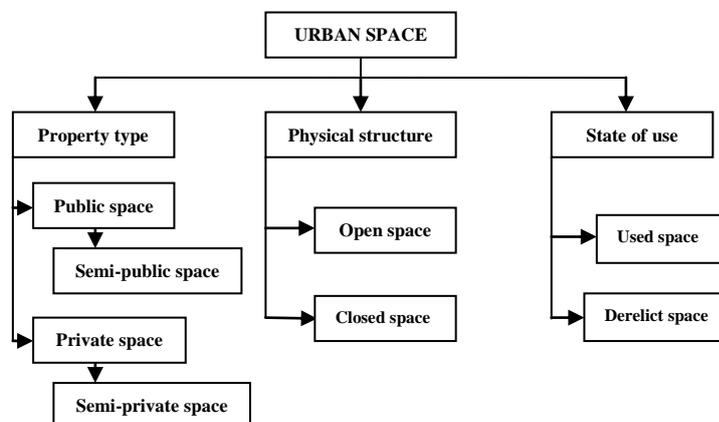


Fig. 2: Characteristics employed in the urban space assessment. Source: adapted after Paraschiv (2013)

4 RESULTS

Homelessness concentrates mainly in the central and the pericentral areas of Bucharest. The analysis of the Bucharest homelessness areas in relation to their space characteristics evidences the typology of functional spaces (Table 1) the homeless use to satisfy their housing and living needs. The public, open and used (in use) spaces include three different functional categories: (1) green spaces – parks frequented by the whole city's population or by the district's population; or neighbourhood gardens and squares; (2) intersections – in the city centre or near commercial areas; pedestrian space – sidewalks in the city centre or around residential spaces; and (3) transport infrastructure space – railway or public transport (metro, bus, tram) stations. The public, open, but derelict spaces where the homeless locate include undeveloped or neglected green spaces – usually small sized and near institutions (a hospital) or high traffic areas (a railway station). Semi-public places, open and used, refer to commercial spaces like markets, hypermarkets, shopping malls and shops that the general population accesses freely, but the homeless may face restrictions due to their physical appearance. But the homeless locate near these commercial spaces to get money or food. The sewerage infrastructure space represents a public property, but without being destined for public use, so that it constitutes a semi-public, closed and used space the homeless largely choose for sheltering. The sewerage canals gather the group homelessness, formed generally by the homeless people with substance dependencies (drug, alcohol). The homeless utilise the residential space in every state it may be found – in use or abandoned. The only used residential spaces the homeless may employ for sheltering are the blocks of flats, where they find shared spaces – the hallway, the stairs, the basement, the attic – available to use if the inhabitants agree. Otherway, the homeless may live in derelict individual houses or apartment buildings.

Urban space patterns		Homelessness areas
Public/Open/Used space	<i>Green spaces</i>	Obor, Morarilor, Baba Novac, Rahova, Cişmigiu, Eroilor, Brâncoveanu
	<i>Intersections, Pedestrian space</i>	Gorjului, Răzoare, Grozăveşti, Romană, Universitate, Obor, Morarilor, Dristor, Cişmigiu, Victoriei, Unirii
	<i>Transport infrastructure space</i>	Gara de Nord, Romană, Obor, Morarilor, Eroii Revoluţiei, Victoriei, Unirii, Brâncoveanu
Public/Open/Derelict space	<i>Green spaces</i>	Gara de Nord, Eroilor
Semi-public/Open/Used space	<i>Commercial spaces</i>	Gorjului, Grozăveşti, Obor, Dristor
	<i>Religious space</i>	Tineretului
Semi-public/Closed/Used space	<i>Sewerage infrastructure space</i>	Grozăveşti, Morarilor, Dristor, Colentina, Gara de Nord
Private/Closed/Used space	<i>Residential space</i>	Regie, Eroii Revoluţiei, Cişmigiu
Private/Closed/Derelict space	<i>Residential space</i>	Izvor, Victoriei
Semi-private/Open/Used space	<i>Garbage bin</i>	Timpuri Noi
	<i>Waste deposits space</i>	Pieptânari
Semi-private/Open/Derelict space	<i>Vacant space</i>	Regie, Industriilor
	<i>Brownfield space</i>	Lujerului

Table 1: Homelessness localisation spaces in Bucharest. Source: adapted after Paraschiv (2013)

The semi-private spaces refer to publicly owned spaces destined to private use or without a public functionality – the outdoor garbage bins inside residential areas (used by the inhabitants) and the waste deposits spaces (controlled – used by the sanitation companies; uncontrolled – companies and population deposit waste on vacant spaces). The vacant and the industrial brownfield spaces represent privately owned spaces, inside the city or at the periphery, that are underdeveloped or not yet exploited by the owners, so that the homeless may appropriate and build informal housing – improvised shelters and barracks.

Among the 25 areas in Bucharest identified with homeless presence, 18 areas (72 %) enter the category of public, open and used spaces, so that the homeless locate mostly in parks (7 areas – 28 %), in intersections, on the pedestrian space (11 areas – 44 %), and near the transport infrastructure space (7 areas – 28 %).

Obor and Morarilor, Gara de Nord, Grozăveşti and Cişmigiu represent the areas in Bucharest that gather four and respectively three different urban space patterns used by the homeless to shelter or to find food and money opportunities.

5 DISCUSSION

The distribution pattern of homelessness in Bucharest shows territorial diffusion, but the 25 concentration areas represent spaces with more than 5 homeless people (Paraschiv, 2012). The homeless locate in these places as a response to what these spaces offer to their housing and living needs. The public, open and used spaces give free access to the homeless, without impediments from the general population. They constitute also high traffic areas that may provide better ways to obtain money – through begging or informal work (cleaning car windshields, directing the cars in the parking lots, helping the locals, selling small objects) and food – by begging or by finding leftovers. The green spaces represent the best choice to improvise shelter, but the homeless use also the pedestrian and the transport infrastructure spaces for sleeping.

The commercial areas represent also spaces with high cars and population traffic and they present attraction to the homeless for the same reasons as the public spaces. Religious spaces – churches and cemeteries – represent quick and certain sources of money and food, as the population that frequent these places is used to help the people in need. The sewerage canals are oftenly occupied by the young homeless people and they are associated with the first generation of homeless young people and children (the “street children”) that appeared after the 1990s (while the transition period started), due to their escapes from the state child care institutions. The homeless that live in the underground canals form groups and homeless communities in which the individuals rarely conduct behaviours that could lead to reintegration in the society (sobriety, working) – they depict the chronic state of homelessness and homelessness as a way of life, involving huge efforts (financial, time, human resource) to make chngements to a normal, more responsible, living and housing condition. Residential spaces, wheter in use or derelict (Fig. 3), and their homelessness utilisation constitute the main reason of conflict between the general population and the homeless people. The homeless depend on the other inhabitants’ acceptance and support when they need to shelter in used multifamilial residences.



Fig. 3: Urban localisation patterns of homelessness in Bucharest (2012). (a. derelict green space; b. derelict residential space; c. brownfield space; d. pedestrian space)

The largest share of derelict houses are located in the central part of Bucharest, they represent former nationalised houses (in the socialist period, they were taken from their owners and transformed in public housing) and they are currently in an ambiguous (de jure or de facto) state: (1) these houses are whether in a juridical process to return to their former owners or (2) they are already in the possession of their former owners but not yet in use – they abandon for a while the houses, they allow the homeless to appropriate the space and they wait for the building to be destroyed, case in which the solution is to sell or to develop the space with new, modern and more profitable constructions. The homeless people usually locate in the residential areas or they shelter near the space destined to residential waste deposits in the neighbourhoods where they used to live or to frequent before their state of homelessness. The vacant land and the industrial brownfield sites give the highest degree of freedom to the homeless to appropriate the space, to use the largest land surfaces and to exploit it to satisfy most of their housing and living needs.

The main findings of the research show that the urban space patterns interact with the homeless population and it support their subsistence in different ways, according to the urban space characteristics that define their accessibility and functionality.

6 CONCLUSION

Urban poverty and homelessness reflect deficiencies in conducting a sustainable relation between population and territory and they represent current challenges in the territorial systems development. The geographical approach contributes to evidence the complex interconnection between homelessness and urban space, to explain the exchanges involved and the results that act in the functioning of the entire urban environment. The urban space patterns influence the homeless decisions to locate in certain places and they explain the homelessness territorial distribution. The urban planners and the policy makers may use the main findings of the study to construct more integrative strategies to end homelessness in Bucharest.

7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research was funded by the European Social Found within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013 through the strategic grant POSDRU 107/1.5/S/80765, “Excellence and interdisciplinarity in doctoral studies for an informational society” project.

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