

PRELIMINARIES FOR AN URBAN HISTORY

ASPECTS OF THE EDILITARY ACTIVITY IN CRAIOVA AT THE END OF THE XIXth CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE XXth CENTURY: DRAINING THE SWAMPS

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Abstract: An important episode in the history of urban activity of the Craiova Town Hall is draining the swamps. In the context of the economic development of Craiova at the end of XIXth century, the ponds that surrounded the city on three sides affected seriously the public hygiene and the health of the population. The situation was aggravated by the lack of pavements, of the sewage system, of the sources of drinking water, by the development of unwholesome industry, by the growth of population which had the effect of increasing the amount of garbage and polluting waste. The author describes mainly the work of the liberal mayor Nicolae P. Romanescu, who played a major role in solving the city problems, but also of other mayors from the period analyzed, a special emphasis being put on the creation of Romanescu Park.

Keywords: muddy pool, channel, Town Hall, mayor, park.

Until the first half of the XIXth century, Craiova looked like a cluster of fairs, a large and hardly orderly bazaar¹. As it emerges from count Moltcke's descriptions, in 1835 Craiova had the appearance of "a town with 10,000 inhabitants, which was nothing but a large village, with pavement either missing or being made up of beams, with streets and lanes turned into rivers whenever it rained"².

At the end of the XIXth century, the economic development of Craiova and the increase in population, caused by the migration of a large number of peasants and of persons come from the centre and the west of Europe, gave birth to an intense concern of the town councillors about sanitation and finding the ways of maintaining the hygiene and of providing the water sources.

If in 1895 Craiova had 38,600 inhabitants, the census of 1899 recorded a number of 45,438 inhabitants. In 1902, the population of Craiova lived in

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¹ *Craiova. Pagini de istorie și civilizație*, I, Craiova, 1997 (it will be further cited as *Craiova...*), p. 46, Table no. 13 and Specht's map of 1790.

² "Arhivele Olteniei", year VIII/1929, no. 45-46/September-December, pp. 528-529.

7,117 dwellings (4,343 good houses, 2,774 unwholesome dwellings) out of which 3,065 had primitive latrines (mere holes or barrels), while 1,709 had none. Under such conditions, the public hygiene was far from satisfactory, a situation worsened by the lack of pavement, sewerage system and water supply and by the harmful effects of the pools surrounding the town on three sides.

The main sources permanently maintaining the danger of the outbreak of severe epidemics were the pools in the west, the south and the south-east, the most harmful of them being Craiovița, Geanoglu and Bibescului; Rahovei street (now Stephen the Great Street) – a valley were the garbage heaps alternated with “a lot of marshy grounds where animals were bathing”, Știrbei Prince street (today the Bucharest Way) – a valley which separated the town into two parts: the Tanners’ brook (now Mureș Boulevard), made up of the waters Oota and Chiriac, the place of the most polluting industries of that time (skin-dressing shops, tanneries); the Weekly Fair in the eastern part of the town, an “indescribable” ground; the Bibescu pond and the Girl’s Valley, “an enormous deposit of dung and dirt from barracks, artillery etc.”³.

Determined to put an end to this situation, in 1883 Craiova Town Hall delegated the councillor Scarlat Mateescu to go to Bucharest to inform the authorities about the most suitable improving measures which were to “raise Craiova from its degenerated state up to a level equal to its ancient splendour”, and also to “provide the inhabitants with those conditions and hygienic improvements enjoyed by the towns aspiring to a European aspect and civilisation”⁴.

Though Scarlat Mateescu’s measure did not have practical consequences, during the last two decades of the XIXth century the town councillors contributed to a great extent to the improvement of the urbanisation state of the town they were in charge of. From among the most urgent works meant to solve the problems of public hygiene and sanitation, the top priority was represented by the draining and sewerage of the pools and marshes around the town, supplying water to the town by finding new sources and by building canals, carrying on the action of paving the streets, erecting schools and hospitals, providing the town hall services with the necessary means, the setting up of the tram etc.”⁵.

In 1886, Craiova was visited by the Prime Minister Ion C. Brătianu who “visiting the surroundings and being horrified by what he had seen”, commanded that the county council should be summoned in order to take measures for draining the pools”⁶.

³ *Craiova...*, p. 72.

⁴ *Câteva vederi generale asupra îmbunătățirilor de introdus în orașul Craiova*, Craiova, 1883, pp. 5-11.

⁵ *Craiova...*, p. 74.

⁶ Dolj County Service of the National Archives (it will be further quoted SJAN Dolj), Craiova Town Hall, administrative service, file 214/1914, f. 103.

For good reason called “the founder of modern urban structures” in Craiova, the liberal Mayor Nicolae P. Romanescu had a major contribution to resolving the city problems. So, in 1887, the local administration set up a plan regarding the whole ground with rivulets, pools and uneven parts of land which started “the basis of a systematic and unitary procedure for the future”. The main projected works were concerned with gathering the waters of the Jianu brook through the canals Obedeau and Dănești, the waters flowing from Geanoglu pool, from the Tanners brook, Vlăiciei Valley, Rahovei Valley, Bishopric Valley brooks and those formed by the fountains at Saint Demeter into a rivulet (canal – our note) with continuous running water as a tributary stream of the Jiu river...⁷. All these arrangements had in view in a concrete manner, “the providing of the Bishopric Valley, the Tanners brook and the Vlăiciei Valley with highways and sewerage, but also the positive consequences that would have appeared in the sanitary state of the town atmosphere by doing away with mire and muddy pools often seen in the streets and waste grounds and by creating a wholesome installation, with water”⁸.

On 17 March 1887, C. Litarczek, chief engineer of the technical service, informed the mayor that “(...) in this office there is no special study on draining the swamps around the town, but it remains to be done in the crucial interest of the state of the local hygiene”⁹. He proposed that the whole ground situated between Cornițoiu pools, Obedeau’s fountain, Cernele village, the Jiu’s riverbed, Popova fountain and Calafat highway should be brought out in strong relief, displaying on this plan all the draining waters, pools, muddy pools, the type of crop under cultivation, as well as the main level differences. The plan will also show the borders of the large estates”¹⁰.

In the wake of this notification, the mayor of Craiova C.G. Pessiakov informed the engineer Litarczek about the fact that D. Dimo had been charged with drawing up the preliminary studies for draining the pools¹¹. But the contract for the plan of the ground containing pools was carried out by captain G. Savopol, as a result of Litarczek’s proposal made in March 1887 and of the official letter sent by the Ministry of Public Works¹². Answering the request of the town hall, he promised to make the plan of the region for an area of about 20 km, “starting from Cornițoiu pool and Craiovița pool towards the west and towards the south up to Cernele village and from the Red Inn up to the Jiu, near Mofleni and Popoveni, ending the measurement at the pool near Bibescu’s garden and at the fountain in

⁷ *Apud* Leonida Nicolaescu (coord.), C. Avram, V. Pleniceanu, D. Ciobotea, S. Lukacs, I. Zarzără, *Craiova, pagini de istorie și civilizație. III. Amenajarea apelor, canalizarea și termoficarea orașului*, Craiova, Helios Publishing, 1998, p. 52.

⁸ *Darea de seamă asupra administrațiunii comunale a orașului Craiova pe timpul de la 1 ianuarie 1887 până la 1 ianuarie 1888*, pp. 9-11.

⁹ SJAN Dolj, Dolj Prefecture, file 14/1887, f. 171.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, f. 170.

¹² *Ibidem*, f. 273.

front of Chintescu's inn"¹³. This plan represented the first topographic achievement for Craiova and it lay at the bottom of not only the studies for the pools drainage but also of the other far-reaching works ment to place the town "on the way to the progress it was fully entitled to aspire to, being one of the main towns of the country"¹⁴.

The road was long and hard, the following years recording many concerns and projects for the draining of the pools around Craiova, still only few of them being achieved.

In the year 1888, the new mayor of Craiova, Nicolau G. Racoviță, reported, among other desiderata, the sewerage of the pools in the southern part of the town "pools which decimate through their stench the town population". He proposed that 1889 should be the year "of starting the true regeneration of the town"¹⁵.

In fact, even in the following years same projects were recorded, but few of them were achieved. Thus, in 1894, the technical service of Craiova Town Hall set – as its targets – three categories of works regarding the drainage of the pools around the town by means of a main sewer:

1. Embankments (digging and adding necessary earth in order to form the open bed of the channel after three types of sections permitted on a 3,500 m route);
2. Works showing craftsmanship (the channel consolidation by means of wood coating and dykes at the deviation points of Șerca waters, also proposing the closed concrete channel, an extension of the channel – inside the town – from Vlăiciei Valley up to the designed open channel);
3. Building bridges over the channel in five places.

The planned channels were: Obedeanu, Cornițoiu, Cornițoiu-Obedeanu, Mendel, Jianu, Bibescu, Haralambie and Tabacilor. These were to create a new microrelief. The actions of expropriation in order to build the main sewer of the pools drainage were taken in the case of 12 owners, the most affected of them being Dinică Popescu, Glogoveanu, the inhabitants of Popoveni, the priest Marcu Florescu, Dimitrie Pleșoianu and others. The pre-measuring works for building the wooden bridge of the main sewer, for the bridge over Bibescu channel, for Breasta highway and for Cornițoiu-Obedeanu-Jianu bridge at Bucovăț highway were carried out by architect engineer Friedrich Springer. The expropriation actions, the works of art, those of the profiles as well as the embankments represented the responsibility of the architect engineer A. Vasiliu.

According to the contract concluded a year earlier between the mayor Ulysse Boldescu and the engineer N.N. Fratoșțeanu, the latter was to make "on site the necessary study for draining the pools in the south-west of Craiova, situated between the barriers Breasta, Bucovăț and Calafat, as well as between Popoveni

¹³ *Ibidem*, file nr. 11/1887, f. 25.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, Craiova Town Hall, technical service, file 20/1894, f. 20-21.

¹⁵ *Darea de seamă a administrațiunii comunale a urbei Craiova pe anul 1888*, pp. 7, 12.

village, the Jiu river and Mofleni meadow”. The main sewer was to start from the concrete channel (built at that time – our note) of the Vâlcii brook. Its route had to correspond with that of the derivation channel in the Jiu, designed by the engineer C.T. Monlan. The main sewer was to be linked to the puddles from Jianu fountain, to three points in the Bucovăț street (by draining Dorobănția suburb), the fountains of Saint Demeter’s, of the Slaughter house street, of the Tanners’ channel “to merge close to Popoveni village”¹⁶. On 10 June 1896 the plan of building the main sewer for draining the muddy pools around Craiova was approved by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The work was to be carried out with the town’s funds, to which 80,000 lei were added, voted by the county council¹⁷. During the same year the works at the channel reached Brestei highway, but they could not continue because the inhabitants whose properties were expropriated had not demolished their houses¹⁸.

A year later a secondary channel was built, named Mendel channel, through which water was draining from Bucovăț Street into the main channel. At the same time, several footbridges were being built on the channel situated in the area of the shooting ground at the Green Pool. In 1898, A. Crăciunescu, the engineer in charge of the work, worked out the cost estimate of a new channel for draining Belcineanu pond (formed of the springs waters under Mântuleasa hill) and the springs in this area¹⁹.

In 1901, after the decision of the hygiene council, doctor Antonini (future mayor of Craiova – our note), president of the health service within the town hall, asked for an intervention at the county level “so that the inhabitants should be removed from Bibescu neighbourhood to the land offered to them beyond Calafat barrier, on the area of the Green Pool village” and “the necessary measures should be taken in order to choke the pools in this area with materials gathered from the ruins of Jitianu monastery”²⁰.

An extensive project of modernising Craiova, ment to take the town out of “its extreme squalor” is linked to the name of the mayor Nicolae P. Romanescu, the one designated by the liberals in 1898 to carry out an ambitious programme of urbanistic works²¹. The first steps were taken during the five-month mandate in 1898, Romanescu continuing his initiatives regarding pools drainage, soil purification, atmosphere cleaning, clean water supply and public services modernization after he was re-elected as mayor of Craiova in 1901. According to his view, “before any social reform”, a people “who considers himself to be wise

¹⁶ SJAN Dolj, Craiova Town Hall, technical service, file 20/1894, f. 20-21.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, administrative service, file 10/1896, f. 1. The works were entrusted to Costa and Nedelcu, mentioning the execution of the channel in 1901 (*Ibidem*, file 44/1901, f. 85).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, f. 306-307.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, file 8/1898, f. 22, 33, 46-54.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, file 44/1901, f. 6, 7.

²¹ C. Avram (coord.), P.-E. Barbu, D. Ciobotea, V. Osiac, *Dicționarul istoric al localităților din județul Dolj. Craiova*, Craiova, Alma Publishing, 2005, p. 55.

and, therefore, free has to wish that “the supreme good in this world should be health securing”. He pleaded for applying the sanitation on scientific principles, considering that only in this way could nations “fully live the life of civilised people of the West”²². So, Romanescu set to himself the main goal of creating an “underground town” of water pipes and channels, the essential condition for establishing the civilised way of life²³. He opted for the French draining system “tout-à-l’égout” (all goes to the channel), expanded and perfected in Berlin, rejecting the systems previously projected by C.T. Moulan for water supply and by Ulysse Boldescu for sanitation of Zurich and Dresden type²⁴.

In the context of this study we cannot omit the creation of Romanescu park²⁵, undeniably linked to materializing the designs of draining the pools around Craiova.

The works of arranging the park were started at the crossing point between the XIXth and XXth centuries and the municipal and urbanistic development witnessed by Craiova in this period began with systematizing and paving the streets, demolishing a great number of houses, introducing the public illumination, providing the water supply and sewerage of the town, erecting public edifices, with the aid of the best Romanian and foreign architects.

The park was created over the period 1899-1903, on the basis of the plans designed by the French landscape architect E. Redont and they were awarded the gold medal at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in the year 1900²⁶, within what we might call today “the fight against pollution” and the arranging of places for leisure and recreation. These plans had in view, among others, green spaces arrangement, traffic systematization by building several boulevards, draining the pools Geanoglu, Craiovița and the Girl’s Valley, as well as turning Bibescu garden into a large park. The initial name of Bibescu park derives from the place where it was arranged, the Bibescu family’s property. On 29 March 1853, the Town Hall of Craiova bought the ground from the high official and landowner Ioan Bibescu through the bill of sale no. 79 from 14 Aprilie 1853, legalized by the commercial court of Craiova, in exchange for the sum of 12,000 imperial gold money²⁷. In this document, Ioan Bibescu declared: “I have sold my garden which I had received both by inheritance and by purchase, with an area of 259 acres, as well as the dwellings, pavilions, flower gardens and other outhouses in this garden with all their conveniences”.

²² Nicolae Romanescu, *Ce au făcut pentru Craiova consiliile comunale din anul 1901 și 1902*, Craiova, 1905, p. 249.

²³ Idem, *Fost-a munca mea de folos pentru Țară și Craiova? (Legislatura 1901-1904)*, Craiova, 1910, p. 23.

²⁴ C. Avram (coord.), P.-E. Barbu, D. Ciobotea, V. Osiac, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

²⁵ For details, see Gabriel Croitoru, *Orașele din Oltenia*, Craiova, Sitech Publishing, 2011, pp. 187-195.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 188.

²⁷ SJAN Dolj, The tribunal of the Dolj county, act 79/1853; G. Mil Demetrescu, *Actul de cumpărare a parcului Bibescu, din anul 1853*, in “Arhivele Olteniei”, year I, 1922, nr. 4, p. 382; *Cum s-a format parcul Bibescu*, in “Anuarul ziarului Patria”, Craiova, 1906, p. 170.

During the second half of the XIXth century, Bibescu garden, as it was known by contemporaries, had a sinous history. For a long time the favourite recreation place of the townspeople, the garden has been related to important historical events. It was here that prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza was accomodated during his visit to Craiova in 1859²⁸; and this is also the place where there were deposits of fodder, food, arms and munitions of the Romanian army during the independence war of 1877-1878²⁹.

However, it seems that during the last two decades of the XIXth century this garden, as well as other pools around Craiova, had become a real danger to public health, as it was frequently mentioned by the town's sanitary service; this fact represented one of the main reasons for starting its arrangement, a very complex work, not without mishaps sometimes.

One anecdotal episode was the fact that in order to retrieve the plan which had received the gold medal in Paris – a plan initially made up of 35 pieces, out of which only four had reached Paris – a large correspondence was required between Craiova Town Hall, The French Foreign Ministry, the customs office and the Ministry of Finance so as to obtain exemption from custom duties on its returning to Romania³⁰. Despite all the efforts of the N. Romanescu, it seems that the medal obtained at the Paris Universal Exhibition has never come to Craiova, such as the city mayor requested in March 1902 for “that we might mention this medal in the various descriptions of this major rehabilitation works of the city”³¹. A response from the French Foreign Ministry was not found within the archival documents, just the drawings of E. Redont and the diploma being hosted in the Archive of Craiova Town Hall and Oltenia Heritage Museum³².

The vast and complex activity of arranging the park was carried out during the years 1900-1903. The works started with cleaning the Bibescu pond of ooze and earth by the militaries of 1st Army Corps³³, the deepening of the lake, the catching of springs to supply water to the lake, continuing the building of barrage walls, the making of embankments, the provision of flowers, ornamental trees and shrubs, the building of the greenhouse, the racecourse, the water tower, the rustic bridges and the suspension bridge for the making of which they obtained the approval of Anghel Saligny, at that time director in the Department of Public Works (later, general inspector), who “had spread huge and everlasting works in the country”³⁴.

In the end, the result was a park of great beauty and special charm, unique in Romania, a park which – as Nicolae Romanescu mentioned in the invitations to the

²⁸ SJAN Dolj, Prefecture of Dolj county, technical service, file 97/1859, f. 68, 69, 73.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, file 9/1877.

³⁰ Leonida Nicolaescu (coord.), C. Avram, V. Pleniceanu, D. Ciobotea, S. Lukacs, I. Zarzără, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

³¹ SJAN Dolj, Craiova Town Hall, administrative service, file 141/1902, f. 1.

³² Gabriel Croitoru, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

³³ SJAN Dolj, Craiova Town Hall, administrative service, file 31/1899, f. 9-16, 35-37.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, file 40/1908, f. 1.

inauguration – can serve as a model in our country and is, in its way, even one of the most beautiful and well performed in the entire Europe, both as a work of art and as a work really useful to public health”³⁵.

The inauguration of the park on 12 October 1903, in the presence of the king Carol I and the entire royal family, who were in Craiova on the occasion of the autumn exercises of the Romanian army, representing a resounding event at in many foreign newspapers and national and even European level. All the counties and towns of the country were requested to contribute to the diversity of manifestations organized on this occasion, and at the same time government members, outstanding personalities of the political and cultural life of the country were invited. The members of the diplomatic corps accredited to Bucharest were called too, while this special event was presented magazines. On 20 September 1903, Nicolae Romanescu invited the ambassadors of numerous countries, among which the USA, Holland, Russia, Spain, England, Greece, Turkey, Austria and Hungary, Germany, Belgium, France and Italy to honour this celebration with their families’ presence.

The owner of “Frantz Duschek” photographic studio in Bucharest, specialised in “any works of photomechanics”, asked Nicolae Romanescu for permission to photograph aspects of celebrating the park inauguration, for various newspapers and illustrated magazines from abroad. He was to be accompanied by a reporter who “will write the text for the illustrated magazines, and for the newspapers will write without any political colour”³⁶.

The inauguration celebration begun by a gala performance at the theatre in Craiova, with the contribution of the famous actress Aristița Romanescu, developed into a magical show³⁷. In a cost estimation for the park illumination, drawn up by the Technical Service of Craiova Town Hall it is mentioned that for this occasion they provided garlands of incandescent bulbs placed along 80 metres from the main entrance, garlands of fairy lights at the secondary entrance, allong the alleys up to the royal pavilion, a fairy light every meter on a 751 m distance, the placing of 100 incandescent lamps on the roof of “Belvedere” and the forming of the text “Nihil sine deo” by means of lights put in the grass. In addition, they secured the illumination of the lakesides and of the paths on the island, the placing of decorative patterns with luminous floating flowers, the planting of 100 pitch torches around the island³⁸. The show was magnificent, just like the achievement of the park, which had not only a decorative and recreational role, but it was also good for the health of the inhabitants of Craiova, as stated, in July 1903, the Director general of the Department of Health, saying that the establishment of the park has “exterminated the swamps and has embellished in the highest degree the

³⁵ Leonida Nicolaescu (coord.), *op. cit.*, p. 65.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

³⁷ For further details, see Gabriel Croitoru, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

³⁸ Leonida Nicolaescu (coord.), *op. cit.*, p. 66.

city, has drained tens of hectares of moras, has raised around town an example of civilized work and has given to the city a recreational place *per excelentiam*³⁹.

Partially drained in 1914, following the plan of W.H. Lindley, “one of the most important hydrologists of the time”⁴⁰, and through the pecuniary support given by dr. C. Angelescu (born in Craiova, Minister of Public Education, ex-Minister of Public Works), the pools around the town represented for a long time a real danger for the inhabitants’ health.

The works for the town systematization were carried on during the inter-war period, and the main priorities were the securing of the town sanitation, the supplying with water for drinking and for housework, executing the sewerage and the pools drainage, works for which in 1927 the sum of 25 million lei was allocated, approximately 23% of a total budget of 106 million lei⁴¹.

In 1925, C.N. Popp – again at the head of the Town Hall – noticed bitterly: “I think there is no other town in the country more unwholesome or where the morality plays havoc more than in our town, where population normally diminishes and where population is increasing intensely. On the other hand, because of this pools, for years the entire Bucovăț neighbourhood has cellars full of water, where there is dampness on the house walls and where the population is affected by all the consequences of this miserable state of things”. Therefore, C.N. Popp organised an auction for the work of pools drainage, entrusting it to the engineer Năsturaș. He showed that the work was carried out and finished in its main part: a drainage channel with concrete bottom, starting from Bucovăț barrier to the Jiu, over an area of almost two kilometres⁴².

In spite of all the efforts and, partly, in spite of all the achievements obtained along the years, the pools drainage was not finished even in 1941, when I.B. Georgescu, the town mayor, pointed to the fact that in the south of Craiova there were swamps representing a permanent threat of a malaria outbreak. “The study of draining – he mentioned – was carried out in the past by professor engineer Pompiliu Nicolau and reached the Superior Technical Council, but the local administrations abandoned it. It should be resumed and completed and, as it is connected with the sewerage works of the town (in the meantime Craiova had become a municipium – our note) it is only natural that the Communal Plant should assume responsibility”⁴³.

After the war, the edilitary works were continued, the town authorities striving to seek solutions to the pools drainage, the sewerage and the water supply, in spite of the difficulties they were faced with and the multitude of issues that had to be settled.

³⁹ Nicolae Romanescu, *Ce au făcut pentru Craiova...*, p. 20.

⁴⁰ *Dare de seamă către consiliul comunal al Craiovei...*, Craiova, 1902, p. 15.

⁴¹ *Dare de seamă generală din lucrările executate sub primariatul d-lui I.B. Georgescu (1 aprilie 1926-12 iulie 1927)*, pp. 13-14.

⁴² *Administrația Primăriei Craiova și lucrările edilitare executate în Campania anului 1923*, SJAN Dolj, Library, inv. 7742.

⁴³ *Preocupări sanitare pentru un plan de înfăptuiri economice, edilitare, culturale și sanitare în municipiul Craiova*, SJAN Dolj, Library, inv. 7117.

