



**PROPOSAL OF PROJECT FOR JOINTLY SUPERVISED DOCTORAL THESIS**  
**UNITA**

**Cultural Heritage** ;      **Circular Economy** ;      **Renewable Energy** ;  
**Interdisciplinary**

**Title of the project:**

*Current processes in urban renewal: between the dependency on evolving socio-territorial matrices and the incidence of new policies for urban agglomerations' development. Case study: Timișoara*

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(CDR-START)***

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**H07\_23R: Grupo de Estudios en Ordenación del Territorio (GEOT)**

## **Description of the PhD project**

**Keywords:** *Urban system, Functional urban area, Urban dynamics, Exurbanization, Rurbanization, Re-urbanization, Urban and territorial disparities, Policentricity, Public policies, Baukultur, Sustainable urban development, Quality of life, Timișoara.*

### **Conceptual framework**

The paper will start from the question:

*How can public policies regarding quality of life be shaped in the context of ex-urbanization and re-urbanization phenomena in an urban-metropolitan territory?*

We begin with the premise that any macro-periphery formed around the core city generates new perceptions of the territory and landscape (Alexandru, 2020), but especially new socio-spatial behaviors and functional structures, in which, alongside metropolitan centrality, peripheral centralities emerge (Popescu, 2021), or should be created. Unfortunately, however, most urban agglomerations in Romania (such as Timișoara, together with the first ring of localities) suffer from fragmentation, with the periphery randomly absorbing only the need for housing (Municipality of Timișoara, 2022), without managing to form new peripheral centers that are attractive enough and complementary to the metropolitan core.

Equally, the administrative reform promoted by the European Commission prioritizes the evaluation of good public administration through the efficiency indicator in public policies and implementation capacity (Esposito et al., 2016). These aspects are directly linked to how these public policies have been shaped and adapted to the scale and specificity of the targeted territory (e.g., the metropolitan one).

Moreover, recent climate, health, technological, or political challenges have shown a low level of resilience in communities, especially in urban agglomerations (Spaans, 2017). This is why INNOVATION in public policies is needed, especially in the field of urban and territorial planning in our country's major agglomerations, which currently lack their own integrated development vision, both horizontally and vertically.

The **main objective** of the study is to identify an innovative method through which integrated urban planning and territorial policies can be defined and implemented at the metropolitan level, considering the new performance targets in quality of life, sustainability, and ecological balance.

The scientific core of the study will be situated within the interdisciplinary area formed by the two fields:

### Geography - Urbanism

These fields already coexist in the majority of strategies and framework documents for urban development and territorial planning adopted by the European Union member states. In the vision of the Territorial Agenda 2030 (European Union, 2020), INNOVATION in territorial cohesion policies holds a central place. By developing this thesis, we aim to contribute to this endeavor by redefining certain planning policies in relation to the socio-territorial developments of urban agglomerations.

In general, we aim to analyze a perimeter that circumscribes the urban (ESPON, 2006) periphery of post-communist core cities. When relevant, we will also include natural territories, not just urban areas, which have significance in the spatial perception of the metropolitan area. These areas can form, in whole or in part, a functional urban area (Eurostat, 2018).

Integrated strategies and plans for sustainable urban development have been more declaratively adopted at the local administration level (Alexandru, 2020). Today, common integrated policies and necessary action plans in metropolitan planning are almost nonexistent. Moreover, the most recent legislative changes in the field of urban planning and territorial development in Romania have shown more of a delayed response from central authorities to respond to funding opportunities rather than a genuine concern for increasing the efficiency of local governance mechanisms (Luca et al., 2021).

### **Materials and Methodes**

The research methods proposed in the present project are interdisciplinary, they belong not only to geography but also to urban planning and architecture, public policies, sociology, anthropology, economics, being both qualitative and quantitative.

The sources of information and data are also complex, with increased attention to the specialized literature, but also to the programmatic and legislative side. The data collected from local administrations, other relevant actors in metropolitan areas, both public and private, play a crucial role in choosing the types of activities and their implementation, identifying their needs.

The main dimension of the research will not be historical or monographic, as these areas are already well-represented, but rather applied, focusing on urban space planning and design in the context of improving quality of life.

Initially, after the general conceptual grounding, an empirical analysis of the geographical, social, political and cultural context will be carried out, extracted both from preliminary studies and research, as well as from surveys and applied research carried out during the thesis development period. The data will then be correlated through a theoretical lens to identify causal relationships or overarching formulas that can potentially be applied to general development policies.

We will attempt a theoretical analysis of individual cases to understand the applicability of general laws to a specific context. The particularity of the research lies in the fact that it will be conducted from within the local administrative system, with direct access to available databases and current mechanisms for spatial management of cities. Additionally, the concrete experiences in the sphere of planning and administration will be

supplemented by active participation in conferences, studies and projects focused on the city of the future, public policies, redefinition of the legislative framework, etc.

In addition to individual research, within the doctoral program, the exchange of experiences will be an essential source for substantiating the ideas and concepts explored in the paper. Thus, valuable resources for the research will come from the insertion in professional associations, such as the Association of Chief Architects for Sustainable Development, the Association of Municipalities in Romania, or partnerships with other public administrations in Europe. These professional relationships often entail concrete contributions, whether in conceiving new regulations or defining action directions for local administrations, which will allow a deep understanding of the functioning of the urban body, respectively of the public decision-making system.

The main research methods will be the deductive and inductive reasoning method, the comparative, qualitative and diachronic multiscale analysis method (to study the process of producing and changing space over time), as well as the method of participatory observation. The necessary data will be collected by accessing both physical and online bibliographic materials, public and private database, interviews, surveys, using digital tools such as google extensions (google forms, google maps), but also by observing the situation in the field, through focus groups. A special role will be reserved for the evolutionary analysis of institutional documents for urban and territorial planning, the processes of urban restructuring and reconversion, heritage conservation, new housing areas, including through the development of the public functions sector.

Finally, the study will emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of architecture in public policies for sustainable urban development, avoiding a specific niche and focusing more on an integrative perspective.

## **Case study**

The territory taken as a case study is that of the Timișoara metropolitan area. It is partially addressed in urban planning documentation such as the County Territorial Planning (Timiș County Council, 2021) and General Urban Plan (Municipality of Timișoara, 2002, 2018), by relating the objectives of these plans to the metropolitan territory. However, the Timișoara metropolitan area (Romanian Parliament, 2022) lacks its own long-term territorial planning vision concerning the organization and power dynamics between the core of the area – the city – and the urban periphery.

On the other hand, the availability of open land outside the administrative territory of the city, in its immediate vicinity, has triggered migration towards new peri-urban areas, appealing due to their lower land prices and the hope for improved housing quality (Municipality of Timișoara, 2022). An important influencing factor of this migration is undoubtedly the geographical context: being situated in the Banat plain, the region has a considerable availability of agricultural land that is easy to urbanize.

The fact that today the municipalities in the first metropolitan crown (Dumbrăvița, Moșnița, Giroc) have almost entirely exhausted their land resources up to the city's limit with single-family or duplex-type housing in carpet-like parcels, is confirmed by the high prices of available parcels, which do not offer a significant improvement in quality of life or location. The formation of bedroom neighborhoods in the last 20 years, without public policies at the level of the Functional Urban Area, has led to the asphyxiation of the city core due to the overloading of existing public services for education, health, culture, and especially existing mobility infrastructure. It is now evident and demonstrable that, in the case of Timișoara, contrary to data from urban studies on Western cities that faced this phenomenon, the widening of streets with new lanes for cars has only invited even more traffic, greater congestion, and pollution. The phenomenon of demand induction (by

widening streets without a metropolitan public transport or alternative mobility policy) combined with the lack of public services or jobs in peri-urban areas has exacerbated the need for daily commuting in a single direction: from the periphery to the center. This is why the most polluted areas are those adjacent to the city's main radial streets, and congestion only increases the time spent in a car with the engine running. This is also one of the reasons why there is a growing need for green mobility infrastructure (pedestrian and cycling paths) as an alternative to overcrowded main streets. Additionally, the monofunctional zoning has stimulated the increase in transportation needs to meet daily necessities.

However, the urbanization pattern around Timișoara has remained simplistic until today, primarily consisting of plot subdivision and selling isolated residential parcels without neighborhood centers or necessary public functions. More recently, the construction of large collective housing complexes has been initiated, isolated in the same manner, with no pedestrian or cycling accessibility. A positive observation, however, is a growing interest in energetically efficient buildings, somewhat compelled by economic and geopolitical context.

Moreover, the Timișoara metropolitan area will soon face the inability to cope with utility capacities (especially stormwater and energy supply). The fulfillment of these needs will not solely rely on the existence of a network but also on rethinking long-term solutions. This is one of the reasons why stormwater management must be ensured locally through solutions such as using drainage channel infrastructure. Besides their role as temporary reservoirs for rainwater, these channels can become part of a green-blue biodiversity and alternative mobility network through interconnection.

## **Expected results**

Starting from the two key questions: "To what extent has the phenomenon of intra-urban migration amplified in the main 8 urban agglomerations in Romania?" and "What is the impact of the most recent crises (health, economic, climatic) on the socio-territorial matrices in the metropolitan areas of post-industrial magnet cities in Romania?" the study will identify and explore several main research directions.

A first theme is to evaluate the current situation of the 8 magnet centers in Romania, with the main focus on cities that were industrialized during the communist era. Considering the available data from previous studies (World Bank, 2017), we will analyze how these cities have evolved in the last 5 years as a result of major global challenges. An important factor to take into account is the different cultural-geographical context of these 8 metropolitan areas, as identifying their specificities is essential for understanding the overall national context. A significant place in the study will be given to the case of Timișoara, the most important metropolitan center in the West Region of Romania, which is complex due to its multitude of social, ethnic, and cultural layers.

In this regard, evaluating the current public policies will help us understand the extent to which they adapt to the specificities of urban agglomerations and the need for adjustment and innovation. A primary goal of the study is to identify the cause-effect relationships between public policies and strategies and the various socio-territorial matrices in the metropolitan space. Understanding these relationships in the specific context of each city, we aim to identify ways to increase their effectiveness through innovative implementation mechanisms, possibly even through a redefinition of the current planning tools.

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