

Neoliberal Urbanism and the Privatization of Urban Regeneration Practices in Romania

Case Study: Iulius Town Timișoara

■ MIHAI-CRISTIAN COJOCARU

[West University of Timișoara]

Abstract

This article investigates the „discursive construction“ of the Iulius Town real estate development in Timișoara, Romania firstly by applying a critical discourse analysis of the discursive commitments of the property developer, and secondly by conducting a critical spatial analysis of the built environment. The results indicate the project is prone to exacerbate certain unsustainable environmental and social risks, contrary to the developer's stated 'urban regeneration' claims. The critical spatial analysis also highlights that this privatized urban regeneration exercise effectively leads to a repurposed „right to the city“ supporting the establishment of public spaces with built-in for-profit purposes, in line with the neoliberal assumption that the fundamental priority of development should be consumption and economic growth.

Keywords

neoliberalism; urban regeneration; development model; urban development

Context and relevance of the topic

Iulius Town Timișoara is a mixed-use property development, edge city and shopping mall located in Timișoara, Romania. Initially inaugurated purely as a shopping mall in October 2005,¹ later in 2015, the company owners expanded the project into a mixed-use property development encompassing multiple functions, namely retail, commerce, services, offices, park, and entertainment and rebranded it into Openville.²³ Later in 2019, the property owners rebranded the property development once again into Iulius Town Timișoara,⁴ citing the locals' attachment to the Iulius brand instead of Openville.

1 Official website Iulius Town Timișoara available at: <https://iuliustown.ro/ro> , accessed on 31.01.2021.

2 Official Local Council Planning Permit available at: <https://www.primariatm.ro/urbanism/avize/opportunitate/studii-de-opportunitate-informare-etapa-i-puz/etapa-i-puz-2017/puz-modificare-puz-zona-mixta-comert-servicii-birouri-open-ville-aprobat-prin-hcl-293-2015-str-a-demetriade-nr-1-timisoara/> , accessed on 31.01.2021.

3 More information on the mixed-use functions available at: <https://www.romania-insider.com/iulius-group-openville-timisoara> , accessed on 31.01.2021.

4 More information on the rebranding process available on the company's website: <https://iuliustown.ro/ro/noutati/iulius-town-timisoara-a-primit-cel-mai-important-premiu-international-pentru-rebranding> , accessed on 31.01.2021.

Located in northern Timișoara between Piața Consiliul Europei and Bulevardul Antenei, Iulius Mall, and then the expanded project of Openville and Iulius Town Timișoara were erected on a piece of land initially situated on the public domain on which the city's TV and radio antennas were located since the 1940's on strict supervision by the army.⁵⁶ From this perspective, Iulius Town Timișoara is worth being evaluated both as a real estate development, but more so as a model of development with multiple socio-economic and spatial implications. This paper will therefore take a look at the Iulius Town Timișoara property development both as a practical urban regeneration exercise, but also as a critical assessment of the evolution of the public space in Timișoara, and as a critical evaluation of a development model widely popularized as *edge city* in the last 20 years. Reading this article will therefore support a critical re-examination of the evolution of the public space and urban regeneration practices in Romania. This article feeds into the framework of critical policy analysis of the neoliberal model of development, but it is limited in scope to the assessment of this particular real estate project, both as a visual and as a discursive representation of the neoliberal development model.

The topic of this paper is equally relevant in light of the apparently heterogeneous and un-questioned reception of the privatized urban regeneration practices together with the quasi non-intervention of the local public authorities in the re-shaping of a vast piece of land previously located in the public realm. This un-questioned reception was widely reflected in the overtly positive appraisal of the project both in the local, regional and national media, as well as through the multiple endorsements of Openville / Iulius Town and its real estate developer by the local public administration. These un-questioned public endorsements both by the media and by the public authorities deserve an independent assessment themselves because from a critical discourse analysis perspective they reinforce the neoliberal discursive framework legitimizing the deployment of such for-profit urban regeneration projects. However, due to its format, the focus of this paper is limited to the critical evaluation of the un-reflected discursive commitments of this self-proclaimed *urban regeneration project*, as well as the critical spatial analysis of the overall property development. This undergoing feeds into the critiques of the neoliberal model of development and it is aimed at providing a modest contribution to the socio-economic and spatial implications of the built environment and public spaces in Timișoara.

Assessment objectives

The purpose of the present paper, nonetheless, is not to assess the quality of Timișoara's public, private, or public-private urban planning policies, but merely to evaluate the *discursive construction* of the Openville / Iulius Town real estate development. Although this paper feeds into the critical policy analysis framework, the essential specificity of our analytical approach stems from the fact that this article limits its focus on the discursive construction of the project, both purely from a critical discourse analysis perspective, as well as from a critical spatial analysis standpoint. The scope of the present paper is therefore limited to the critical discourse analysis of the bodies of text produced by the property developer of Openville / Iulius Town through its marketing strategy, as well as the critical spatial analysis of the project

5 Information retrieved from <https://www.circom-regional.eu/doc-download/ac/848-2011-discovering-timisoara/file>, accessed on 31.01.2021.

6 Information retrieved from <https://iuliustown.ro/ro/noutati/15-ani-de-iulius-in-timisoara-o-zona-industriala-transformata-in-lifestyle-center>, accessed on 31.01.2021.

as an *edge city*. Nonetheless, although the ex-post environmental or social impact assessments typically require different theoretical frameworks and analytical tool-boxes than the ones discussed below, one of the implicit purposes of this paper is to provide a brief vertical assessment of the effectiveness of the Openville / Iulius Town real estate project as a *development practice*, by looking at the environmental and social outcomes engendered by this *development exercise*.

Theoretical framework and research method

This analysis of the discursive construction of the Openville / Iulius Town real estate development is rooted in social constructivism – the sociological paradigm in which the ‘reality’ is ‘constructed’ through constant subjective interactions. Although the theoretical recognition of the term ‘discourse’ or ‘narratives’ depends on the academic discipline, we estimate that the most relevant use of these terms will be connected to the official bodies of text produced by the property developer of Openville / Iulius Town through its marketing strategy. The paper’s theoretical framework is rooted in the model proposed by Teun van Dijk in the book ‘*Text and context. Explorations in the semantics and pragmatics of discourse*’⁷ as the term ‘discourse’ will be used as a „text within a context” throughout the paper. Consequently, reading this article will provide you a critical insight of the narratives used by the property developer to re-articulate the project as an urban regeneration development exercise benefitting the entire community, rather than merely a for-profit real estate development.

To better refine the application of the critical discourse analysis, the research method will be utilized in the Foucauldian meaning theorized by Norman Fairclough in *Language and Power*.⁸ Therefore, the critical assessment of the bodies of text produced by the property developer of Openville / Iulius Town will consider the language and the narratives surrounding these bodies of text as a form of ‘social practice’⁹ which is institutionally managed through the metadiscourses, power structures and the ideological background in which they get produced.

Separately, the critical spatial analysis of Openville / Iulius Town will provide an assessment of the typology of human interactions incentivized by the public and private places produced by the developer. The underlying question of the critical spatial analysis will therefore be to unwrap the developmental typology put in motion through the public and private places developed, as well as the environmental and social outcomes derived from the use of these spaces. In doing so, the critical spatial analysis will provide a comparison of the discursive commitments of this self-proclaimed *urban regeneration project*, with the environmental and social outcomes resulting from the human interactions incentivized through the use of these private and public spaces. This type of critical spatial analysis is rooted in the definitional logic provided by David Harvey in his essay *Space as a Keyword*,¹⁰ and will provide a critical assessment of the process through which the human interactions co-create and make use of the public space in the Openville / Iulius Town development, in line with the theoretical use of the term *space* provided by Harvey in *Spaces of Global Capitalism*.¹¹

7 Teun A. Van Dijk, *Text and Context, Explorations in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse* (London: Longman Linguistics Library, 1980).

8 Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989).

9 Fairclough, *Language*.

10 David Harvey, „Space as a Keyword”, in Noel Castree, Derek Gregory, *David Harvey: A Critical Reader* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 270-294.

11 David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (London: Verso, 2006).

Naturally, both the critical discourse analysis of the bodies of text produced by Openville / Iulius Town through its marketing campaign, as well as the critical spatial analysis of the private and public spaces of this real estate development, will be discussed through the critical examination of the neoliberal model of development. Although situated outside the scope of the research objectives of this article, it is worth mentioning that the un-questioned and multiple endorsements of Openville / Iulius Town and its real estate developer by the local public administration in Timișoara highlight a deep *ideological baggage* of the public servants in Romania. This ideologized background typically carries a profound impact on the formulation of local and national public policies and feeds into the *rolling-back of the state paradigm*^{12,13} and the minimization of the public authorities' interventionist prerogatives when shaping up public policies, such as the planning permits. On the other hand, it is also worth highlighting that the un-questioned public endorsements of the project by the local authorities in Timișoara is in line with a more subtle process through which the *rolling-back* of the interventionist prerogatives is paradoxically accompanied by a „systematic use of state power to impose market prerogatives“¹⁴ and the deployment of a certain model of development subscribed to the neoliberal market logic. This bi-dimensional public action, in which the public authorities roll-back their prerogatives all by promoting a market-based development model highlights an ideologically-informed policy-making paradigm. The common criticism of this logic is that this process is primarily motivated by the idea that socio-economic development is a built-in mechanism of capitalism, and state intervention is therefore not required for generating development,¹⁵ with this process directly contributing to the deployment of a „distinct social order“¹⁶ and model of development. This ideologically-informed policy-making process revolves around the idea that markets are always efficient, while states are not, and therefore the markets, not the states, offer the best solutions to development problems.¹⁷ Nonetheless, it is one of the purposes of this paper to critically reflect on the ideological assumptions of the neoliberal model of development by critically assessing an empirical product of this particular model of development, namely Openville / Iulius Town.

To summarize, in this paper I will use the neoliberal development model to discuss the *discursive construction* of Openville / Iulius Town by applying a critical discourse analysis to the bodies of text produced by the property developer through the marketing strategy of this real-estate project, as well as ii) a critical spatial analysis of the newly-built environment (public and private places).

Hypothesis and expected results

The neoliberal development model routinely informs the policy-making agenda of numerous international institutions, governments, or regional and local authorities. This model habitually shapes the public servants' and development

12 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

13 Harvey, *Spaces*.

14 Alfredo Saad-Filho, Deborah Johnston, *Neoliberalism. A Critical Reader* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 3.

15 Alan Thomas, „Development as Practice in a Liberal Capitalist World“, *Journal of International Development* 12(6) (2000): 773-787.

16 Gérard Duménil, Dominique Lévy, „The Neoliberal (Counter-)Revolution“ in Alfredo Saad-Filho, Deborah Johnston, *Neoliberalism. A Critical Reader* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 9.

17 Alfredo Saad-Filho, „From Washington to Post-Washington Consensus: Neoliberal Agendas for Economic Development“, in Alfredo Saad-Filho, Deborah Johnston, *Neoliberalism. A Critical Reader* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 113-114.

practitioners' interpretation of how development should materialize, having become the hegemonic paradigm in which development gets operationalized. This paper advances the hypothesis that the un-reflected discursive commitments surrounding the establishment of Openville / Iulius Town are rooted in the neoliberal model of development. A sub-hypothesis of this article is that the articulation of the project as an *urban regeneration development exercise* benefitting the entire community serves as a discursive attempt proposing a reinterpreted model of human interactions mediated through the *cash nexus*. As such, this article's hypothesis aligns with the Marxian criticism of capitalism that it annihilates space to ensure its own reproduction¹⁸. The privatization of the public realm, and conversely, the establishment of public spaces with built-in for-profit purposes, such as Openville / Iulius Town, aligns with the neoliberal assumption that the fundamental priority of development should be measured by the ever-expanding purchasing power and sustained economic growth, with all the other development objectives being subscribed to these priorities.

Case study and discussion

The evaluation of the discursive construction of the Openville / Iulius Town real estate development is structured around two separate sections. The first section will provide i) a critical discourse analysis to the bodies of text produced by the property developer through the marketing strategy of the real-estate project, while the second section will provide ii) a critical spatial analysis of the newly-built environment (public and private places). On the first part of this section, due to the vast amount of marketing material available, the assessment will be focused on the written content available from two sources, namely Iulius Town's website and its official Facebook page – strictly in relation to the *illustrative description* of the project and its *exploitation uses*. The second part of this section will provide a critical spatial analysis of Openville / Iulius Town real estate development based on the inaugural official video released by the property developer in October 2015.

Critical discourse analysis

The property developer of Openville / Iulius Town¹⁹ has a dedicated historical page of the project in which it is described as a former „industrial area“ which has been transformed into a „lifestyle center“ over the last 15+ years since the initial inauguration of Iulius Mall. The real estate project is represented as having „revitalized an urban industrial area“, which resulted in a „mixed-use project delivering an extensive development impact for the entire region“. The narrative of development is further highlighted through the project's representation as „an urban objective with an economic and social role (...) which has become the locals' preferred leisure destination.“ On a separate note, Iulius Town self defines as a „regional business pole“, delivering a direct economic impact of EUR 38 million. This amount is split between EUR 25 million in direct economic contributions, EUR 13 million in public infrastructure development (road improvements in the neighboring area, a vehicle underpass beneath the entire real estate project and other basic functions of public freely handed to the municipality), as well as other EUR 6.5 million in annual property taxes.

¹⁸ David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City, Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Iulius Town's historical page available at: <https://iuliustown.ro/ro/noutati/15-ani-de-iulius-in-timisoara-o-zona-industrial-a-transformata-in-lifestyle-center>, accessed on 04.02.2020.

Yet on separate topic, the property developer highlights the positive environmental impact of the project through the incorporation of Iulius Gardens, represented as a „infusion of nature in the city center“ in the format of the city's „newest park which brought nature among the people“. From a discursive standpoint, Iulius Gardens are articulated as the „centerpiece of the urban regeneration mosaic, which can be regarded both as a connecting element with the city center, as a cultural scene, as well as a social interaction space (...) offering access to multiple artistic and cultural outdoor experiences.“ The property developer ends this section with an overarching commitment for Iulius Town „always remain relevant for the community and an integral part for its development“.

There are three discursive narratives most prevalent throughout this section, all wrapped together around the narrative that Iulius Town is significantly more than merely a real estate project. These representations portray Iulius Town as an (i) urban regeneration project, whose development prompts (ii) economic and infrastructure contributions to the municipality all by (iii) fostering a positive environmental impact and the establishment of quality public spaces.

Iulius Town's official Facebook page²⁰ provides additional insights into the discursive representation of the project. Iulius Town is yet again characterized as an „urban regeneration project seeking to coagulate the community no matter the purpose – office work, shopping, sports or relaxation.“ It is portrayed as a „family destination for entertainment and relaxation (...) where the walks along the park's alleys and the lake become more fascinating, and where the kids have access to entertainment (...) due to the Venetian carousel, trampolines, skate park, restaurants, themed cafés and the green areas.“ The certification of the office buildings situated on the premises of Iulius Town with various levels²¹ of the LEED Green Building Certification²², as well as the installation of two EV charging stations²³ allowed the property developer to promote the project as a sustainable development *exercise*.

Nonetheless, the assessment of the discursive commitments outlined by the property developer highlights three fundamental criticisms. On the one hand, Iulius Town is a pure-play product of the neoliberal model of development. Despite being portrayed as an urban regeneration project, the bodies of text produced through the marketing campaign indicate that the uses of the private and public spaces are primarily geared towards for-profit activities in a market-driven ecosystem proper to the neoliberal model of development. While the developer's stated intention to produce an urban regeneration project generally aligns with the criteria proposed by World Bank,²⁴ it seems that the social and environmental dimensions of the project are organically subscribed to the neoliberal market logic altogether. This attempt to reconfigure social interactions around the cash nexus and the consumerist paradigm is in line with a global trend for establishing edge city developments as a renewed form of human interaction.²⁵ However, such set-ups

20 Iulius Town official Facebook page available at: https://www.facebook.com/pg/Iulius-TownTM/about/?ref=page_internal, accessed on 04.02.2020.

21 More information on the certification process available at: <http://unitedbusinesscenter.ro/green-building/>, accessed on 04.02.2020.

22 More information on the LEED Green Building Certification available at: <https://www.usgbc.org/leed>, accessed on 04.02.2020.

23 More information available at: <https://iuliusincomunitate.ro/mediu/in-ansamblul-openville-au-fost-montate-statii-de-incarcare-a-masinilor-electrice>, accessed on 04.02.2020.

24 More information available on the dedicated Urban Regeneration section of the World Bank website available at: <https://urban-regeneration.worldbank.org/>, accessed on 04.02.2020.

25 Peter Callahan, „The Re-Design of the „Edge City“: From Isolation to Interaction“ (2000), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Peter-Callahan/publication/270579681_THE_RE-DESIGN_OF_THE_EDGE_CITY_FROM_ISOLATION_TO_INTERACTION/links/54aeaf8b0cf2b48e8ed45b46/THE-RE-DESIGN-OF-THE-EDGE-CITY-FROM-ISOLATION-TO-INTERACTION.pdf, accessed on 04.02.2020.

are never ideologically neutral, with the edge city-types of development typically being geared towards *commercializing* human interactions, leisure activities and spare time. It is in this sense that, despite being represented as an urban regeneration project, Lulius Town is reflective of a *certain kind* of urban regeneration project. The un-reflected commitment (at least from a discursive standpoint) of such an urban renewal *exercise* is therefore to create an ecosystem which repurposes every aspect of human interactions and leisure activities into a profit-making activity. This interacting setup seeking to maximize the monetary value of each unit of time spent on the premises of Lulius Town is in line with the stated purpose of the neoliberal model of development which subscribes all social and environmental considerations to its most fundamental priority of development – consumption, reflected through economic growth.

A separate criticism pertains to the apparent misalignment between the discursive commitments of the property developer and the development commitments set through the Sustainable Development Goals (“SDGs”).²⁶ Except for the aforementioned green building certification of its office spaces, which is in line with SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure,²⁷ benchmarking the Lulius Town project against the SDGs fundamentally misaligns the sustainability commitments of this project. While there are multiple alternatives for scrutinizing a project’s sustainability impact, the growth-driven development model of Lulius Town is intrinsically unsustainable because it fosters overconsumption, and it bears multiple unintended consequences such as environmental degradation and negative impacts on neighborhood stores. This is reflective of yet another insufficiently explored commitment of the developer to „always remain relevant for the community and an integral part for its development“. Similarly, products of the neoliberal model of development such as Openville typically exacerbates consumerist behaviors, which are in stark contrast with the prescriptions of utilitarian consumerism, generally perceived as an alternative path to development²⁸ both from a social and environmental standpoint.

Critical spatial analysis

The inaugural official video released by the property developer in October 2015 showcases the final rendering of the Lulius Town project,²⁹ which is not entirely operational as of the drafting of this article. Nonetheless, the utilization of the public spaces established through this real estate project may serve as a contemporary neoliberal reinterpretation of the *right to the city*.³⁰ *In light of the aforementioned analysis, the permeability and accessibility of the public spaces within Lulius Town seem to be a pre-condition for the expansion of the consumerist paradigm, making this right to the city contingent upon the necessary duty to consume. This democratization of the public space usage within Lulius Town resembles a managed process of „embourgeoisement“.*³¹ In this managed environment, the visitors’ social status appears to become fluid offering them the opportunity to step into the up-

26 The UN Sustainable Development Goals are available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> , accessed on 04.02.2020.

27 More specifically to the SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, SDG target 9.1 Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including regional and transborder infrastructure, to support economic development and human well-being, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all.

28 Shamsul Haque, „The Fate of Sustainable Development Under Neo-Liberal Regimes in Developing Countries“, *International Political Science Review*, Vol 20. No. 2 (1999): 197-218.

29 Inaugural video of the Lulius Town project available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkdXR0WffcA&t=5s&ab_channel=Openville , accessed on 04.02.2020.

30 Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville* (Paris: Editions Economica, 2009).

31 David Harvey, „The Political Economy of Public Space“, in Neil Smith, Setha Low, *The Politics of Public Space* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 21.

per middle-class environment while experimenting new behaviors. This managed experience is mediated by what David Harvey calls the „Hausmannization“³² of the public spaces. Initially conceded as the process through which modernity was brought to Paris, the process of Hausmannization may be reinterpreted as supporting the democratization of the neoliberal use of the public space „meant to mask and disguise the fundamentals of the class relations“.³³ However, as the Hausmannization of this managed environment dilutes the class discrepancies between the visitors, this reinterpreted neoliberal use of the public space further transgresses the *necessary* duty to consume as the gateway occasion to join the upper classes - the more the visitors spend time in Lulius Town the more they will consume, and thus the more they are likely to accede to the upper classes.

Concluding remarks

We have investigated the discursive construction of the Lulius Town real estate development through the lens of the neoliberal development model. We have seen that despite the discursive commitments of its developer, Lulius Town is a pure-play product of the neoliberal model of development because i) it repurposes every aspect of human interactions and leisure activities into a profit-generating enterprise and ii) it subscribes all its social and environmental considerations to the most fundamental priority of the neoliberal model of development – consumption. Similarly, we have seen that the property developer’s discursive commitments fundamentally misalign with the Sustainable Development Goals, except for the green building certification of its office spaces, which is in line with SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure. In contrast with the developer’s stated purpose to „always remain relevant for the community and an integral part for its development“, we have seen that this model of development exacerbates consumerist behaviors and may lead to environmental degradation and negative impacts on neighborhood stores, thus defeating its stated purpose. Separately, the critical spatial analysis highlighted that Lulius Town provides a managed environment in which class discrepancies are meant to fade away, while the visitors’ *right to the city* gets reinterpreted in a neoliberal key as an opportunity to join the upper classes via spending. This article’s conclusion is in line with the Marxian criticism that capitalism annihilates space to ensure its own reproduction, which typically gets carried out either through the privatization of the public realm or the establishment of public spaces with built-in for-profit purposes such as Lulius Town.

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32 Harvey, „The Political“, 22.

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