



## The urban transformations of a post-socialist city centre. The socialist relicts and current identity of Iași historical city centre

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## THE URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS OF A POST-SOCIALIST CITY CENTRE. THE SOCIALIST RELICTS AND CURRENT IDENTITY OF IAȘI HISTORICAL CITY CENTRE

Lucian Roșu<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** The changes of urban forms inside of post-socialist cities (during the last 25 years) had transformed the life-style of the city and created a more adaptable and resilient city. The core of the city, the historical city centre represent the object of the present study, whereby evidences and assessments of transformations that occurred had been highlighted. Using a GIS analysis, the socialist relicts inside of historical city centre are analysed from the economic, social and built-up area point of view. The historical transformations of the city are presented in order to understand the local context that the city (and historical centre) faced. The analysis concentrates upon the present state of the study area, aiming to reveal patterns of economic, social, demographic and morphologic features of urban transformations. The results emphasis a heterogeneous construction of the city centre, with a lack of cultural and urban identity, where social processes of gentrification, stratification, poverty and social exclusion cannot hide the process of rebranding that the city is trying to achieve.

**Keywords:** gentrification, post-socialist city, social transformation, urban revitalization

### 1. Introduction

The current stream research on post-socialist cities has densified the knowledge upon urban transformations that emerged during the last decades (Stanilov, 2007; Tsenkova and Nedovic-Budic, 2006) and the path that the cities followed for reaching the Europeanization model (Fleming, 2012). From broad descriptions to urban transformations, critical frameworks and explanatory theories (Ianoș, 2004), most of the studies had focused on the changes that occurred in the life of the post-socialist city (social, urban, institutional, economic or morphologic level). In this respect, there is no surprise that these changes which occurred over the Eastern Europe had generated a great academic interest.

Some of the most common features that the post-socialist cities are inevitable still sharing have some unique features, leading to an autonomous urban model.

a. Socialist cities had a high degree for density values (no matter whatever speaking of population density or buildings density), being a compact city with a clear urban edge (Tammaru, 2001), distinguish itself by the capitalist cities (which were facing massive urban sprawl).

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b. Land-use gaps, with aesthetics high buildings and with grand scale of civic spaces (parade squares to parks), which were placed in the middle of a neighborhood, being the main recreational activity that an inhabitant could have.

c. The lack of basic facilities, diversity and choice while on the other hand had huge industrial districts.

d. The lack of economic private activities, with no retail and other services.

Cities across the entire Europe are facing complex challenges, but the ones located in the Eastern Europe are undergoing dramatic changes, globalization being a major factor which determines irretrievable urban transformations. The urban landscape formed under the socialism is being adapted and remodeled to the new conditions shaped by the political, cultural and economic transition to the new free economy market (Sýkora, 2009). But the socialist relicts are visible, the reorganization of urban landscape in post-socialist cities being far from complete. The post-socialist transition is considered to be a wide set of social and urban processes, including transformation in the urban spatial organization of the built environment, land use and residential segregation (Sykora and Bouzarovski, 2012). Furthermore, the built urban environment is typically resistant to changes (in the absence of destructive events) (Hirt, 2006), the changes being hardly visible, from a year to another but remarkable as for 25 years already.

While most of the studies focused on several over-represented cities (Budapest, Prague, Warsaw), in the late 2000s other cities appear in the interest of the researchers (Ljubliana, Tallin, Bucharest, Sofia or Lodz) (Sykora and Bouzarovski, 2012). These cities are representative for the regional and European level (the studies being justified by the key role that plays into society), but on the other hand they are outliers in their own countries, having different structure, morphology and urban behavior than the rest of the cities, which share more common features and are more adequate for the majority of the urban settlements. Medium size-cities across central and Eastern Europe started to be researched as there was a reduced knowledge about transformations that occurred in the rest of the cities from Eastern Europe.

The city centre is representative for each city; it is representative for tourists, as it's the starting point for knowing the local culture and on the other hand is the main engine for the residents, the place where things happens and the energy of the city can be feel. Besides its representativeness, the city centre of post-socialist cities is in an urge of changing, the process of gentrification being more visible and, therefore, the social conflicts (gentrification, social exclusion) being present. There is also the heterogeneous built up environment, as in many city centres the transformation process is permanent and the hallmark of each historical period can be seen. The built up environment goes through substantial changes, buildings get renovated, streets are friendlier with the residents and the economic activity changes according to the needs of the new residents (Gy and Kovács, 2006). Also, an important characteristic of the centre is the growing direction of urban functions, the strengthening of economic activities and the expansion of business activities.

In socialist period the urban centres across Eastern Europe have suffered due to centralization and planning economy (since 1970), the results being the decline of historical and cultural buildings, the growing number of slums and the construction of new, socialist buildings. Since the 1980, the city centres suffered a more intense degradation as the poor, old-ages and gypsy population were moved to the state buildings. "In the ideological system of state-socialism the city centre was considered as a kind of conservative, bourgeois phenomenon, and for this reason urban development had no priorities for the maintenance and improvement of the city centre" (Szirmai, 2006). After the fall of the socialism the city centres

have known different transformations, as they are seen the core of the city. Undoubtedly, the contemporary transformations are legitimate due to the process of globalization and the need of reaching the well-being state of the western cities. But this comes with great costs (such as the decline of periphery socialist districts), being transposed by the core-periphery model. Furthermore, the western model was supporting global urban development trends, while the national features of urbanism were left apart. The conservation of historical buildings became a key issues for the local authorities, benchmarking the local identity of city centres.

All major cities across the Eastern Europe are facing different phases of urban transformation in the city centre, but they are not confronting similar problems as urban revitalization of city centre is in different stages. Most of the physical and social problems concentrated in the city centre are relicts from the socialist period, as the urban development was not integrated into urban policies of that times (Ianoş and Tălângă, 1994).

Hence, the current study is focusing on the recent socio-economic transformation of the historical city centre of Iasi, a medium-sized city (at European level) with a population of 326.000 inhabitants ("Rezultate | Recensământ 2011," 2014.), which is the third largest urban settlement of Romania and the biggest city at the eastern border of European Union. During the socialist period, it was considered to be the most representative city of culture and religions (due to a great number of historical and cultural personalities, together with a great cultural heritage, oldest university and a high number of religious buildings). The changes that occurred during the last decade transformed the city and unbalanced its identity towards new capitalist brand and rebranding processes (the Eastern hub of IT industry, the University City, the city of creation etc.).

## **2. The historical transformations that occurred in Iași**

In order to highlight the recent transformations of the city centre, a short description of urban development from the past centuries is necessary. The foundation of the city is consider to be the year of 1564. The actual position is conditioned by the geographical factors (geomorphological contact and the presence of the river Bahlui terraces) (Ungureanu, 1977) and also due to human conditions (central position inside of historical Moldavia, crossway position for the main commercial journeys, great favourability for agriculture). The fast expansion of the settlement is favoured by the intersection of two main European roads, leading to the emergence of a town, with a growing influence (having a customs in 1408, or being a reign residence in 1500). The actual city centre maintain some religious buildings from that period (Golia Monastery, St. Nicholas Monastery).

As the importance of the settlement grows up, there is a significant population (233%) and territorial (531%) growth (Stoleriu, 2008) during the late feudality which is restricted by the land use favourability. Therefore, the evolution of the city tend to be tentacular, along the main river terraces and main roads. On the other hand, due to historical instability the main urban core is in a continuous change, being shaped and reshaped each time an event (war, fire, flood invasion) take place. Some buildings can be visible today from that period but most of them had been replaced by the imposed architecture of the next important periods.

During the XVIII century, the city has maintained his regional importance, building the fundament for the modern city. The occurrence of brotherhood, rising of at activity, demographic growth and spatial extension made the city of Iași the main urban centre of the region (Barbu and Ungureanu, 1987). At the beginning of the XIX century, the political background (reshaping the limits of Romania, loosing Basarabia) change the importance that the city had once, reducing its importance and its polarization area to the detriment of Bucharest. On the other hand, the internal urban structure is benchmarked by the occurrence

of educational and cultural buildings, which are the base of the future cultural capital of Romania.

The XIX century represented a very tumultuous period. The emigration of Jewry, marginalization of the city, together with first and Second World War shackled the foundation of the modern city. The insertion of systemized economy and socialist politics created the hallmark of that period, which is largely visible today in most of the districts. The old city centre is rehabilitated in a socialist way, the specific architecture replacing the old buildings. The insertion of socialist buildings at all levels changed the urban structure and functionality, the city centre losing his importance (the demolishing of historical buildings, turning over to slums and gypsy district) in the detriment of socialist districts which gained more demographic power.

The socialist concept of urban development devoted an important role to the inner city; it was designed as the centre of political power and representation. The political, administrative functions were concentrated here. Some representative buildings from the socialist past are keeping their functions nowadays (Student House, Square House, Unirea and Moldova Hotels). Also, some urbanistic changes took place – the union square was geometrically regulated, its size was increased, cubic stone was put on the main streets and some other major streets were also modified for large representations (in front of Square House).

The post-socialist period converged to a slowly transition marked by the free market economy principles – accessibility, centrality, proximity and quality of life (Stoleriu, 2008). While the extension of the suburbs is a natural process (led by a higher residence mobility), the reconversion of the city centre is a very slowly process, but gaining his centrality and being the core of the city once again. The high density of historical and cultural buildings together with the occurrence of the main office buildings and shopping centre (Palas) recreated the centre that Iași needed.

### **3. The present state of the city centre. A geo-spatial overview.**

The current state of the inner city centre is a result of driving forces for over 5 centuries, whereby each historical period marked the present urban structure. The inner centre of Iași present some specific conditions of urban development that determine problems and solutions for a future sustainable development of the historical city centre. In order to accomplish the main goal of this paper several data were compiled for a better characterization of the inner city centre.

#### **a. Delineation of city centre**

As being seen as a district, the historical centre has some problems when it comes to delineate the borders. As the local administration do not have some clear delimitations of their districts, there are different dimensions of the districts. In order to solve this problem, several borders were compiled for a better overview upon the limits of city centre.

The delineation of a district is rather a mental perception which comes from its inhabitants. This is the reason why, for this study 280 inhabitants from the city centre were asked to draw the limits of the historical city centre. Another delineation was the results of a research taken in 2008 by Phd. Stoleriu Oana where the districts of Iași were established according to scientific expert opinion together with historical background and general perception. Therefore, the present study highlights 3 different extents that the city centre can have (Figure 1):

The minimum extent, from Union Square to Palace of Culture (the western border – pedestrian street, the northern border – Cuza Vodă, the eastern border – Sf. Lazăr and Anastasie Panu) was chosen by most of the respondents, showing that, in general perception, the historical centre should contain only symbol-buildings.

- Expert opinion (research taken by. Phd. Oana Stoleriu during her doctoral studies) adds to the first mention extent some more built-up area. The delineation of this historical centre takes into consideration not only the homogeneity of the buildings but more important, functional barriers which are, in this case, large arterial streets (Independenței Street, Sf. Lazăr and Smârdan Street).

- The last delineation takes into consideration another small area from the south-west side of the centre, as has been chosen by some respondents but also has historical and religious buildings (Treii Ierarhi Monastery) and, at the edge of this area, another functional barrier can delineate the entire city centre (St. Andrew Street).

Therefore, even if the historical centre do not have some clear boundaries (due to building heterogeneity, mixed functionality, different general perception and no administrative policies) the study will analyse the maximum extent that the city centre can have it, in order to reveal different features of the urban transformations. The maximum extent has an area of 125 ha with a population of approximately 10.000 inhabitants.

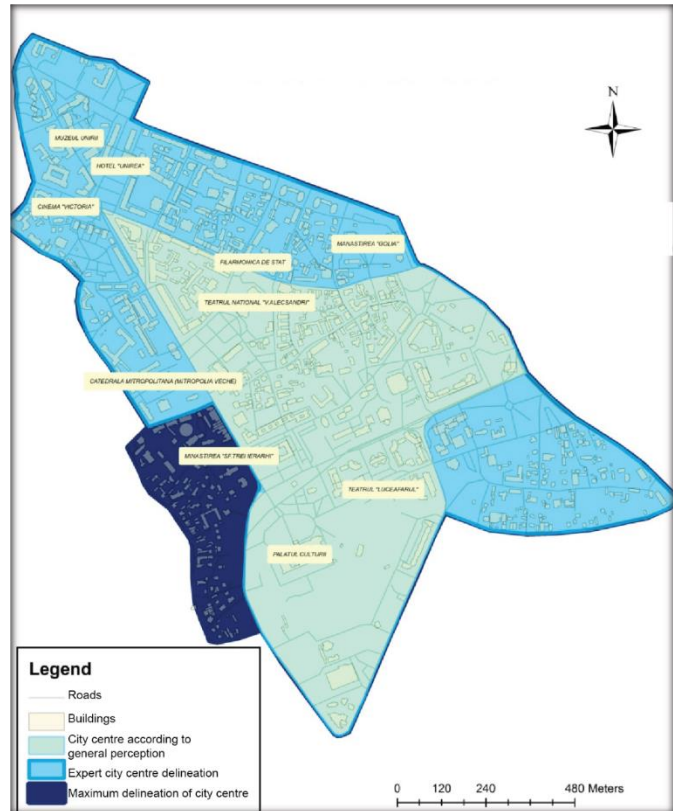


Figure 1: Different limits of historical city centre of Iași city

## b. The economic activity and demographic pressure

Usually, the transition that a historical centre faces is the decline of residential function, while other activities (commercial, banking) takes place, but this is not the case of the historical centre of Iași, where more than 10.000 residents live in the city centre. While it does not have the highest density between districts (socialist districts have higher densities), the historical centre holds a great number of inhabitants. The spatial repartition of the population reveals an uneven distribution. This pattern is undoubtedly a consequence of the insertion of socialist dwellings without a city development plan, the locational decision regarding new dwellings being carried out at political level of country (Benedek, 2006.). Highest concentration of population are where ten-storey blocks were built (the decision was taken after the earthquake from 1977). Most of the buildings date from that period, and they represent 35% of the total number of buildings from the historical city centre. The decision of building socialist dwellings inside of the city centre changed the face of the historical city,

with a chaotically insertion of these type of buildings. Most of the city centre population is concentrated among Sf. Lazăr Street and Independence Street (toward Union Square) as a high concentration of ten-storey blocks. After the fall of socialist regime, no collective residential dwellings were built, even though some office buildings appeared.

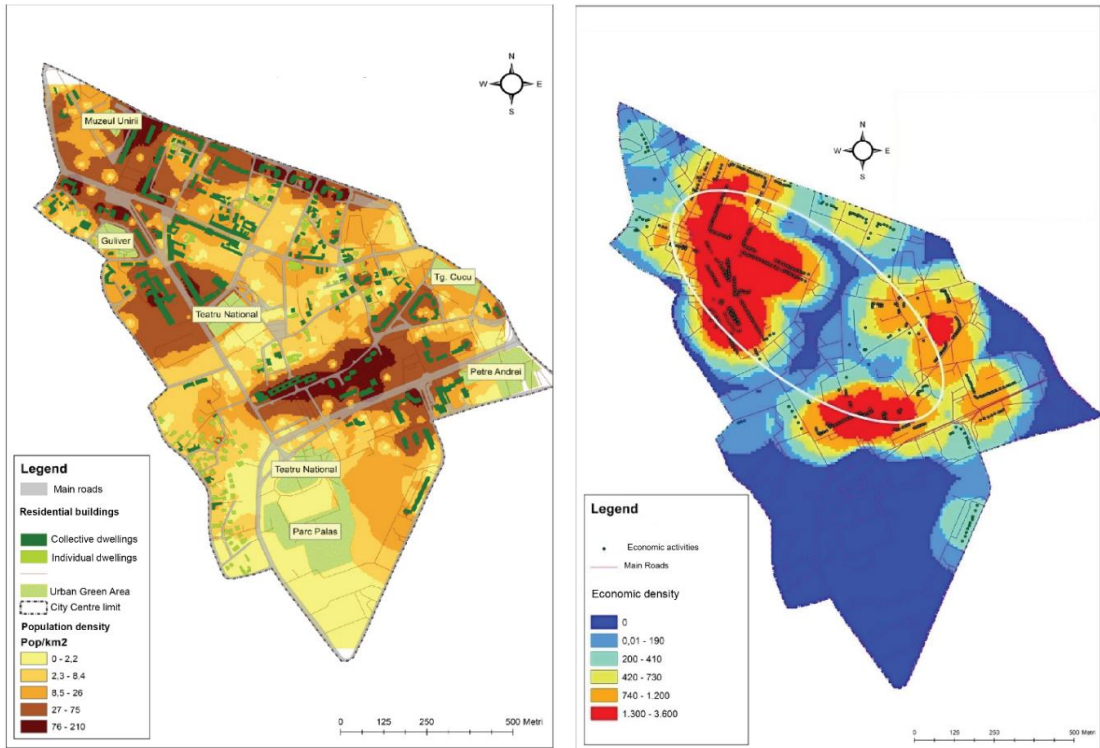


Figure: 2 Population (a) and economic (b) density in the historical centre of Iași

Individual residential buildings have, also, an uneven distribution. Most of them are concentrated in the S-E side of the historical centre, where the process of gentrification can be found in an advanced phase. On the other hand, inside of historical city centre, several individual residential buildings can be found but most of them belongs to the gypsy and other deprived population. The reason can be found in the politics of the socialist regime, as they decided to offer state buildings to the deprived categories. Nowadays, there is a high contrast between renovated old buildings and degraded other buildings. In this case, Tg. Cucu is a perfect example of deterioration of historical buildings, where local authorities do not involve in finding sustainable solutions.

The economic activities follow the pattern of population concentration. Therefore, most of the economic activities are concentrating at the ground floor of the collective dwellings but also on the main streets of the centre (Cuza Vodă, Ștefan cel Mare etc.), being influenced by the centrality theory. The retail activity is the most present of the city centre (40% of total activity), having from exclusivist brands to second hand shops and from very expensive restaurants to different taverns, showing a strange mixture of activities, without being influenced by rent bid theory. The most frequent type of economic activity after retail is the financial one (12%), as most of banking companies have their headquarter located in the centre. Other type of activities are medical services (10%), administrative facilities (10%), hotels and tourism activities (7%). Most of these facilities have their activity in the city centre because they are dependent upon centrality and have an over local influence.

One major problem that the historical city faces is the mismatch between the pedestrian street and location of economic activities, especially those specific to a pedestrian street. The presence of symbol buildings with different functionalities (religious, administrative, cultural) sideways of pedestrian street determine a low concentration of services in this area, while other narrow streets (Cuza Voda) concentrate economic activities at the ground floor of their buildings.

#### **c. Functionality of buildings inside of city centre**

As mentioned before, most of the buildings are represented by collective dwellings (35%) and individual residential buildings (20%). The rest of buildings have different functionalities, from cultural, religious, economic and retail (24%) or administrative functions. Most of commercial buildings are within Palas ensemble, a complex area for retail, office and hotel facilities. Some other functionalities such as education buildings (6%), religious buildings (7%) or cultural buildings (4%) have small values, showing that the historical city centre is rather a district with some historical background. On the other hand 20% of the buildings are recognized as historical monuments within local context and only 6% of them are monuments of national interest. Most of the symbol buildings of Iași are actually religious buildings, showing rather an attachment both from local administration and national authorities when it comes for culture but also showing the religious historical background that the city had. Other symbol-buildings are the Palace of Culture, V. Alecsandri National Theatre, Alexandru Ioan Cuza Palace (museum today) or Roznovanu Palace (city hall). If most of the symbol buildings are before the Second World War, most of the administrative buildings are placed in socialist buildings, which are present everywhere inside of city centre and having different functionalities (Square House, Court of Law etc.). Education buildings have a high proportion, being represented by 2 university buildings, 2 primary schools, 2 secondary and college schools, not taking into consideration the spatial distribution of population and educational buildings.

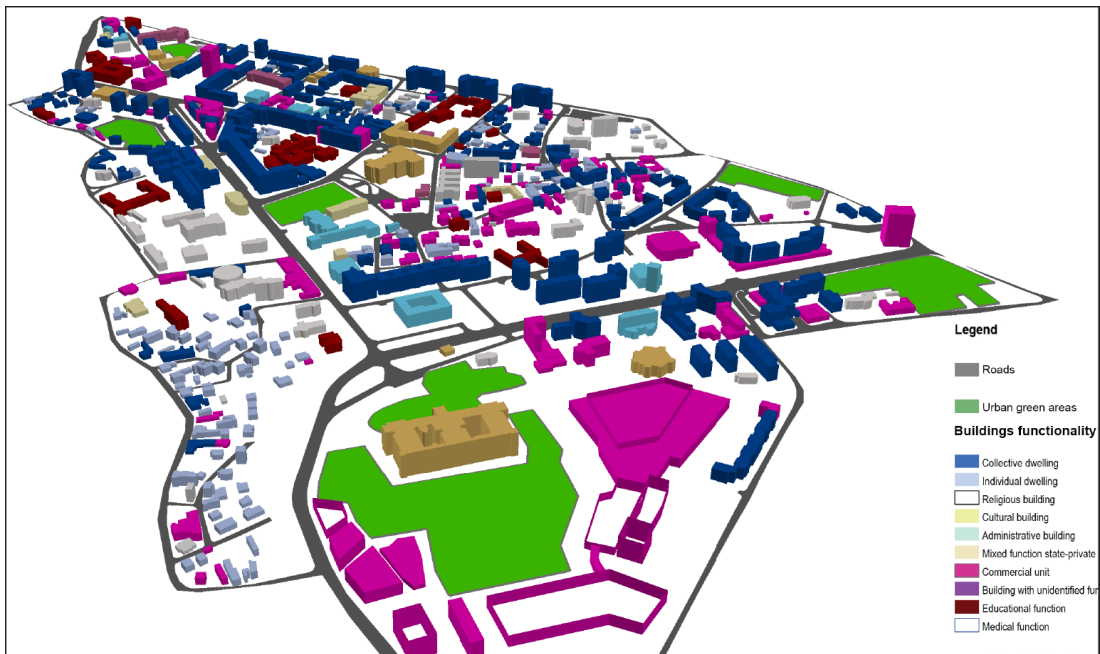
The socialist urban development had a huge impact on urban morphology of the inner city and also upon the functionality of the buildings. While the population had a forced growth, the intensity of economic activity was a normal process of free market economy. The behavior of the city centre changed from a normal district to the core of the city together with diversification of activities and opening of Palas- the lifestyle centre. On the other hand, the presence of a high number of inhabitants creates urban problems such as gentrification, agglomeration, urban segregation.

#### **d. The current state of the buildings**

The economic changes during the post-socialist transition lead to social transformations that occurred the inner centre as well. Growing unemployment, increasing impoverishment of deprived groups, rise of a new middle- and upper middle class lead to social stratification and liberalization of housing market (Benedek, 2006). Together with permissive legislation from local authorities lead to the rise of new residential areas without respective architectural and aesthetical laws from the upper middle class and, on the other hand degraded buildings which belongs to the deprived groups. While during the socialism most of the dwellings were owned by the state, the privatization of public housing went over (after 1989) under extremely favorable conditions for the tenants, empowering a large number of people. Therefore, an extreme social segregation form took place in the city centre and, slowly, the process of gentrification occurred. Simultaneously, the role of the public and private sectors have shifted. The power of private capital to shape space has sharply increased (Harvey, 1990). This shift



has increased inequalities and produced social segregation leading to growing privatization of urban space (Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee, 1998). Another process is the occurrence of gated communities, the wealthy inhabitants being protected from the poor (Webster et al., 2002).



*Figure 3: Buildings functionalities inside of Iași historical centre*

During the study field, all buildings were evaluated in accordance with the degree of deterioration (marks from 0- no deterioration to 10 – severely damaged). The state of the buildings reveals the characteristics of the groups which are living in. While there is an ethnic homogeneity inside of city centre formed by Romanians, the social segregation is severe. On the Sf. Andrew street (S-W area), the rehabilitation of most of buildings reveals a flourishing population; there are still some families with a low income, families which will be removed by the gentrification process. The presence of gated communities gives a sense of a wealthy district. On the other hand, on the Cuza Vodă Street and Tg. Cucu area, there is an entire zone with a low income population and very deteriorated buildings. The feeling of fear and insecurity creates a compact block of buildings which are desirable for everyone except the inhabitants. The process of gated communities creates another sense, as wealthier people do not have a desire on moving there, even if the space offers many advantages. The process of spatial privatization led to high disparities when it comes to buildings. Most of private monument-buildings have a high degree of degradation (Braunstein Palace) while all public monument-buildings are in a good shape (City Hall) or in a process of rehabilitation (National Theatre, Palace of Culture).

As a consequence of social stratification, inside of historical centre, the degree of buildings degradation is high, due to a massive presence of deprived groups, while at the edge (especially west) the process of gentrification reshaped the urban morphology and created gated communities.



Figure 4 :Degree of building deterioration

#### 4. Discussions and conclusions

Historical city centre of Iași has a very heterogeneous urban structure. The main factor that reshaped the urban morphology is the socialist urban planning policy which erased most of the urban identity of the historical centre. The post-socialist transition lead to major modifications inside of city centre, the shift from public ownership to private housing, together with increasing social stratification altering one more time the promiscuous city centre. Therefore, the city centre is rather another district of Iași, with some cultural valence and punctual presence of symbol-buildings of Iași. On the other hand, due to centrality and bid rent theory Iași rediscovered its internal energy in major projects that reshaped the image of the city and created the image of a modern city. On the other hand, the process of gentrification created higher inequalities and social exclusion that can be observed inside of the city centre, while local administration policies have a low impact on reducing inequalities.

Even though the image of historical city is altered by socialist insertion, different stages of building degradation and mismatch between different functionalities of the urban centre, several positive features can be highlighted, for redefining the image of city centre.

Most of historical monuments of national interest are represented, with some exceptions (National Theatre, Palace of Culture) by religious structure, which should be the main benchmark for the historical city. The presence of 3 monasteries, and other seven historical churches creates the premises for a religious stronghold. The local administration should focus their future policies on promoting religious events in the transnational context, Iași city having the possibility to become the eastern orthodox capital of Europe.

Opposite to other East-European historical city centres who lost their civic space, Iași city has maintained and rehabilitated most of the green spaces from its inner city. With seven

urban green areas (some of them in a stage of modernization) the centre offers what other cities lost – fresh and green area. The public garden from Palas is the best example of planning urban green area inside of modern buildings. Also, the apparition of pedestrian street and planning for future pedestrian streets is a direction that follows the western pattern. Together with a match from the economic actors will create the atmosphere of a veritable city centre.

The transformation of the surroundings of Palace of Culture in one of the biggest real estate projects that developed in Romania after the fall of the socialism occurred simultaneously with the explosion of the creative workforce, leading to a successful core of the city, which created a positive snowball effect. The emergence of the IT companies, together with high end retail magazines and urban public garden offered an alternative for religious sites of the city centre.

At national level, for some years already there is a high competition in order to achieve the status of being European Capital of Culture in 2021. This competition lead to several initiatives from local administration and civic groups. Therefore, the occurrence of international festivals that focuses on culture, literature and religion change the perception of the image of Iași and involves locals in different activities.

As having a periphery position at all systems (European, national, regional and local), the city of Iași had a delay regarding urban development, therefore, during the near future, the expectation of city centre development are high, therefore notable changes will affect and transform the inner city. Nevertheless, the inner city of Iași is facing a tumultuous phase of reconstruction, but the relicts of the socialist past are present everywhere and cannot be eliminated. The scars of the planned economy cannot be hidden, but the image of the city is not only about buildings, is also about events and lifestyle and this is the future path of the city.

From the social point of view, the post socialist transition led to social exclusion, higher inequalities and high rate of building deterioration. The local administration intervention with priorities for social rehabilitation can create a better background for inhabitants and local actors. . The uniquely post-socialist process may be fading into history. They may have defined the 1990s, but now seems to running their course (Hirt, 2006).

For this reasons, the last 25 years transformed the inner city district into a lively historical centre needed and used by the locals and tourist as a new centre of leisure and cultural life.

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