FAILED HERITAGIZATION AT THE CARBOCHIM INDUSTRIAL SITE IN CLUJ-NAPOCA: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS ON HERITAGE ACTIVISM

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Abstract: The demolition of the Carbochim industrial platform in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, despite sustained opposition from heritage specialists and civic activists who argued for its cultural value and environmental importance, provides a revealing case to examine decision-making processes in contemporary urban transformation and public perceptions of industrial heritage. This article employs autoethnography as the main methodological approach to explore *failed heritagization* from within, foregrounding the situated experience of heritage activism under real-estate pressure in a post-socialist society. Data collection also involved fieldwork and research on documents issued by the public administration, the private investor, academia, and civil society, as well as on stakeholders' positions in the mass-media and social media comments on the topic. We argue that in the broader context of intensified real-estate development and the post-socialist decline of industrial sites following privatization and deindustrialization in the 1990s–2000s, Romania's industrial heritage remains highly vulnerable. The absence of a comprehensive inventory has left many industrial sites to decay or demolition before being researched, officially recognized, or reappropriated by local communities. Current redevelopment practices tend to favor *tabula rasa* approaches over adaptive reuse, while legal frameworks for informing and consultation procedures prove largely ineffective. Research findings show that heritage activism uncovers systemic forms of violence and simultaneously plays a crucial role in raising awareness of the potential of industrial buildings, changing narratives about socialist heritage, and in stimulating public policies aimed at heritage safeguarding and protection. More exactly, heritage activism fosters emancipatory practices related to policy-making or the envisioning of communicative pathways toward improvement. Such findings carry significant policy implications, underscoring the need to democratize urban development to ensure transparency, inclusiveness, and fairness.

Keywords: *contested industrial heritage, Romania, post-industrial urban development, urban activism, obsolete industrial area*

1. INTRODUCING THE PAST AND MAKING SENSE OF THE PRESENT

Romania's industrialization emerged comparatively late within the European context and was perceived as a critical instrument for achieving much-needed economic and social modernization, starting with the Interwar period and the subsequent communist era when it gathered a much greater momentum. Most historical Romanian cities underwent rapid population increase between the 1920s and 1980s, mostly due to the rapid grow in industrial workforce. The communist centralized economy based itself on mass construction of industrial complexes and forced resettlement from rural to urban areas between 1949 and 1989 (Pop, 2007; Cucu, 2019).

Cluj-Napoca, situated in the Transylvanian heartland, had the advantage of being a regional center and housed the second largest university in Romania, but was lacking in the industrial sector with just two factories employing more than 1,000 workers in 1930 – The Railway Workshops (future Remarul, 16 Februarie) and Renner Brothers' Leather Factory (future Dermata and later Clujana shoe factory). Although other factories existed for common goods like beer, tobacco, sweets, paper, and matches, they employed less than 200 workers and had only local importance (Buzea, 1939; Pop, 2007).

Due to the compact spatial configuration of Cluj-Napoca, mainly located south of the Someș River, newly established industrial complexes were concentrated along the banks of the Someș and Nadăș rivers, and north of the railway. Between 1940 and 1989, the northern part of the city evolved into an extensive industrial corridor, spanning over 600 hectares and providing employment for more than 80,000 employees (Pop, 2007; Cucu, 2019). However, following the privatization processes of the 1990s–2000s and the subsequent wave of deindustrialization, the industrial landscape underwent a rapid process of degradation. The former industrial complexes soon fell into disrepair and obsolescence (Țiganea, 2016). This condition of decline came to legitimize practices of *tabula rasa* approach, effectively repositioning former industrial platforms as strategic sites for capital investment, marketized urban development and privatized urbanism (Vincze et al., 2024). Nowadays, as Cluj-Napoca (with approximately 325,000 inhabitants) reinvented itself as a cosmopolitan city specialized in learning, information technology and services, the land has more market value and there is real estate pressure to demolish derelict industrial halls in favor of building profitable housing and retail complexes.

Among these industrial structures, Carbochim—founded in 1949— named initially Electrocarbon, but renamed Carbochim since 1951, was the first Romanian factory specializing in abrasives and steel electrodes (Sucală, 2018). Within little more than two decades, its production capacity and workforce grew consistently, establishing it as one of Cluj-Napoca's major industrial enterprises (Anonymous, 1976; Pop, 2007; Florescu, 2022). Today, Carbochim stands as the country's largest producer of abrasives (S.C. Carbochim S.A., 2023), but it has a much-diminished capacity. Following its relocation within the industrial zone, the former Carbochim site was included in an urban regeneration plan that envisioned the demolition of all historical structures with the exception of the Arcade Hall and the Administrative Building, and the construction of a large retail and housing area with a riverfront (Tămaș, 2022; Zamfir, 2022; Guttmann, 2023; Trans Form SRL, 2023).

A central issue today concerns the under-recognition of industrial and socialist-era heritage, particularly from the 1950s to the 1980s, as industrial heritage has long been marginal within the National List of Historic Monuments, despite its architectural, urban, and social significance (de Vreuschmen and Iamandescu, 2023). The first step toward the conservation and valorization of industrial heritage lies in its systematic documentation (Iamandescu, 2014; Wollmann, 2010-2022). Yet, in the absence of coherent public policies for inventorying and protection, and given the still limited scholarly engagement with socialist-era architecture, industrial heritage demolition interventions on derelict industrial sites outpaced both academic inquiry and the formal acknowledgment of their heritage value (Țiganea, 2020). As such it falls upon some professionals interested in protecting industrial architecture to showcase these examples and to underscore their real potential value for the city. By doing so, some become activists for the preservation of industrial heritage in a milieu that is neither eager, nor well equipped in discerning and applying tactics of safeguarding a past (Ilovan et al., 2025) that, for some, is still synonymous with communist oppression.

In such an urban context, we ask how activism works to safeguard and protect industrial heritage in Romania. We answer this by drawing on the *failed heritagization* of Carbochim industrial platform (cf. Ilovan et al., 2025), a process that took place from 2023 to 2024. We considered our fieldwork and official documents released by key stakeholders in the public arena and, finally, we cited an activist autoethnography about industrial heritage preservation. The purpose of the study is to see how civic activism was influenced

by different factors and stakeholders, and, reciprocally, how it influenced them, in the specific context of industrial heritage preservation efforts. Moreover, we also document liminal spaces and roles: the industrial heritage enclave in the urban area and the specialist (i.e., architect) as civic activist. Our research aims to fulfill an epistemic gap: there is a disconnection between the activists' experiences, heritage activism and the preservation of industrial heritage in post-socialist societies and beyond. In addition, we aim to expand our understanding of this relationship through an autoethnographic perspective. To achieve all this, we unpacked the decision-making process (over a period of several years) about urban redevelopment in a former industrial area of Cluj-Napoca, Romania: the Carbochim Platform.

Prior research has demonstrated that narratives of decline and redevelopment function as competing discourses in the context of brownfields (Loures and Panagopoulos, 2007; Benito del Pozo, 2016; Komatina et al., 2016; Constantinescu Păun et al., 2017; Jucu and Voiculescu, 2020; Merciu, 2021; Arboleda, 2022; Conca, 2022; Drăgan et al., 2024; Ilovan and Mutică, 2024). But knowledge production so far mostly ignored activist voices in defending industrial heritage. Moreover, there is still very little research in former European socialist countries on the relationship between activism and safeguarding socialist industrial heritage (Ilovan and Mutică, 2024; Ilovan et al., 2025). Existing research has rarely addressed activists' experiences explicitly when examining this link (Janinović, 2024). As a result, activism for industrial heritage is undertheorized. Adriana Măgeruşan, author of this paper, addresses her concerns about industrial heritage both academically and through civic activism. Thus, we aim to fill in a research gap concerning the relationship between socialist heritage preservation and civic activism in the urban area of post-socialist Romania.

Secondary research questions are the following: What were the overlapping development discourses about Carbochim Platform? What contestations were visible concerning the planned future of the area? Were there discourses that could not be articulated? What was the power dynamics that structured the contestation of redevelopment? How did activists participate in the decision-making process? What factors shaped activists' mindsets and actions? This formulation of our research questions challenged hegemonic knowledge and methodology in diverse ways, foregrounding the overarching aim of our study: to better understand industrial heritage activism in the post-socialist Romanian society.

Because we chose the lens of activism to discuss an ongoing decision-making process for a development project in the northern area of Cluj-Napoca, this concept needs defining for the purpose of this paper. Activism is defined as resistance (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). It is a process and product of situated knowledge, of performing individual and shared community values (Ilovan and Mutică, 2024). Moreover, activism is a presence against something, and a form of self-discovery and self-expression, a way to assert our humanity (Madison, 2010). It is both constructive and productive – calling attention to a failing within society, it recognizes the limits of knowing, while being inclusive. Moreover, activism is a social practice that disrupts the hegemony of economic and political power and privilege (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Madison, 2010; Quinn, 2018). It is a form of expression and an agent of change that tries to prevent the marginalization of certain topics (e.g., socialist heritage, industrial architecture, social memory of the worker, heritage preservation, urban nature) on the public agenda. Activism is a practice in line with

freedom of expression rights, where individual activism can lead to collective empowerment (Quinn, 2018).

Defining activism depends on context, but, in general, activism enables envisioning change in shifting societal and cultural contexts: from socialism to post-socialism, from centralized economic planning to neoliberal policies. Taking into account research so far on European post-socialism (Hamilton et al., 2005; Golubchikov et al., 2014; Ferenčuhová and Gentile, 2016; Andruzs et al., 2019; Tuvikene et al., 2019), the selected case study is meaningful. The analysis demonstrates how the place politics were interpreted and enacted in the context of a developer-led project employing a top-down placemaking approach that neglected bottom-up and collaborative constructions of place and future visions for the area. Accordingly, this study foregrounds the discourses and actions that either legitimized or challenged the urban transformation advanced by a private investor and supported by public administration, providing a critical interpretative analysis of the process. Also, we underline the role of activism in striving to take a stance for a humane approach to development and against ignoring activist experiences. In the same vein, we point out that heritage has increasingly been understood not merely as the contemporary use of the past, but as a dynamic cultural process and a relational form of dialogue, whose meanings evolve in relation to time, social actors, and specific places, involving networks and a broader range of stakeholders who both shape and are shaped by heritage processes (Jones et al., 2020).

After detailing our research material and methods, we introduce the case study of Carbochim industrial platform. Then, we present results and discussions based on Adriana Măgeruşan's activist autoethnography. The article concludes by pointing out key results, policy implications, research limitations and future possibilities.

2. CRAFTING OUR RESEARCH

Methodology combines by the book 'objective' academic methods (fieldwork observation, literature review) and the subjective experience of one of the authors (Adriana Măgeruşan), employed as an autoethnographic approach. This self-narrative is relevant as it positions the activist in the social context under scrutiny, foregrounding the micro-political practices of activism.

The study draws on two types of sources: (1) archival documents, publicly available official urban planning documentation and strategies issued by urban authorities, private investors, academic institutions, and civil society actors discussing the Carbochim industrial platform; and (2) an autoethnographic narrative authored by a civic activist. Adriana Măgeruşan, serving as both author-researcher and cultural insider in the Romanian society, the academic sphere, and Cluj's activist networks, documents and reflects upon her engagement in activism. Social practices and belief systems are documented and interpreted through her personal stories. Because of this approach, autoethnography is an appropriate method, treating individuals as living archives, and considering activists' experiences as valid knowledge.

Autoethnography is ethnography in which the ethnographer's experience is documented, and which questions reality and conventional truths (Holman Jones, 2005; Ellis et al., 2010; Custer, 2014; Denzin, 2014; Adams et al., 2017; Gale and Wyatt, 2019).

This method allows for a critical bridge between personal experience and broader cultural or social phenomena of urban regeneration. Autoethnography enables the researcher to access tacit layers of meaning that are often inaccessible through traditional semi-structured interviews or external observation. By leveraging the researcher's positionality within the activism field, the study gains a nuanced understanding of Carbochim case study. Embracing researcher's vulnerability fosters a more authentic connection with the community and the reader, turning subjective experience into a rigorous site of inquiry. A common critique of autoethnography is the risk of self-indulgence or bias. To mitigate this, we utilized data triangulation, constantly cross-referencing personal narratives with existing literature and external observations.

Adriana's reflexive writing about her civic activism for safeguarding Carbochim was treated as interview material and therefore it was analyzed by the other authors. We read her autoethnographic account repeatedly finding the whos in her narrative. We also identified the relationships among stakeholders and their features. We realized a multi-vocal analysis of Adriana's autoethnographic writing from the point of view of relations between an activist's actions and the other societal actors involved. Through collaborative and interdisciplinary work, we triangulated her autoethnography with the other authors' experiences during fieldwork and with public reports and positions concerning the development project. We all performed a critical inquiry into Adriana's practice of activism where she addressed pervasive issues of current sustainable development in Romania – industrial heritage preservation and environmental protection – and clarified relationships that shaped the decision-making process about urban development in the period 2023-2024. Thus, we constructed new knowledge about heritage activism in Romania.

Autoethnography follows the feminist epistemology because it highlights that knowledge is always situated in how individuals experience the world (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997). As a result, personal experience is a legitimate source of knowledge and autoethnographic writing is a fruitful method that unearths such experience. Thus, the micropolitics of activism can be better explored and consequently understood through an autoethnographic approach and this is the reason we used it as a source of data for our paper. In addition, the utility of autoethnography when approaching heritage activism has remained mostly underexplored (Ilovan et al., 2025). The perspective is partial, but no less valuable. Personal accounts within the politics of place offer insights into cultural experiences. The personal and the subjective is placed within the political (Holman Jones, 2005; Ilovan and Mutică, 2024), linking civic action with academic debate about activism for socialist industrial heritage preservation.

The activist's sociocultural background, personal experiences and power structures influenced how we constructed knowledge through our research, pointing out the inexistence of objective observation and the usefulness of the researcher's subjectivity for societal improvement. Adriana's age, gender, academic education, her two professional identities – as activist and academic – and other qualities may have affected the research results. Having the education that supports the articulation of her ideas and values which challenged the development project, easy access to needed social capital, one is aware of the privileged background of the academics. This impacts their leadership, as they are many times more visible than people from the affected areas. Through her work both in an NGO and as an academic in architecture, Adriana occupies a position as a closely involved insider concerning the development project:

> Because of circumstances I am in the position to be at the forefront of a campaign regarding the industrial and natural heritage of the city and the Urban Regeneration project of Carbochim Platform. It's a position where I feel exposed and vulnerable, but I also feel that I have a responsibility to speak up.

3. LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR PRESERVING CARBOCHIM HERITAGE

In this part we answer the question about the relevance of saving Carbochim industrial platform (Figure 1). Multiple historical investigations were undertaken to evaluate the cultural and architectural significance of the Carbochim platform structures and to explore their potential integration into a master plan for urban regeneration (Florescu, 2022; Guttmann, 2023). Nonetheless, the General Urban Plan (PUG) designated only two buildings as part of the protected area (Primăria și Consiliul Local Cluj-Napoca, 2014). Concerning the conservation of the green-blue corridor along the Someș River, the regulated green area was restricted to a narrow strip, adhering only to the minimum width prescribed by the Water Law, and was inadequate for maintaining the corridor's ecological role.

Figure 1. Location of Carbochim Industrial Platform
Source: Authors' elaboration, based on Google Earth

In addition, the conclusions of our fieldwork at the industrial platform, in 2023, before demolitions, were that several buildings that were deemed to have low ambient or aesthetic value (cf. Guttmann, 2023) were more suitable for sustainable conversion than for demolition. For this purpose, we enumerated the paste tower, the two chimneys and the water tower (all part of the urban silhouette for more than 70 years) (Figure 2), the ripening

press hall, the silicon carbide granulation hall and granulation hall 1, the tunnel oven hall 1 for abrasive structures and the policondensation hall – all listed in the 2017 Planwerk Carbochim Restructuring proposal (Planwerk, 2017).

Figure 2. Paste tower and chimneys of Carbochim Platform
Source: Adriana Măgeruşan, 2023

The new owner of the 14-hectare platform launched a residential and retail development project promoted through an intensive PR campaign in media. The proposed plan entailed the demolition of most of the industrial heritage to make way for two buildings, one of which was of remarkable proportions, incorporating the largest shopping mall and one of the most extensive underground parking facilities in Romania. The scale of the project was impressive: 115,000 m² of retail space with 6,000 public parking spaces, 23,000 m² of office space, and a substantial residential district, with an estimated total cost of €500 million, representing the investor's largest undertaking and potentially the largest project in Romania (Tămaş, 2022).

Nonetheless, there were at least three compelling arguments for the preservation of the Carbochim platform. The first concerned its *historical value*: the complex represented a significant example of 1950s communist-era industrial architecture (Florescu, 2022) (Figure 3). It was the city's largest industrial establishment from the first post-war decade at the start of the planned economy, extended in the 1960s, like all the chemical factories of that period (Adler et al., 1964); its construction commenced in August 1949. By 1957, the complex spanned over 11 hectares and boasted a range of facilities including a polyclinic, a canteen, a banqueting hall, a cinema, a library, a radio-amplification station, workers' housing, and green squares (Anonymous, 1976). These various elements combined to form a significant and multifaceted industrial complex that had an important role in the industrial history of Cluj (Pop, 2007).

This industrial heritage stood for the historical geography of northern Cluj (Ilovan et al., 2019a, 2019b). It structured the materiality of the area and its meanings. Industrial heritage is a marker of place, acknowledging its past relations and able to reconfigure the present (Lefebvre, 1974/1991; Relph, 1976; Buttimer and Seamon, 1980; Creswell, 2013): it keeps the memory of place alive. Recognizable landmarks of the city relate to certain

messages, in this case, with the socialist identity or with the working-class identity and development of the city (Cucu, 2019). Nevertheless, such places can contribute to human well-being, local pride, belonging and attachment to the city at large and the creation of a shared narrative (Loures and Panagopoulos, 2007; Constantinescu Păun et al., 2017). The preservation of industrial heritage can improve the spatial and cultural experience of place (Benito del Pozo, 2016; Conca, 2022).
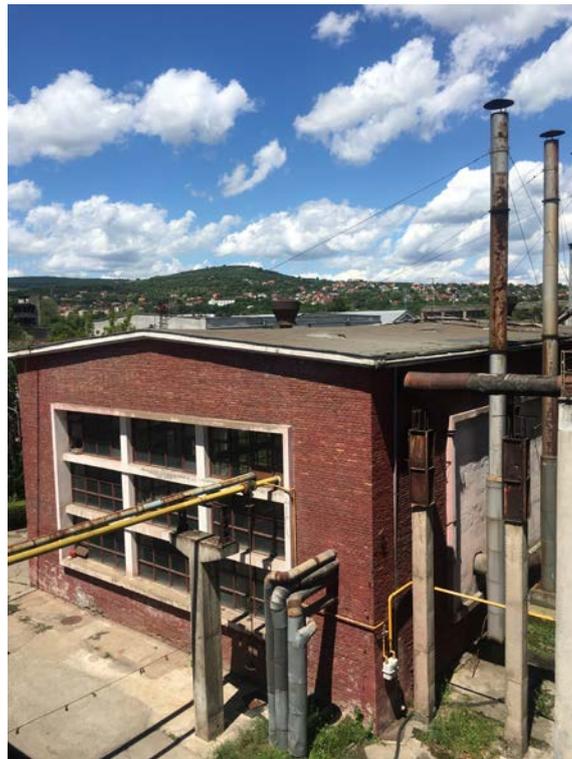

Figure 3. Ore binder hall
Source: Adriana Măgeruşan, 2024

Secondly, *the aesthetic quality* ascertained the high potential for conversion of many buildings and their possible role as urban activators. Carbochim stood as an enduring industrial complex with a history stretching nearly 75 years, showcasing a distinct and systematic urban design characteristic of modernist architecture (Florescu, 2022). Its industrial buildings, constructed of brick and concrete (Figure 4) and featuring large openings, held significant potential for adaptive reuse (Figure 5). Several buildings presented impressive facades (Figure 6), more akin to public structures than typical industrial halls. Concrete constructions on site were intertwined with natural growth, exemplifying a 'third landscape' (Clément, 2004). Notably, the water tower and chimneys emerged as iconic features in the city's urban landscape (Figure 7). However, akin to many abandoned industrial sites, the interior of the Carbochim platform remained an enclave within the city, a sort of 'terrain vague' (Solà-Morales Ignasi de, 1995). This seclusion has

led to limited public familiarity and place attachment to this piece of industrial heritage (Măgeruşan and Dohotaru, 2024).

Figure 4. Press baking hall, side view
Source: Adriana Măgeruşan, 2024

Figure 5. Carbochim – Tunnel furnace hall and abrasive bodies
Source: Adriana Măgeruşan, 2024

Figure 6. Carbochim – the administrative building
Source: Adriana Măgeruşan, 2024

Figure 7. Vertical landmarks of the industrial area in northern Cluj
Source: developed during a summer internship with architecture students, 2023–"Tower. Mapping industrial towers in Cluj"–guided by Adriana Măgeruşan, Paul Mutică, and Smaranda Todoran

The third reason related to the site's *landscape and ecological potential*: the Someș River could have functioned as an urban catalyst, facilitating the creation of pedestrian and cyclist pathways that enhanced connectivity and public space. Since the 1960s, there have been proposals to reorient the city of Cluj towards the Someș River through urban policies (Mitrea and Tudose, 2016, p. 15). This goal has only been partially achieved (Figure 8) (Kobulniczky and Ilovan, 2020). With the launch of the Rethinking Someș Competition in 2017, there seemed to be a clear signal of the city's return to the river (Ordinul Arhitecţilor din România, 2017). A series of public investments have focused on developing areas along the Someș and have been extensively examined from ecological, social, and urban perspectives (Dohotaru, 2024; Hartel, 2024; Măgeruşan et al., 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Sisak,

2024). However, the proposed project for Carbochim platform envisioned a four-level underground parking lot on the riverbanks and a monolithic building hundreds of meters long along the bank (Trans Form SRL, 2023). Moreover, there were no pedestrian connections to the water, which could also function as ecological corridors connecting with the blue-green corridor of the river for ventilating the city and reducing the heat island effect. The percentage of green space on natural soil proposed for the former industrial area was 7.5%, compared to 30% as regulated by the PUG (Primăria şi Consiliul Local Cluj-Napoca, 2014; Trans Form SRL, 2023), which would affect the river ecosystem.

Figure 8. Temporary architecture getting people closer to the river – the confluence of the Someş with the Nadăş
Source: Oana-Ramona Ilovan, 2018

Located at a crucial ecological junction, the site of Carbochim Factory sat on the Someș riverbank, at its confluence with the Nadăș stream (Figure 9). It boasted a significant water frontage of approximately one kilometer, underscoring its ecological significance for the river. Despite its importance, the Someş Master Plan (Práctica Arquitectura y Urbanismo SLP Espana, 2021), which defined building constraints and planning recommendations for privately owned riverfront parcels, did not receive official backing from the local administration.

Figure 9. Carbochim platform at the confluence of the Someş with the Nadăş (the chimneys, the hall of battery electrodes and the paste tower)
Source: Adriana Măgeruşan, 2024

More broadly, the ecological implications of preserving the Carbochim industrial site were articulated through a critique of *tabula rasa* strategies and an advocacy for adaptive reuse as a fundamentally more sustainable approach. Drawing on Carl Elefante's now widely cited assertion that "the greenest building is the one that is already built," this perspective foregrounds the climate-related costs embedded in new construction and positions existing buildings, reuse practices, and sustainability within a shared ecological and political framework (Batista and Siedle, 2025; Malterre-Barthes, 2025; Wong, 2025).

Despite experiencing a progressive sense of place (Massey, 1993) due to the openness of places to global processes and the inherent connections between different spatial scales at the economic, political, social and cultural level, industrial heritage and green spaces should be preserved as place-based resources, valuable for sustainable development. The politics of heritage preservation and redevelopment emphasizes that derelict industrial space is continuously under siege from real estate development (Jucu and Voiculescu, 2020; Drăgan et al., 2024; Ilovan et al., 2025). The production of non-places through large projects consumes (through destruction) industrial heritage and green areas, changing the urban fabric in alienating ways for the locals (Măgeruşan, 2023; Someş Delivery, 2023; Ilovan and Mutică, 2024).

4. AN ACTIVIST'S AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON CONTESTED INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE

This part is centered on Adriana Măgeruşan's activist experience, blending the researcher persona with the activist one, exercising reflexivity through autoethnography. Her self-reflexive narrative generated rich data on the dynamics of deciding urban development and on the cultural reality of activism in Romania. Particularized knowledge, values and attitudes were exhibited through the interaction among activists, public administration, investors, the mass media, and concerned locals. Local activist groups called for development that was sensitive to both environmental and heritage considerations, emphasizing the misalignment between the objectives articulated in official public administration documents and the plans proposed by the investor (Someş Delivery, 2023; Măgeruşan and Dohotaru, 2024; Măgeruşan, 2025).

The activist's relationships are analyzed chronologically based on autoethnographic data, with the autoethnography simultaneously functioning as a self-reflective synthesis of the insights arising from these interactions.

4.1. Stepping in

A series of real estate projects proposed on the banks of the Someș ignored social, environmental, sustainable urban mobility and industrial heritage considerations (cf. Vincze et al., 2019; Măgeruşan and Dohotaru, 2024; Vincze, 2025), but Carbochim proposal was even more controverted, from multiple perspectives (Socol, 2022):

> In early June 2023, I became aware through Clujul Civic Facebook Group that the industrial chimneys, initially marked for preservation in the opportunity notice phase, were condemned for demolition in the Zonal Urbanistic Plan (PUZ) approved by the Technical Commission for Territorial Planning and Urbanism of Cluj County Council. This prompted a local NGO, I was collaborating with at that time, to propose delving deeper into the public documentation for PUZ. Our findings revealed that the proposal

plan was direr than it appeared in the media. Next step was to study the urban planning documents: PUG (Primăria şi Consiliul Local Cluj-Napoca, 2014, PIDU Someşul Mic (Práctica Arquitectura y Urbanismo SLP Espana, 2021), and SIDU 2030 (Primăria şi Consiliul Local Cluj-Napoca and The World Bank, 2021). Two critical issues came to light in relation to the documents and higher-ranking strategies that define the major development directions of the area: 1. Deficient implementation of the green-blue corridor along the Someş River and 2. Insufficient preservation and conversion of the valuable industrial heritage.

Considering these elements, four NGOs decided to initiate a campaign starting with three steps: an address to the institutions that approved the documentation, a press release, and an open letter. My role was to research the subject and draft the documents with the NGOs.

4.2. Relationship with the Activist Environment

The first activist reaction was organized together by four NGOs: Asociaţia miniMASS, SOS – Societatea Organizată Sustenabil, Clujul Sustenabil and Clubul Cicloturistic Napoca:

> After the initial cohesion and enthusiasm, a step-back occurred when two of the NGOs decided not to sign the open letter and to separate the campaign for the Someş from that for industrial heritage. In the end they rejoined the campaign, but it is important to underline that civil society is not a monolith, but a mosaic of opinions and points of view, and that the blue-green corridor was the main issue for most members of civic society, not the endangered industrial heritage.

Different bottom-up initiatives are connected through shared concerns and activism for adaptive reuse is an active practice of place politics (Jones et al., 2020; Roura-Expósito, 2023; Janinović, 2024). At European level, citizens' initiatives such as House Europe, proposed an alternative discourse about the environmental and social impact of demolishing existing buildings and replacing them with new buildings, claiming for a radical change in European legislations (Malterre-Barthes, 2025). At local level, practices of resistance included participating in public debates, giving interviews, writing petitions (Ilovan et al., 2025). However, it is worth noting that themes related to green space are a recurrent topic in the civic environment and have wide support (Vais, 2016), whereas industrial heritage does not. This is because the latter is associated with past communist propaganda, political repression, and labelled in the present as a 'misfortune' of a political built legacy (Ţiganea, 2016; de Vreuschmen and Iamandescu, 2023). There is still insufficient interest in the inventory and preserving of industrial heritage (Iamandescu, 2014; Wollmann, 2010-2022) and popularization of successful industrial heritage conversions (Andreşoiu, 2024). Also, the seclusion of these platforms is further deepened by the fact that they are generally off limits to the public.

Under these circumstances, an uneven power dynamic is made visible through Adriana's interactions and subjective experiences. Power is a relational process, a complex web that resides in administrative and economic positions and should be more dispersed (Ilovan et al., 2025). Reflecting on activism, Adriana is hopeful:

> The civic environment and NGOs remain the silver lining in post-socialist Romania. Some important changes in society came through the pressure of civic society. In some cases, NGOs have done in Romania what public institutions failed. But power games can make you either docile or convince you to give up, even emigrate.

4.3. Relationship with the Cultural Environment

In Cluj, one of the first bottom-up initiatives for the adaptive reuse of an industrial space emerged in the form of an independent art center, the Paintbrush Factory, which operated between 2009 and 2022 (Ilovan et al., 2020). In this context, support for a campaign to heritage-list the Carbochim site seemed to find fertile ground within the local cultural scene. However, the director of a cultural organization called CCCluj, which brings together also former members of the Paintbrush Factory and is funded by the local administration as well as private sponsors—including the Carbochim developer—became active supporter of the project in public debates, arguing that the Hall with Arcades, one of the only two preserved buildings, would be transformed into a cultural space. This position drew criticism from other former members of the Paintbrush Factory, who perceived it as a narrowing of local independent cultural space (Braniște et al., 2024).

The public debate over the Carbochim project, which took place in 2024 after the city's chief architect and the mayor had already issued their approvals (Ilovan et al., 2025), became the inspiration for the political theater play "Tresure City", which addressed decision-making processes in the city, gentrification, and social exclusion (Stoica, 2025). Other forms of artistic expression thematizing the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage, commons, and social memory included the 2025 exhibition "City of Glass" by artist Andreas Fogarasi at Galeria Aluvial in Cluj, and the site-specific performance "Commoning. A Journey Through Time in Search of the Commons", held in 2025 in a factory slated for demolition: Armătura Factory (Măgerușan, 2025).

4.4. The Investor – Few Words

Dominant public-private power relations seem to work to delegitimize particular views and to marginalize activists. The neoliberal discourse dictates how people should relate to urban renewal (cf. Komatina et al., 2016; Janinović, 2024; Vincze et al., 2024). A powerful view about capitalism that privileges a certain kind of knowledge exists in Romania: private investment is always welcomed because it enables modernization, which cannot be supported otherwise (Vincze, 2025). After Adriana's discussion with the investor's executives, her position is underlined concerning the decision-making process:

> We are trying to convince the public institutions to watch over the public interest and preserve common resources; our address was sent to these institutions, not to the investor.

4.5. Relationship with the Press

After the public letter and a subsidiary of the national television invited Adriana and a colleague to a live transmission, it became apparent to the local press that there could be different opinions regarding the intervention on Carbochim:

> We very confidently and optimistically sent the letter to the institutions involved in approving the PUZ and, through a press release, to the local and national media (Someș Delivery, 2023). Apart from a few local publications, there was deep silence. Our action was not promoted by the media, despite the involvement of well-known environmental activists with high media visibility in other causes. There was a press embargo because most of the media had sponsorship contracts with the investor. It was a pleasant surprise that the television invited us.

A large part of the national (Smile Media, 2022; Zamfir, 2022) and local (Tămaş, 2022; Ştirbu, 2022) media published articles about this project presenting it as "the largest

urban regeneration project in Romania", "the largest mall in Romania in terms of investment value" and "the largest underground parking lot". Some displayed "(P)" or "supported article", a sign that it was a paid article. Nevertheless, the construction of leadership through activism is made visible due to the press: activism was a journey of self-discovery when Adriana realized she needed to be open about her position concerning the project. The moment of publishing the *PressOne* article (Felseghi, 2023) was perceived by Adriana as a trigger:

> In this deafening silence, I was invited by a journalist to discuss the issues we reported. I spoke freely, not being aware that I would be quoted, but thinking that our discussion was the basis of a journalistic documentation. I was on the bus when I received an email from an urban architect, who was a member of a commission involved in approving the project, and who wrote "Bravo!" and linked to the article. I trembled. Instantly I became exactly what I had avoided: the person in the foreground of the campaign.
>
> I realized that I would have to publicly assume my position and especially that the arguments related to the valuable industrial heritage needed an architect's support. Suddenly, I was caught in the front line: things had become serious.

4.6. Relationship with the Institutions

The institutions involved with authorizing the project revolved around the City Hall and its commission for urbanist interventions (CTATU). The CTATU Meeting was mediated by the mayor and broadcasted online, with restricted access; the project for Carbochim was the most discussed. Adriana was invited to express criticism:

> July 24, 2023, was the third return to CTATU of the development project; it was an important moment of our approach, when the matter could have been decided in one direction or another. This was a moment that stressed me before and haunted me for a long time. The tone of the discussion became very vehement at certain moments and even personal, with comments on the behavior and attitude of each side. What was more disarming, however, from the activist's point of view, was the lack of involvement from my colleagues, architects, members of the commission that were present in the meeting and expressed few points of view regarding the project.

The role of an urban planning commission is to establish the feasibility of a project and whether it is in agreement with higher-level urban planning documents such as PUG (Primăria și Consiliul Local Cluj-Napoca, 2014), PIDU Someș Mic (known as the Masterplan for Someș – Práctica Arquitectura y Urbanismo SLP Espana, 2021) or the Integrated Urban Development Strategy 2021-2030 (SIDU, 2030) (Primăria și Consiliul Local Cluj-Napoca and The World Bank, 2021). These strategic documents include elements to protect the industrial heritage and the green-blue corridor of the Someș River.

Activism could strengthen social solidarity in the face of bartering between the public administration and business that excludes a real participation of other stakeholders in the city, a pattern based on an outdated and ineffective legal framework for informing and consultation procedures (Panaitescu and Stan, 2024; Ilovan et al., 2025). Adriana reflects upon the symbolic violence of not being listened to:

> At the end of the debate, the mayor invited the architect who represented the architecture firm to present the design concept. After the presentation I pointed out that we should not discuss design, but rather urban impact. I acknowledged that the design was very nice, but it could very well be in Doha or China. Of course, we hoped to have a project that had to do with the city of Cluj, the Someș and Carbochim. My

feeling was that things had been decided politically long before, not in the technical committee, and that everything was meant only to give the appearance of a democratic procedure. Until the critical mass grows, the adage is "dogs bark, yet the caravan passes!"

Adriana emphasizes the problematic dialogue between activists and the authorities (cf. also Ilovan and Mutică, 2024; Ilovan et al., 2025). A cause may be no cultural tradition of negotiation since the establishment of communism in Romania and during post-socialism. Present administrative regulations forced discussions into a certain format and timeframe that was no longer relevant for the civil society's interventions on the decision-making process. A form of silencing through bureaucratic mechanisms could be perceived (Panaitescu and Stan, 2024). Such a practice is a negation of opportunity, it deprives the citizens of being listened to. Also, when asking public administration to re-evaluate the project, the atmosphere described by Adriana was of tacit conflict. Her interactions, as activist, with the public administration engender her feelings of anger and frustration to the lack of interest in inhabitants' views and needs about the development of the area, and collective action for the sustainable transformation of places.

Moreover, old conceptions about urban governance pertain to the public administration actions. In a former socialist society, activism may be viewed as "reactionary behavior", especially by traditional decision-makers. On one hand, the savior complex of the public administration and of the investor is obvious. On the other hand, the ideal of non-hierarchical relationships cannot yet be envisaged because of the normative perspective supporting that only investors and public administrations are responsible for local development (Vincze et al., 2019). In addition, politicians and urban planners, although well-informed, are gatekeepers of the status quo (cf. Ilovan et al., 2025). They understand the need to change, but they say nothing that could make them lose on a personal or political level. There is no democratic, open and inclusive process of decision-making.

4.7. Relationship with the Professional Environment

The context-specific work of activism required the perspective of architects. DoCoMoMo Association, centered on modernist architectural heritage, signed the open letter and agreed that the project lacked an appropriate study of the existing buildings (Someș Delivery, 2024). The support of architects with established ethical and professional backgrounds represented an important motivation and validation for the activist endeavor. The architect's practice appears as a humane social one, first linking civil action with academic knowledge, and foregrounding the necessity to bring unheard voices into the public arena:

We consulted with fellow architects from the scientific-professional organization DoCoMoMo Romania. Their area of interest, 20th century architecture, overlapped with one of the themes of our positioning: industrial heritage. They agreed with our criticisms of the project. Moreover, they decided to join the effort as signatories of the document. This motivated us to move forward.

The solidarity of activism is characterized by a mix of academic and civic activist practices that shape new patterns of thinking about redevelopment, heritage, and the environment. Such research production is a political gesture, as much as a theoretical contribution to the subject. In the same vein, one understands how activism is played out both at the personal level and in professional contexts shaped by the Romanian reality

(Bîlici and Iamandescu, 2015). Adriana built bridges between society and academic knowledge by connecting her urban civic activism with specialty knowledge. However, little support from the rest of the professional environment to the points of view expressed in the documents of the NGOs was received with disappointment:

> In recent months, I have spoken with many professionals who agree that this project is harmful, but for one reason or another they don't want to have a public position. This is because they can be accused of conflict of interest or because they are in decision-making positions and could be accused of pre-judging or post-factum, or they don't want to expose themselves to public hate. All these abstentions say something about how 'open and democratic' the public sphere is in Cluj.

At the level of professional organizations, the local branch of the architects' chamber accepted sponsorship from the developer for the organization of architectural events in 2023 and 2025, and openly promoted the Carbochim proposal on social media, despite criticism voiced by some of its members (Măgeruşan, 2025).

Considering her emotional labor during the entire process, for Adriana–the scholar-activist–her activism appears as a liminal space between personal vulnerability and societal power:

> I am personally more of a realistic person. I try to anticipate, understand the context, assess the prospects. However, the beginning is a head-on action. At first, I was optimistic, then, understanding the tangle of relationships surrounding this project, I moved to being pessimistic and angry. Protest or civic reaction is born out of revolt and anger. The moment you realize how many people are co-interested or pressured, you feel both anger and pressure. You rebel even more because what you initially noticed was just the tip of the iceberg.

4.8. Relationship with the Citizens

Cultural sensibilities are exposed in social media comments showing citizens' perceptions of socialist industrial heritage and of current urban transitions in the Romanian post-socialism. Heritage involves the idea of respect for the past, but the narratives about the socialist past and post-socialist redevelopment are multiple and contradictory (Constantinescu Păun et al., 2017; Jucu and Voiculescu, 2020, p. 9; Ţiganea, 2020; Drăgan et al., 2024; Ilovan et al., 2025; Iuga et al., 2025), as social media comments show. In Clujul Civic Facebook Group, these underline the present lack of affective solidarity concerning the industrial heritage of the area:

> Let's not exaggerate with those 'industrial heritage' buildings because many halls look like after the war.
> I can't understand the obsession with clinging to some unaesthetic, dilapidated halls, and deciding ourselves what the owner should do with them.

Social media comments point out the contested place identity. Inhabitants' dissonant voices about industrial heritage are heard. Not many are aware of the flexibility of industrial heritage to accommodate change. The rhetoric of obsolescence is leveraged to legitimize demolition before the public, masking the underlying interests that drive such interventions (Batista and Siedle, 2025). Also, detractors of industrial heritage identify with negative narratives about socialist propaganda related to industry. The materiality of the place is evocative of past development, of the economic and political ideology of communism and therefore must go. But others find arguments to keep it even so:

> We cannot brush history by choosing only the chapters that suit us. A cultural space could be made, which is lacking anyway, not just malls and blocks of flats. All spaces of collective freedom disappear.

Other comments made comparisons with restructuring examples for urban industrial areas. Nevertheless, when referring to social media comments, Adriana notes:

> I realized that the industrial heritage is much less valued than I imagined. But I think this very finding makes a campaign for industrial heritage even more needed, because it can raise awareness of its value to a community.

Activism creates novel spaces within Romanian society, characterized by both risks and opportunities (cf. also Constantinescu Păun et al., 2017; Ilovan and Mutică, 2024; Ilovan et al., 2025; Măgerușan, 2025), in which marginalized topics are given voice; by contrast, top-down interventions appear to foster a sense of stability while rendering citizens peripheral to the decision-making mechanisms underpinning a state-sponsored neoliberal agenda. The few examples of adaptive reuse in Romania—such as Petrila Mine, Faber Timișoara, or the former Paintbrush Factory in Cluj-Napoca—have emerged from bottom-up initiatives. The conclusion is that heritage activism is necessary and produces meaningful dynamics, even in cases of failure:

> Despite the failure of the campaign to save Carbochim, the discussion of industrial heritage later became more prominent in debates surrounding other real estate development projects in the city, such as Remarul or Armătura, even though none of these projects sufficiently preserves and integrate valuable industrial heritage. The civic campaign that led to the local administration's exercise of its right of pre-emption to acquire the Telephone Palace—one of the most remarkable buildings in Cluj from the socialist period—can also be read as a small shift in perceptions regarding recent heritage.

5. DRAWING THE LINE: HERITAGE ACTIVISM AND SOCIALIST LEGACY IN CLUJ-NAPOCA

This article explores urban redevelopment decision-making processes in connection with the emergence of civic activism concerned with industrial heritage preservation. At Carbochim, *the crisis* was the imminent loss of some common assets of the city: the valuable industrial heritage and the natural heritage represented by the Someș (Măgerușan and Dohotaru, 2024). *The opportunity* was for the opposition of specialists from different fields to open the discussion about the value of this heritage and of Someș in the sustainable development of the northern area of the city (Vincze et al., 2019). A campaign started by architects, heritage specialists and environmentalists can create a wave of awareness that can change citizens' perceptions. And if the tide is high enough, public pressure will have the power to save that heritage. As in other cases, the respective *call to action* was addressed to both specialists and the public: *you need to join the campaign* (Bîlici and Iamandescu, 2015).

For public projects, it is easier to activate the civic spirit than for private ones, although urban activism was a response to a crisis of the public and the common space generated by the aggressive developments of neoliberal urbanism (Vais, 2016). When it comes to dilapidated industrial buildings, the width of the green-blue corridor of Someș, the percentage of green space on natural soil, abstract urban planning and regulations written in professional jargon, it is more difficult to explain and understand *the crisis, the opportunity,*

and *the call to action*. A defining feature of contemporary urban planning is the lack of representation and defense of the common good and collective interests by planners, public authorities, and developers (Degros, 2024). The paradox is the following: when such a project reaches public debate (i.e. the PUZ–Zonal Urbanistic Plan–is on the City Hall's website), it has already been agreed with decision-makers and stakeholders (cf. Ilovan et al., 2025). Civil society is the urban actor left out of these discussions and told, when the project is in public debate, that "it's too late".

Considering the above, the integration of ethnographic methods into heritage studies represents a key response to evolving conceptions of heritage and the growing influence of social movements in heritage-making (Jones et al., 2017). At the same time, the activist's observations highlight the lack of representation and defense of collective interests, the lack of an ongoing collaborative process that ensures citizens' right to the city and to meaningful engagement (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008; Degros, 2024). More inclusive participatory approaches can incorporate local knowledge and cultural values, leading to context-sensitive adaptive reuse strategies, enhancing the social legitimacy of interventions, and uncovering opportunities that may remain invisible in expert-led frameworks (Sayegh et al., 2026). Such reflections shed light on the dynamics of territorial development and heritage governance in post-socialist Romania (cf. also Merciu, 2021; Drăgan et al., 2024; Ilovan et al., 2025).

Through redevelopment, place features are fixed, and others are displaced. For Carbochim, renewal ignored previous place identity features and thus produced non-places for easy economic gain. Against a simplistic approach to redevelopment and calls for reexamining the highly marketed development project, public administration should be held to account, especially concerning the documents, regulations, and strategies it produced.

The project, although popular for 'cleaning' a derelict area, advanced the interests of an economic elite and certain segments of the population who afforded to live there. We witness the financialization of urban redevelopment, while green washing is a prerequisite for accepting the real-estate redevelopment project (Malterre-Barthes, 2024).

In addition, socialist heritage is often viewed through a political lens rather than as a cultural resource. However, civil society organizations, research networks (such as DoCoMoMo Romania), and academic studies have played a decisive role in documenting and advocating for the protection of twentieth-century architecture. Associations like BACU and ARCEN have contributed inventories, research, and public awareness campaigns, compensating for the limited administrative capacity of the state (de Vreuschmen and Iamandescu, 2023).

To sum up, the role of activism is to drive urban transitions, to enable societal transformations and catalyze change, to reimagine urban environments during economic and environmental challenges (cf. Jones et al., 2020; Roura-Expósito, 2023). In this context, civic activism, which acknowledges the collective right to the city as an inherently political process, prioritizes citizens' interests and promotes sustainable local development, through a place-based approach. However, only when occurring over a long period, a networked approach to participation and incremental urban change makes a difference and builds alternative models for heritage and environmentally friendly development (Janinović, 2024). During a process of normalization of neoliberal values in post-socialist Romania through specifying industrial heritage and green space for economic purposes, the

transformative resources of the civil society can advance alternative planning solutions (Degros, 2024; Sayegh et al., 2026).

This study contributes to the international literature on post-socialist urban regeneration. *We propose a theoretical shift* from expert-led preservation to acknowledging the influence of social movements in heritage-making. From a practical point of view, this study offers two major contributions. First, it validates autoethnography as a rigorous method for capturing situated knowledge that remains invisible in standard planning. And second, it identifies and discusses the 'Paradox of Public Debate'—a systemic flaw where civic engagement is structurally decoupled from decision-making.

For those who see the activist's subjectivity as a limitation of research, we addressed this at least partially through co-authorship and data triangulation. Our research supports the relevance of both using autoethnography in research and of heritage activism in urban development. It analyses advocacy for capitalizing situated knowledge and for understanding how to create place-specific renewal. Were the activists' ideas, those of the public administration's and investor's in line with those of the city inhabitants? Future research should find an answer and document the need to develop administrative measures that make all voices heard.

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