

Urban revitalisation within the historical quarter: A comprehensive analysis of a medium sized city in Romania

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Abstract

The public space environment is one of the critical influential factors for strengthening local identity and communities' sense of belonging, while enhancing city life quality. This study focuses on the use of heritage buildings as a catalyst for reactivating public spaces and aims to explore to what extent the revitalization project for the historical centre of Craiova, a medium-sized post-socialist city, has succeeded. The three dimensions of revitalisation – physical, economic and social – were analysed using a mixed approach, including participant observation, field investigation, and a residents' survey. Physical changes within the study area, improved accessibility, functional changes and economic restructuring were analysed, as well residents' perceptions and use of the area (perceived changes, use of the place, types of places used by the residents, frequency, times spent). The results point to the fact that not all the three dimensions of the revitalization project were equally successful, proving once again that not all the actions are effective in delivering the best outcomes. The main beneficiaries are discussed and the outcome of the revitalisation project is analysed against similar projects in other countries.

Keywords: heritage conservation, urban revitalization, functionality changes, residents' survey, Craiova, Romania

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1. Introduction

City centres are public urban spaces, open to all citizens, which cause pride for the residents and allow public interaction (Giddings et al., 2011). Within the urban context, public spaces worldwide have always faced "transformations, revitalisation, overlapping, or reconfiguration [...] since the urban change is a necessary process, resulting in newly created hybrid landscapes" (Ilovan et al., 2018, p. 419).

Historical quarters, often located in central areas, give a city's charm and appeal and hence have become protected and preserved, but are nonetheless in dire need of revitalisation as functioning parts of their cities, either through the regeneration of traditional activities or the restructuring of the quarter's economic base (Heath et al., 2013).

Towards the end of the 20th century, due to the peculiarities of the urban development and housing policies of the European socialist governments that led to almost five decades of 'more than benign neglect' (Scott & Kühn, 2012) (housing stock was generally under state ownership, state authorities had total control over all public policies, including housing), cities from the European communist countries were quite different from those in Western Europe. As most of the older buildings that were confiscated and nationalised by the government were assigned to various social classes paying low rents, they gradually decayed following the neglect of both

state authorities and tenants. These old decaying buildings were found throughout the inner cities in former socialist countries (Tosics, 2005). In the early 1990s, the restitution of buildings taken abusively by the governments was seen as an element of de-communisation (Stan, 2006).

Although the socialist regime fell, in Romania and some of the neighbouring countries, the great urban operations for historical city centres destruction that took place during the former period continued for another two decades in most of the Romanian cities, even if the conditions were completely different; this left a bizarre footprint on the urban realities of cities, which is difficult to control (Gheorghiu, 2017b). This period, termed the Wild West of urban management (Stanilov, 2007), was marked by poor or no enforcement of regulations and lack of social responsibility.

In most Romanian cities, historical areas were severely devalued due to lack of investments and under use of land (Bürkner & Totelecan, 2018) that spread well into the 2000s, as a result of a "primitive accumulation process" (Chelcea, 2006) due to a "new social class, including renters, real estate entrepreneurs, corrupt clerks" that had not so much financial capital, but rather social capital – a vast network of liaisons with state institutions that managed the dwelling fond (Nitulescu, 2006). These dramatic outcomes spread throughout the historical parts of the cities

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caused spatial shifts as well as divergent interventions regarding policies and programs aiming for the regeneration of the urban space (Pavel & Jucu, 2020; Vesalon & Crețan, 2019).

The geopolitical changes in the Central and Eastern European countries in the early 1990s, triggering both economic and social transformations, rendered many public spaces especially in the central areas of the cities quite vulnerable, either directly through neglect and abandonment or indirectly through the "abusive taking of the public space", called "Balkanizing" (Radoslav et al., 2013), that 'starts with temporal, legal or illegal, constructions, which afterwards tend to become permanent' many cases, for more than two decades, the historical areas of the Romanian cities were left to drift towards decay.

For most Romanian cities, the historical heritage in the urban core is made up by dwellings, small commercial areas and workshops (Light et al., 2020; Nistor, 2006). These urban areas that "contain and mirror histories and long standing traditions, old organisations and statutes, various mentalities as well as tangible values that could still be capitalised today" are in dire need of protection, a fact which causes a major problem for local authorities, governments and Romanian professionals (Gheorghiu, 2017a, p. 7).

The current paper aims to examine the strategy chosen by the local authorities of Craiova (Romania), a medium sized city according to the European classification, to revitalise part of its historic quarters which was partially derelict for several decades. For this purpose, the three main directions of revitalisation identified following a thorough literature review were analysed, focusing on the major changes that took place from the physical, economic and social point of view. The main research questions this paper tries to answer are:

- Q1: What type of changes took place following the revitalisation of the historic quarter in Craiova? Were there significant economic and social changes, or only physical changes?
- Q2: Who are the main beneficiaries of the revitalisation process? Did anyone lose out in this process?
- Q3: To what extent the revitalisation strategy chosen by the local authorities is similar to the ones adopted by their counterparts in other European countries?

The paper begins with a brief description of the context of the historical centres in the former socialist cities, followed by a review of the concept of urban revitalisation and its dimensions, before turning to the case study. The third part of the paper presents the main characteristics of the study area, as well as the research design and methods used for data collection and analysis. In the fourth part, the main results of the revitalisation project are presented, focusing on three main aspects: a physical upgrading of urban spaces through architectural restoration and adaptive re-use of buildings; an economic capitalisation of urban spaces; and the social use of public spaces. The last part of the paper reviews the significance of results and raises issues related to the beneficiaries of the project and similarities with other revitalisation projects in Europe.

2. Theoretical background

When reading about urban redevelopment policies and strategies regarding urban decline, one of the main issues that is quickly evident stems from the lack of agreement on the right concepts and definitions regarding urban revitalisation (Balsas, 2007; Grazuleviciute-Vileniske & Urbonas, 2014; Roberts & Skyes, 2000). Although changes have always affected city centres which are distinctive, multifunctional places, probably none compare to the ones that took place during the last decades (Balsas, 2007), hence the concepts, definitions and theories related

to urban regeneration have evolved (Roberts & Skyes, 2000), moving 'reconstruction in the 1950s to revitalisation in the 1960s, renewal in the 1970s, redevelopment in the 1980s and regeneration in the 1990s' (Balsas, 2007, p. 233). Moreover, the concept has had different meanings, depending on time, place and agenda (Grodach & Ehrenfeucht, 2016), inner-city revitalisation being seen as a "slippery concept", sometimes associated with gentrification, at other times with the alleviation of poverty (Zielenbach, 2000).

City centre revitalisation, defined as "the general process of redevelopment in central city neighbourhoods" (Schwab, 1981, p. 16), refers to "the physical redevelopment of blighted areas, the creation of additional jobs, the improvement of local infrastructure, and/or the elimination of undesirable individuals and businesses" (Zielenbach, 2000, p. 24). Similarly, Grodach and Ehrenfeucht (2016, p. 4) use revitalisation to refer to "a rebirth or revival in the conditions and character of a place that has endured a period of decline", identifying six main dimensions, namely: human capital, social-cultural equity, built environment, place attractiveness, economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability.

Drawing upon the lessons and observations of numerous case studies regarding the revitalisation of historic urban quarters from North America and Europe, Heath et al. (2013) conclude that a successful revitalisation must manifest itself in three main directions, i.e., physical, economic and social. These three dimensions are considered complementary to each other for a successful revitalisation of the historic urban centres (Vehbi & Hoşkara, 2009).

From a physical point of view, city centre revitalisation mainly refers to, but is not limited only to the restoration of old architecture, the upgrading of housing and retail. It also entails pedestrianisation, new street furniture, public art, as well as improved accessibility and safety, targetted at increasing the aesthetics of the overall area and strengthening local identity (Balsas, 2007; Radoslav et al., 2013; Smagacz-Poziemska, 2008). Parts of the investments regarding the upgrading of buildings are closely related to their obsolescence, be it physical/ structural or functional which resulted in decreasing the competitiveness of a given area (Doratli, 2005). Hence, conversion or adaptive reuse of heritage buildings must take place. International instances of best practices point to the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings (Beretić & Talu, 2020; Boeri et al., 2016; Lei & Zhou, 2022; Mısırlısoy & Günçe, 2016; Nedućin et al., 2019) throughout the world, this process leading sometimes to gentrification (Larsen, 2005; Nedućin et al., 2019). If revitalisation is limited only to the physical component, however, it is only a short-term strategy that cannot ensure sustainability (Doratli, 2005; Heath et al., 2013; Vehbi & Hoşkara, 2009).

The second component of revitalisation is related to the economic aspects and for the long term, it is of utmost importance, providing the productive utilisation of space that pays for the maintenance of the public realm (Heath et al., 2013). Programs have focused on creating new consumption spaces (Raco, 2003) to attract both investors and other beneficiaries, to bring people and business back to the neighbourhood and thus increase property values and boost economic activities. Functional diversification or, on the contrary, functional restructuring, as well as functional regeneration (still the same occupations, which are nevertheless operating more efficiently or profitably) (Heath et al., 2013; Tiesdell et al., 2016) are the main strategic approaches to economic revitalisation. Among the economic indicators for a sustainable economic regeneration, researchers list development costs (maintenance cost, land value, infrastructure), as well as tourism facilities in the area and financial indicators (property and rent prices compared to the income level, ratio of locally owned businesses) (Vehbi & Hoşkara, 2009).

The revitalisation process also entails a general improvement of public spaces and functional spaces, as well as the diversification of spatial functions so as to meet the needs of individuals and social groups related to living, leisure and work (Smagacz-Poziemska, 2008). This is no easy feature considering the complex interaction among institutions, actors and resources of both the public and private sectors (Sutton, 2008), not to mention the private space and different property owners it encompasses, sometimes with conflicting interests (Balsas, 2007). Most of the times, owners want to maximise the potential of their properties and are not necessarily keen on their historical structures, which often involves higher costs to maintain or preserve (Ilovan et al., 2018). It is precisely these multiple interests from various actors that make the process of revitalisation so complex (Rich & Tsitsos, 2016) and the economic revitalisation the most challenging.

One of the strains of the revitalisation policy has emphasised the importance of ‘human renewal’ (Sutton, 2008) or social revitalisation, which is closely connected to the attractive ambience. As Heath et al. (2013) argue, the public realm must be animated by people, and such animation can be planned, thus spaces becoming places through their use by people. Consequently, revitalisation has resurfaced as an important topic and policy as all stakeholders gradually understood that a proper planning of commercial activities and good city centre management help maintain liveable cities (Balsas, 2000).

Historical quarters as “public spaces are shaped not only by claims” (who uses the space, for what categories of residents it is an iconic place), “but also by the absence of claims and withdrawal from the public sphere [...] which is reflected in neglect and decline, poor maintenance or lack of care and attention” (Madanipour, 2010, p. 238). These incivilities, be they social or physical, trigger problems related to the fear of crime, no matter the level of actual crime (Day et al., 2007). Hence, since the 1980s, urban regeneration projects have focused on measures to ensure that places are not only safe, but perceived as safe (Day et al., 2007; Raco, 2003; Rhodes, 2016; Wiig, 2018), minimising the opportunities for criminal behaviour. It is clear that urban perceptions and their representations occupy an important role when creating enjoyable urban spaces that should be taken into consideration in the urban revitalisation and regeneration processes (Niță, 2021).

The adaptive re-use of buildings and infrastructure by keeping the historical area and preserving its heritage while fostering the sense of community cultural identity (Throsby, 2016) has been acknowledged to support the economic and social revival of historical areas of cities worldwide (Arbaci & Tapada-Berteli, 2012; Rousseau, 2009; Throsby, 2016). Since city centre revitalisation was tagged as a “trendy objective in political discourses” at the beginning of the 21st century (Balsas, 2007), there are numerous well-detailed revitalisation proposals for world-famous projects, but mainly for the largest cities and not so much regarding medium-sized cities as several researchers have already pointed out (Dokmeci et al., 2007; Doratli, 2005; Horbliuk & Dehtiarova, 2021; Polanska, 2008). Moreover, the majority of the published papers dwell with cultural projects for the urban regeneration of Western cities (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007) and more recently, on some of the largest cities from the former socialist countries (Sagan & Grabkowska, 2012), but to a much lesser extent on the medium cities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). This paper therefore aims to fill this research gap by providing an analysis of the recent city centre revitalisation intervention in a medium size city in Romania, offering an Eastern European perspective to the debates about urban revitalisation strategies. Moreover, while most of the existing literature on revitalisation stems from case studies related to well-established tourism destinations, the current study brings to focus a medium city trying to assert itself as a destination for cultural tourism on an already extremely competitive and diverse tourism market.

3. Material and methods

3.1 Study area – the historical quarter in Craiova

Craiova is one of the many Romanian cities that only partially conserve the historic morpho-structures (Gheorghiu, 2017a), despite its rich history and former architectural heritage. With some 300,000 inhabitants, it is one of the largest Romanian cities. It lies in the south-western part of Romania (see Fig. 1), in a large agricultural domain, being the de facto administrative centre of Oltenia region for some 500 years. Consequently, it was the home of many rich boyars and great landowners that left numerous architectural masterpieces, many of them included on the list of

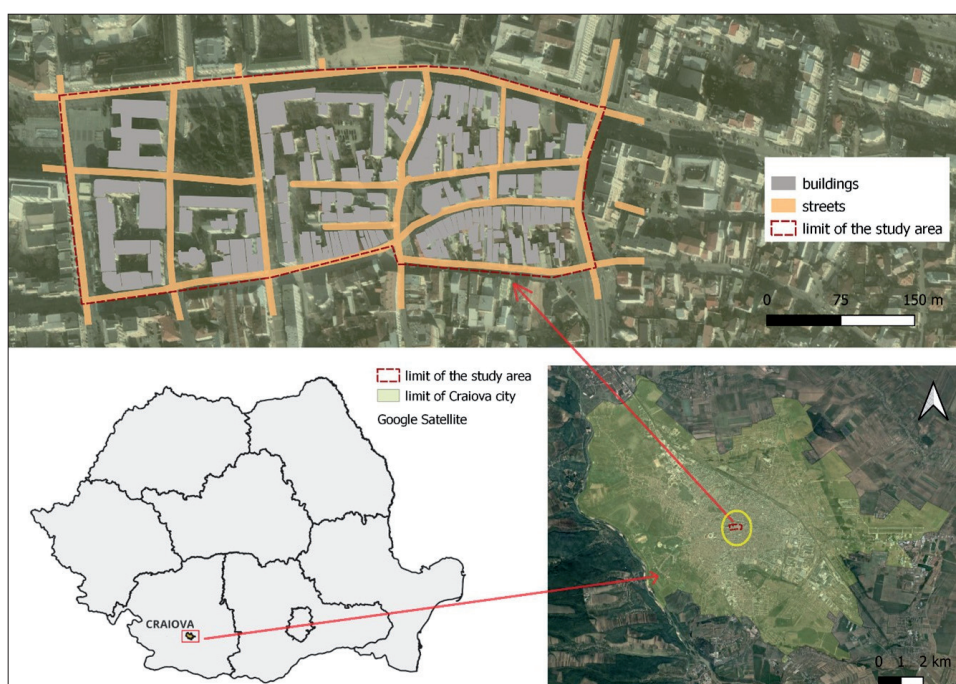


Fig. 1: Location of the study area
Source: authors' elaboration

built heritage. During the socialist period, two major government strategies impacted this area: first, nationalisation of buildings and later on large scale demolitions and reconstruction in many parts of the city. This caused significant transformation of the urban landscape in the city centre: part of the old buildings, which hardly underwent any renovation or conservation since they were built, were demolished to make room for new residential collective buildings beginning with the 70s until the late 80s, while others were scheduled for demolishing just before the fall of communism, thus causing some lasting problems and subsequent degradation. Hence, the former historical quarter of the city is a mixture of areas that still preserve pre-war buildings and areas with new collective buildings. Beginning with 1990, there followed two more decades of neglect and decay of the central area, which further affected commercial development as well as the appeal of the area to its residents, not to mention the quality of the buildings. All the buildings built prior to 1960 (accounting for as much as 80% of them), were in very bad technical condition and some of them were derelict for some time. Generally, ground floors housed shops, workshops or small businesses catering to the needs of students, while apartments were on the upper floors, just like before the Second World War. The inner courtyards and small alleys which were originally private gardens were usually dark, filthy and full of all sorts of junk materials.

In the early 2000s, the area was an intricate mix of small shops (many of them thrift stores), dozens of stalls (many of them illegal), dwellings, public services on the ground floor of some three hundred decaying buildings. It was also a very congested area due to the car traffic and abusive parking, leaving almost no sidewalk for pedestrians. Some of the streets were only culs-de-sac due to abusive constructions of some of the residents (car garages, warehouses, sheds etc.). The area faced a "serious image problem, being perceived as an ugly, dirty and decaying area, with no major attraction points, with a rather high crime rate" (GEA, 2009, p. 23).

In 2010 the city council approved a project proposal addressing the decline of part of the historical area, which was approved for financing in June 2012 and started in October 2013. It totalled 16.7 mil. EUR, with a major contribution (79%) from the European Union within the REGIO 2007–2013 program. The area included in the project, centrally located, covered only 5% of the city area (Fig. 1), comprising buildings dating from the end of the 19th century/early 20th century, mainly dwellings and shops, but also hotels, administrative and financial institutions. The Commission of Urbanism within the City Hall identified the part of the old heartland that would be included in the project, considering the buildings still preserving clearly defined architectural characteristics that could render the image of the old urban settlement, while updating their functionality and use. The main target was to draw selectively on the past to strengthen the identity of the city, while also favouring the economic and social development of the area (Popescu et al., 2020). The local administration also rezoned this particular plot of land so as not to allow further construction of dwellings within the area: only commercial, cultural or other tertiary activities are allowed.

3.2 Research design

Participant observation was the initial technique used by the authors in the early stages (2012–2015), first and foremost as lifelong residents of the city and subsequently as researchers, which gave us the opportunity to document changes to the study area. Later on, a thorough review of the official planning documents followed by fieldwork (2018–2022) allowed us to further identify and map urban changes.

Although there are numerous studies depicting revitalisation projects for various cities, mostly from the developed North, but also from developing countries, we did not find any standardised

methodology for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of any particular strategy or its success. The literature review, however, yielded three main components of revitalisation that must be taken into consideration when discussing revitalisation, namely physical, economic and social revitalisation. Consequently, we based our analysis on these three major components, using a variety of research methods (Fig. 2).

3.3 Data collection and analysis

A crucial approach to depict the dominant features within a study area involves conducting an examination of the physical characteristics of the respective space. For the physical revitalisation, we carried site investigations and applied observational techniques to gather information on the physical conditions of the study area. GIS techniques were used for the elaboration of connectivity maps and the spatial representation of physical changes within the study area.

Spatial behavioural analysis seldom employs mixed methods, yet their incorporation is crucial for converging insights derived from the urban fabric and human experiences. This study uses two methods (the residents' survey and space syntax) to investigate the effects of urban revitalisation on enhancing social and economic activities. Accessibility is a quality of travel and occurs both at the community and individual level to provide access to various land uses. Accessibility focuses on travel time, travel cost, travel options, comfort, and risk while addressing the needs within the community. The authors did not use common methods to assess spatial accessibility like isochrones or Euclidian distance, instead the study uses the space syntax method to show the accessibility through space connectivity and integration. This spatial analysis method that focuses on understanding the relationships between spatial configurations, such as streets and buildings, and human behaviour is used to investigate society-space relation based on graphic representation (Rashid, 2019; Şahin Körmeçli, 2023; van Nes & Yamu, 2021; Yamu et al., 2021; Yunitsyna & Shtepani, 2023). There is also a strong connection between street connectivity (both local and global) and accessibility within an urban environment. Street connectivity influences how easily people can reach different destinations, affecting overall accessibility in a city or neighbourhood.

Connectivity and axial maps were created using DepthMapX (depthmapX development team, 2020) that is a software tool designed for spatial network analysis, particularly in the context of space syntax. In order to obtain the graphical representations

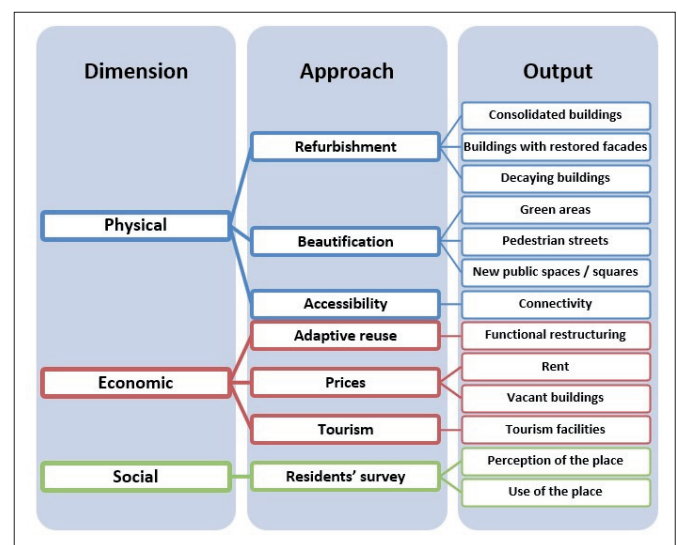


Fig. 2: Methods used for the current research
Source: authors' conceptualisation

several working steps were needed. The street network was extracted from OSM and then prepared in a suitable format, exporting information on street segments and nodes (intersections), assuring the data includes the necessary attributes such as segment length and orientation. After parameter configuration, we ran the depth and integration calculation to generate values for each segment. Connectivity measures how many streets connect to one street, showing how a space is connected with other spaces in its surroundings, while integration measures how integrated (or central) a street is to the network. The greater integration of the space, the more people will appear in it. For this reason, integration is sometimes called accessibility by SSA (SSA = space syntax analysis) researchers (Szczepańska, 2011). In contrast to global integration (Rn), Local integration value (R3) examines depths as far as three steps from the main line, which means it indicates a more localised structure. In the context of this research, the analysis of the historical city of Craiova was done within a 3 km radius, which represents the local area.

The results were correlated with the users' perceptions on accessibility to the historical centre of Craiova. The data related to people's perceptions of accessibility were gathered by processing the results of the survey. The connectivity of urban street networks increases accessibility in two ways: it provides direct and short routes from origins to destinations and, in case of longer length of streets it creates a greater number of frontages as destinations available within walking distance. Destinations are the main part of land use, and their number is strongly related to street length (Özbil et al., 2015). In order to assess economic revitalisation, continuous fieldwork beginning in 2018 allowed us to make a thorough inventory of vacancies, types of business in the area, as well as the evolution of rental prices.

Regarding the third component – social revitalisation (historical centre as an iconic area of the city), a survey of residents' perceptions and use of the space was taken, as well as participant observation. For this particular purpose, we used an open-source online survey application to develop a questionnaire. We prepared a draft, which was pretested (for length, item comprehensibility and relevance) with 10 respondents with different backgrounds. The final version of the survey comprised four main sections; the first one addressed aspects regarding the use of place (leisure preferences, accessibility, aesthetics, type of space used, activities, frequency, intensity, main issues related to the use of the space). The second part of the survey focused on the perceived changes in terms of aesthetics, accessibility, friendliness/ danger, facilities. The last section covered socio-demographic factors, such as age, gender, length of residence in the city, neighbourhood, income and education level. The third section included questions to assess the residents' attachment to the area and this particular section was used in a different study (Popescu et al., 2022). All but one questions were multiple choice questions, using a 5-point Likert scale. The survey was posted online, on the website of the Geography Department from the University of Craiova (it was described as research carried on by some of its members); it was advertised in the main newspaper of the city and also distributed and shared online using social media. Data were collected during the first two weeks of June 2021. There were 585 valid responses (Tab. 1).

The age structure suggests a relatively balanced representation across different age groups, as well as the place of residence, which is a positive factor for the study's external validity. Still, the sample includes a slightly higher share of female respondents (64%) compared to the resident population (55%).

To a population of approximately 300,000 people, the estimated population proportion that was used pp was 0.6. To calculate a representative sample size (minimum number of valid questionnaires) it was considered a common confidence level of 95%, which corresponds to a Z-score of approximately 1.96.

Age	(%)	Length of living in the city	(%)
≤ 23 years	12	≤ 5 years	7
24–33 years	17	5–10 years	6
34–43 years	33	11–20 years	8
44–55 years	28	≥ 20 years	78
> 55 years	10		
Gender	(%)	Place of residence	(%)
Women	64	City centre	16
Men	36	One of the neighbourhoods	74
		Metropolitan area	10

Tab. 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents
Source: authors' survey

It was considered a margin of error of 5%, which corresponds to 0.05. According to this, we estimated that a sample size of approximately 369 respondents should be sufficient for the questionnaire to achieve a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. For this study we received 588 responses, but only 585 were validated. A statistical data analysis was included to see if there is a positive correlation between the physical changes, perceived accessibility and social revitalisation. These variables were also considered having some influence in the economic revitalisation of the studied area.

The first step in our statistical data analysis was to perform a descriptive statistics and a correlation analysis that provided the means, standard deviations, and correlations between variables. The second step was to perform a regression analysis to test if the coefficients are statistically significant to a p-value < 0.05. As other studies have shown that the perception of people concerning the transformations of urban areas is affected by the length of residence (Kelly & Hosking, 2008; Lewicka, 2005; Popescu et al., 2022; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010), we controlled this variable in all analyses.

4. Results

4.1 Physical changes

The physical dimension of the revitalisation includes streetscaping (23,000 sqm), retail modernisations, public space improvements, pedestrianisation, as well as improved accessibility. Side-buildings and various sheds were demolished, and the inner spaces were partially reconstructed, giving way to new attractive recreation areas and green spaces. A new and relatively large public area (Buzesti square) was created, where small scale sport, culinary and artistic events take place throughout the year.

Public spaces, streets and squares were subjected to modernisation and pedestrianisation, generating safe spaces for leisure, sport and cultural activities. Instead of congested narrow intricate streets, the area now offers promenades and meeting places for the locals and tourists alike, as well as a venue for various cultural events. While initially only part of the Lipscani street was for pedestrian use (some 250 m), currently all nine streets within the area are vehicle free, totalling 1,500 m. Lighting fixtures, urban furniture and large paintings on the side of the buildings were used to recreate the atmosphere of the Belle Epoque Era, seen as the Golden age of the city (Fig. 3).

Out of the 141 buildings in the study area, 20 did not suffer any changes (Fig. 4), not even face-lifts, being in various stages of decay. Less than a quarter of the buildings were actually consolidated, while for most buildings, the owners paid for only 'facelifts' of the facades because they were risking paying a much higher property tax if they failed to do so. Consequently, there are still 4 buildings where only the ground floor is in use, and 6 buildings the facades of which are already disintegrating in less than 10 years.



Fig. 3: Streets in Craiova's historical city centre before and after the revitalisation project
Source: authors (2012, 2022)



Fig. 4: Buildings inventory within the study area (2021)
Source: authors' elaboration

Apart from the physical renovation and the increase of pedestrian area, accessibility assessment was an important aspect of the physical changes that was analysed. Was the space more or less accessible from the point of view of its users? For the question related to accessibility the study uses space syntax analysis. Public space activation is crucial for enhancing the functions of an historical centre (Ge et al., 2023). Analysing connectivity helps identify potential activity hubs in these areas, contributing to community vitality and accessibility for certain social and cultural events like the Christmas fair, Shakespeare and Puppets Occupy Street festivals, summer music festivals (IntenCity), etc. is very important and planning the events and festivals in areas with high connectivity ensures easy access for attendees. The map shows an average value in terms of connectivity for the historical centre that is mainly a pedestrian area. In relation to connectivity, there is also the step depth in street network that determines the convenience for a pedestrian to travel. So, according to results in Figure 4, the street network system offers moderate alternatives by three to four path choices for a pedestrian in their travel from one place to another. Higher integration values (represented by warmer colors) indicate that the node is more integrated into the spatial network, which was related to the network's connectivity (Fig. 5).

Well-connected streets contribute to vibrant urban spaces, encouraging people to explore and spend time in different areas. This aspect of urban design positively influences the overall appeal and accessibility of a city. Connected street networks often support

mixed-use development, where residential, commercial, and recreational spaces coexist. This mixed-use approach contributes to increased accessibility by reducing the need for long trips to access different services.

The relationship between the global availability of space (global integration), and the local availability of space (local integration) lies in the clarity and readability of the space (intelligibility). The better the correlation between these measures, the better user moving along a given axis is oriented in space and knows where they are in the context of the entire city (Szczepańska, 2011). Understanding depth and integration becomes particularly significant for pedestrian movement. Integrated streets, characterised by their central and accessible nature, are likely to attract more foot traffic, contributing to improved pedestrian accessibility (van Nes, 2021). Integration (Fig. 6) is therefore about syntactic, not metric accessibility, and the word "depth" rather than "distance" is used to describe how far away a space lies.

Connectivity and integration are used to analyse streets in order to assess their depth and integration. Streets with low depth and high integration are considered more central and integral to the overall connectivity of the urban fabric, while streets with high depth and low integration are more peripheral (Mohamad & Said, 2014). By understanding depth and integration helps in predicting and explaining patterns of pedestrian movement. Integrated streets are likely to attract more foot traffic due to their central and accessible nature.

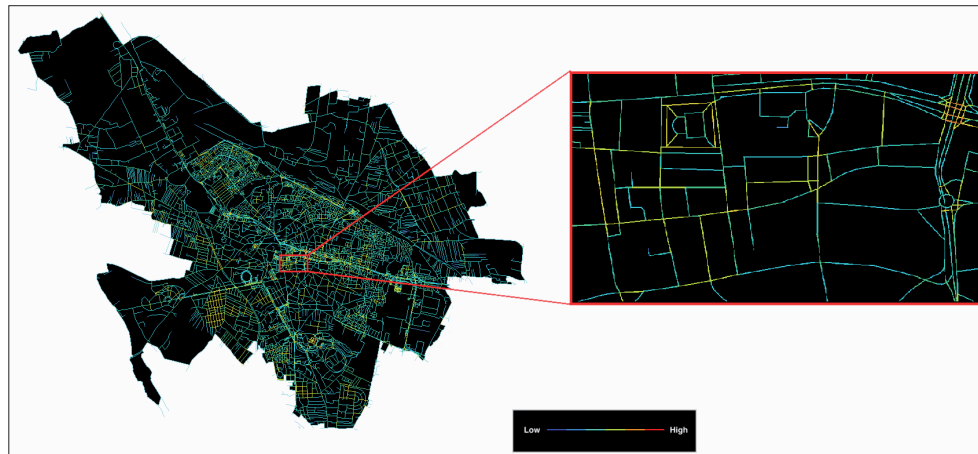


Fig. 5: Connectivity of Craiova and historical centre
Source: authors' elaboration

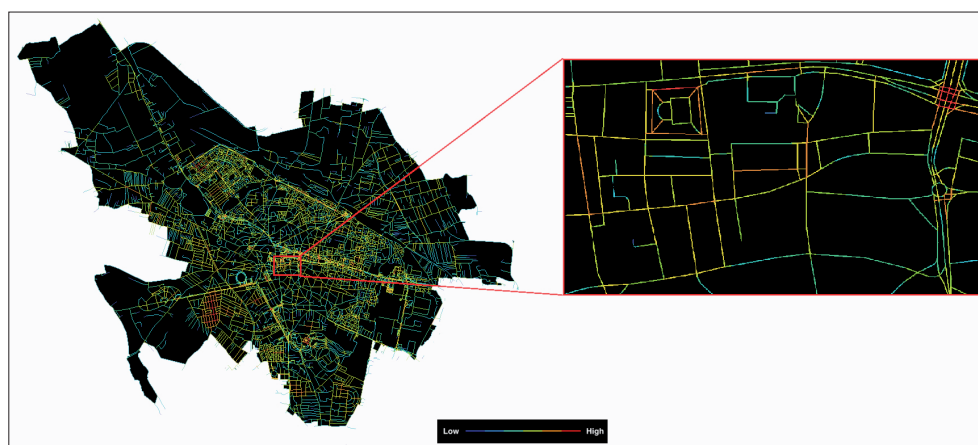


Fig. 6: Axial map of Craiova and the city centre: [Craiova] global integration (radius n); [city centre – medallion] local integration (radius 3)
Source: authors' elaboration

A highly connected street network, both locally and globally, generally leads to shorter travel distances. Reduced travel distances enhance overall accessibility, making it more convenient for individuals to access various destinations. Thus, by analysing depth and integration through space syntax, urban planners and designers can gain insights into the structure of spatial networks, helping them make informed decisions to enhance connectivity, accessibility, and the overall functionality of urban environments. This can be of great help to individuals with limited mobility which can also benefit from improved street connectivity, as it provides more options for reaching destinations. This inclusivity in transportation options enhances accessibility for people of all abilities.

In terms of peoples' perceptions, accessibility and connectivity are often subject to the same meaning. Thus, from the total of 585 people who took the survey, 49% declared that they see an improvement in the accessibility of the historical centre, while 36% said that they see no change after the renovation. Also 39% of the people described the city centre as accessible, while 68% pointed that the extension of the pedestrian area is one of the main positive outcomes. More than half of the respondents (55%) said that the historical centre is fit for walks which are among the main activities undertaken in this area, alongside with socialisation and recreation.

Accessibility can also be seen from the point of view of various transportation modes from personal car to common transport like bus and tram, as the closest bus station is less than 100 m, while other bus and tram stations range in the distance of 300–500 metres (Vilcea et al., 2018; Vilcea & Şoşea, 2020).

The feed-back from the residents is connected to physical changes performed in the historical area, effect on social activity and animation, perceived accessibility and economic benefits perceived by the locals due to physical transformations. These variables were considered to influence the most the economic regeneration and social revitalisation of the historical centre. As people who lived most of their lives in the same city may have a more general perspective over the physical, social and economic changes over time, the length of residence was included in the correlation. The statistical analysis indicated a strong correlation, especially between physical changes and social animation (0.763) and social activity (0.688). Accessibility is also correlated with physical improvement of the public space and increased social activities (Tab. 2). The connectivity of public spaces that makes walking favourable is an important demand for a functional pedestrian system that organises the pedestrian movement to follow the shortest distance between the different destinations within an area (Gehl, 2011). Length of residence had no correlation with any of the variables.

4.2 Economic revitalisation

The main purpose of the physical improvement of the city centre was to bring back business to the area following a mix-use concept, adapting historical buildings for new functions (a combination of commercial, catering and other services) (Figs. 7a and 7b).

The real estate market displays the effects of upgrading the buildings and the area in general. Before the revitalisation project, the residential and commercial activities were the most important functions for the study area, whereas at present, leisure, catering,

socialising and commercial activities account for the main functions of the area, while the residential stock in the area has been seriously depleted.

Along Mosoiu, Roman Rolland Streets and Buzesti square, several small restaurants, pubs, clubs and cafés cater to the needs of locals and tourists for cosy places. There were three large restaurants, which were usually used only for large private events

during the weekends, and some bars and cafes, while at present, there are over 25 HORECA units, quite popular among the foreign tourists, and many restaurants, pubs and cafés.

It is worth mentioning the fact that most of the buildings changed their functionality during or immediately after the revitalisation project and there followed 6 or 7 years when no intervention for any building took place. During the last years,

Variables	Length of residence	Physical changes	Accessibility	Discomfort (noise)	Discomfort (dirtier area)	Social animation	Social activities	Economic benefits
Length of residence	1.000							
Physical changes	0.113	1.000						
Accessibility	0.000	0.544*	1.000					
Discomfort (noise)	0.115	0.363	0.241	1.000				
Discomfort (dirtier area)	0.055	-0.109	-0.135	0.400	1.000			
Social animation	0.117	0.763*	0.530*	0.447**	-0.008	1.000		
Social activities	0.042	0.688*	0.553*	0.270	-0.076	0.629*	1.000	
Economic benefits	0.053	0.492**	0.436*	0.191	-0.154	0.487**	0.462**	1.000

Tab. 2: Correlations between variables that may influence economic regeneration (Note: Significant correlations are in bold (*p < 0.001; **p < 0.01) Source: authors' calculations

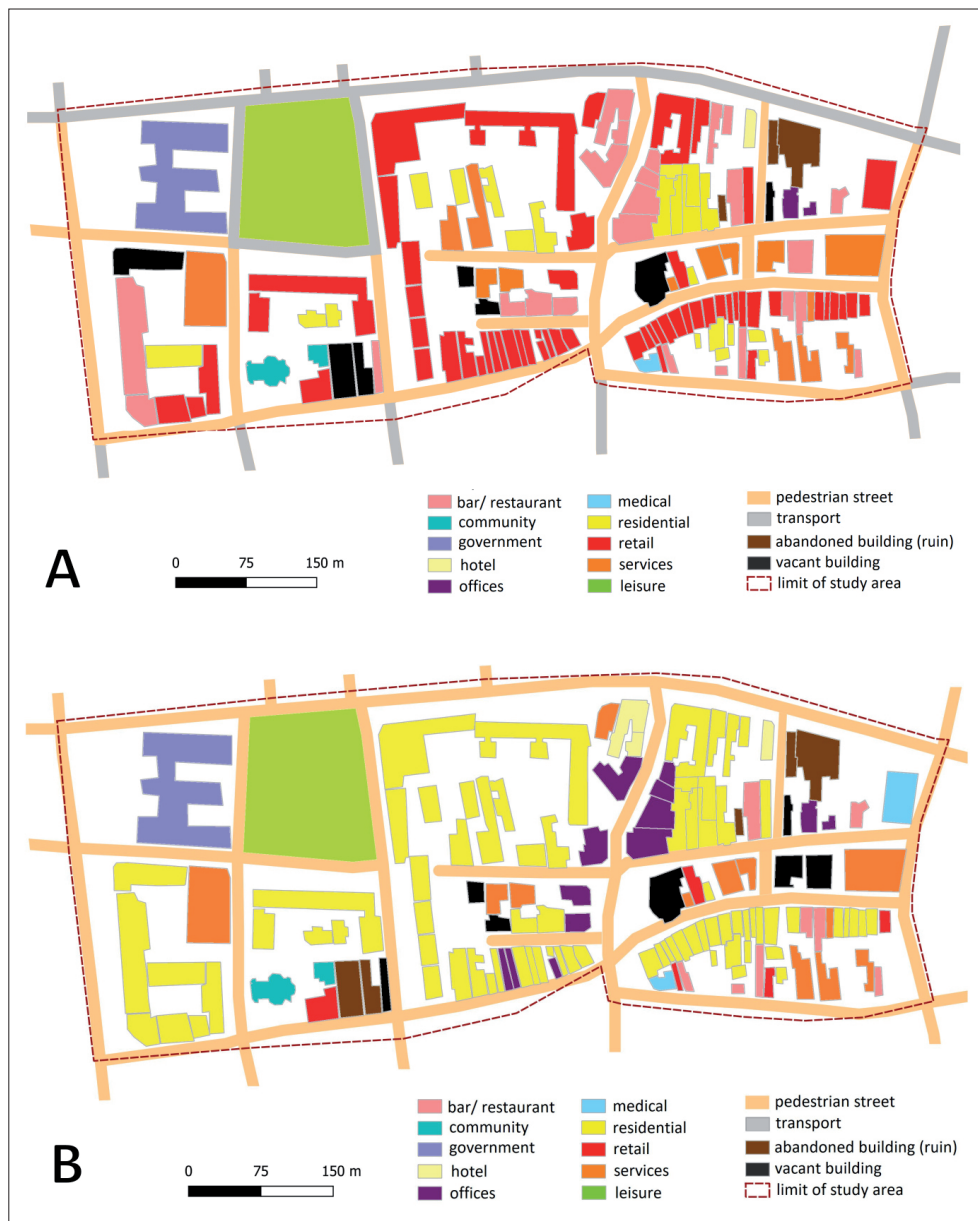


Fig. 7: Current land use on the ground floor (A) and on the upper floor (B) in 2021 Source: authors' elaboration

however, following the new zoning and the strategies for tourism development pushed by the local administration, investments were once again made in some of the buildings, which were converted into hotels (7 small hotels appeared during the last 5 years).

The rental and sales prices have increased steadily and considerably, the rent for smaller areas having more than doubled by the beginning of the pandemic. If before the revitalisation works (November 2010), the price varied between 5 and 10 €, beginning with 2015 until 2020, it reached 20 up to 25 €/sqm. The last two years witnessed a somewhat stagnant situation (lower price, around 10 €/sqm for larger places, double price for the smaller ones – up to 30 €/sqm). As evidenced in other studies, following the revitalisation works, both the price of the buildings and the rent increased (Vigdor, 2010).

The survey included some questions about peoples' perceptions regarding the economic revival of the study area, considering the fact that the historical centre is well known for its commercial streets. People were asked if they believe that the historical centre brings some economic value to the city and 82% of the respondents strongly considered that the economic value was increased once the area was renovated.

The correlation between variables that may influence economic regeneration indicates a positive moderate correlation between the improved physical aspect of the urban environment (0.492), increased accessibility (0.436) and social activities and animation (0.462 and 0.487) for a p-value < 0.05, demonstrating that the variables are statistically correlated. The analysis showed almost no correlation with the length of residence in this case (0.053), while the p-value was high over the value of 0.05 (Tab. 2).

Physical improvements convinced caterers to move into the area – mainly on Mosoiu Street, where pedestrianisation proved to be successful. This is not the case with all the streets, however, including the main commercial street – Lipsani, where the number of vacancies has remained quite high during the entire period, peaking at almost half during 2021. In fact, it is safe to say that the main commercial streets have had the highest number of vacancies after the revitalisation project (Fig. 8).

4.3 Social revitalisation

The research aimed to observe if the recent changes in street life patterns led to the social revitalisation of the urban city centre. According to the renovation plans the old city centre had been transformed into a pedestrian street system (Fig. 2) with

a moderate connectivity (Fig. 5) which increased the animation of the public spaces, well above the extended commercial activities, developing a comprehensive social and recreational city life (Ge et al., 2023; Gehl, 2013).

Previous studies on the same area (Popescu et al., 2020, 2022) showed that the city centre has become a new meeting place in a societal perspective. It is a great quality that people, regardless of age, income or status, can meet and socialise in the city space as they go about their daily errands.

According to the survey, pubs and restaurants in this area, as well as the newly-created Buzesti square, are a popular choice for meeting with family and friends at the end of the week (30% had as top choice a restaurant or bar in the historical centre and another 13% a cultural institution – be it theatre, philharmonic orchestra, cinema around the historic quarters). The top choices are the same, no matter the age group. A more detailed analysis of those preferring the historical centre, however, shows that those aged 34 to 54, with higher-than-average income are the most numerous. Within the historical centre, bars, restaurants and the pedestrian area are spaces that are the most frequently used by residents, no matter the age and gender, except for older people (who prefer the pedestrian and green areas). As for the visit frequency, there are two categories of residents: those that come frequently, at least once a week – mainly younger persons, and those that come seldom – mainly those aged 44 and over. The share of older people that visit the area daily, however, is much higher than the share of those in their early 20s or younger. In general, people spend one to four hours here, a time frame which is explained by the type of places that are used by most of the respondents.

The most important changes identified by respondents were the rehabilitation of old buildings (although there are numerous cases when only the façade of the building was restored), the larger pedestrian area, disappearance of thrift stores and establishment of new bars and restaurants. Less than a quarter of the respondents consider that the cultural and sports events that take place here are a significant improvement. The main advantages identified by the respondents relate to the particular atmosphere given by the old buildings and the fact that the area can be used for various activities, while the disadvantages stem from the busy area and noise pollution.

Due to improved street lights and extended pedestrian streets, some of the safety concerns (vehicles and darkness), the feeling of public safety greatly improved, allowing for activities to extend

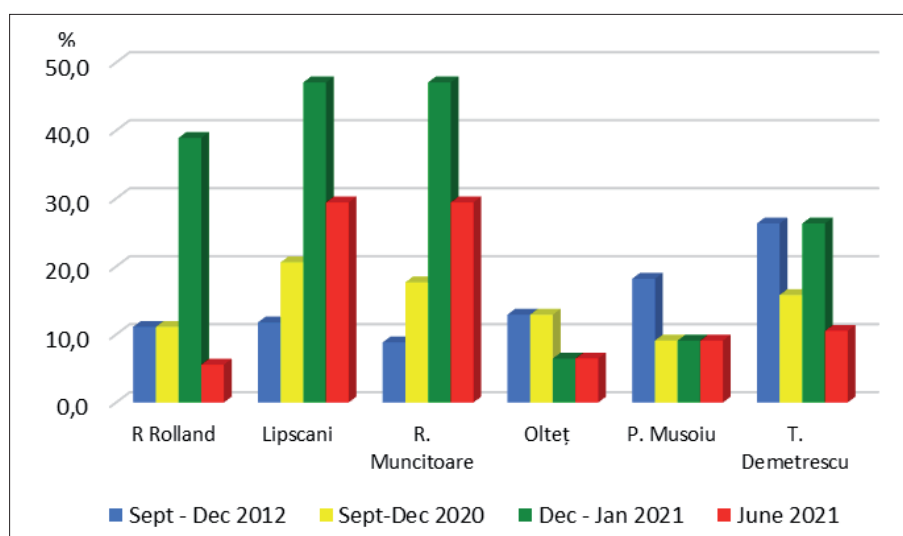


Fig. 8: Vacancies in the study area (2012–2022)
Source: authors' survey

well into the evening/night. The constant presence of local police officers in the area as well as the unobtrusive surveillance systems also contribute to this situation.

The statistical analysis following the correlation between selected variables (improved general aspect, accessibility, social interaction and possible discomfort (Tab. 2) showed that there is a strong positive correlation between the physical changes and social animation and activities (0.763 and 0.688), while the perceived discomfort (increased noise) is moderately correlated with the physical changes (0.363) and social animation (0.447). Almost 50% indicated a discomfort created by the increased noise. As previously, in the case of economic revitalisation, the analysis showed no correlation between the length of residence and the way people see the social revitalisation of the city centre. The respondents considered the area as safe (80%) and more suitable for recreational opportunities indicating a change from a passive use to an evident active one. Also, the outdoor social activities are strongly influenced by the quality of the outdoor urban space, especially by the variety of the recreational functions and social activities that develop once the physical aspect of the city is upgraded (Gehl, 2011). Beside the perceived improvement of the public space, 20% of the people indicated problems like little green spaces, dirty areas or overcrowding.

5. Discussion

The European financing for the revitalisation project was targeted only towards the public domain, i.e. streets, public squares, green areas, sewerage system, and not the decaying buildings, which were private property (99% of them). As all the buildings within the study area were nationalised during the communist period, the ownership of the buildings was a treacherous issue. The handling of nationalised housing in Romania had very peculiar traits compared with the other CEE countries, starting with the fact that the laws regarding nationalisation of buildings and terrains were not rescinded, tenants were able to buy at very low prices, property rights rarely returning to initial owners (Chelcea, 2003). Consequently, many of the buildings in the study area were divided between several owners, and most of them did not have the financial means to invest in the buildings. Few buildings were returned to the heirs of the initial owners, while others became 'no man's land' as they did not have a residential function during the communist period (so no tenants keen to buy their place of residence) and their rightful owners and their heirs did not raise any claims on these buildings.

In order for the project to be successful, the area needed to be kept in good repair, with good visual impact. Hence, city council forced the building owners to take care of the facades and roofs of the buildings, which was no easy or cheap endeavour, considering the age of the buildings and the need for conservation and preservation of their authentic features. There were significant differences regarding the buildings in the target area, as many small private owners only invested for facelifts of their buildings, while larger investors usually improved their properties by consolidating and adapting them to new functional needs (to turn them into hotels, restaurants or shops). Several years after the revitalisation works, local authorities recognised that there were still 13 buildings housing ramshackle dwellings and 9 plots that did not abide by the regulations and decided to raise the taxes on derelict buildings by up to 500% (Local Committee Craiova, 2017). Unfortunately, this decision did not change anything and ruined houses can still be found literally next to cosy and popular pubs, as it is the case of the so-called House with a tree, where the disputed ownership of the building is argued to be the main cause. Moreover, less than a decade after the facelift of the area, there are a few buildings storefronts that are beginning to show signs of decay, testifying for the poor work under limited financial means.

Despite the hopes and dreams of owners and authorities alike, the commercial properties in the area failed to attract the big names, constant and flourishing businesses, proving once again that turning neighbourhoods around is big business (Ford et al., 2008). There are two main reasons for it: i) very close to this area, within less than 5-minute walk distance, there is a large commercial centre, a symbol for the shopping in the city for almost five decades, where the big brands opened their shops; ii) most of the buildings in the area, particularly on Lipscani, România Muncitoare, Olteţ and Tr. Demestrescu streets are very narrow and long (only 5 to 10 meters wide, but sometimes just 2 or 3 m), thus hindering a proper display and use of the space. Even if the commercial activities are lagging behind, however, the pubs have proven to be a safe bet, as many within the study area have made the top ten list of pubs and restaurants in the city on the Tripadvisor list. Moreover, the overall appeal of the area for residents and tourists alike led private investors to convert some of these buildings to hotels (there are currently 7 small hotels in the area and several other rooms for renting).

There is no doubt that following the revitalisation works, the general aspect improved considerably, the area becoming much more lively and cleaner according to the residents' survey. Moreover, it ranks among the residents' top favourite places for spending time with family and friends and it managed to become an iconic place within the city. So, we can safely say that social changes, namely residents' use and appropriation of the space, as well as improved safety, were the most important ones that took place within the study area. The revitalisation project transformed this area from a congested and ill-perceived public area to a landmark for the city. Physical changes are also relevant, but despite improved accessibility, pedestrianisation and streetscaping, most of the heritage buildings were not properly consolidated, a practice which was also identified by various researchers in different cities (Balsas, 2007; Chelcea, 2006; Pascariu & Pascariu, 2002; Roşu, 2015). Similar to other people in former communist countries from CEE, those living in Craiova consider that the built heritage is important and must be preserved, but rarely take any tangible actions (Grazuleviute-Vileniske & Urbonas, 2014; Nedučín et al., 2019; Polanska, 2008). Regarding the economic dimension, the adaptive reuse of the heritage buildings and functional restructuring of the economic activities were only partially successful, as proven by the vacancy rates which have been rather high particularly along some streets and the lack of certain commercial activities that the local authorities targeted (high-end boutique shops, antiquity shops, bookshops, libraries, art galleries and cultural centres). Consequently, the results confirm that while the revitalisation project led to significant physical and social changes, the economic ones were not quite similar in scale. Considering that revitalising implies bringing back areas into active use and that 'revitalisation can only be defined qualitatively' (Heath et al., 2013), we can safely say that the social revitalisation of the historical centre in Craiova is the most successful element of the revitalisation project.

The study used the survey as a method to correlate people's perceptions regarding the revitalisation and transformation of the area. Even if perception about accessibility was also covered by the questionnaire, a more objective method was also chosen. Although the analytical procedure of the method is simple, objective, and replicable, the interpretation process of the numerical results remains complex, subjective, and therefore controversial. Also, scientists contesting the reliability of this method state that applying space syntax, while overlooking the social and psychological aspects of the people, lead researchers to speculate and generalise about the social rules that produce shared design features (Sun, 2013). For a more realistic result concerning accessibility and connectivity, the present study tries

to show a correlation between the mathematical results obtained using dedicated software to analyse space syntax and peoples' perceptions about connectivity using the survey. While space syntax is a valuable tool, researchers recognised its limitations, which should be considered when interpreting results and making decisions in urban planning and design (Pafka et al., 2020; Yamu et al., 2021). Combining space syntax with other methods and approaches can help mitigate some of these limitations and provide a more comprehensive understanding of urban spaces. The authors consider that experimenting the use of mixed methods explores the augmentation of traditional space syntax analysis through the inclusion of quantitative data collected by questionnaires, thereby shaping the understanding of social capital dynamics.

The transformations undergone by the city centre favour walking, considered the best way to get around, as is not polluting and contributes to keeping people healthy, while it provides a less complicated possibility for being present in the public environment (Gehl, 2011). The new legislation regarding the urban environment advocates for more walkable cities or neighbourhoods. In regards to the new recommendations about urban mobility that encourage the development of public spaces and more pedestrian areas, the city centre of Craiova provides such an environment that can be used for walking, sitting, relaxing, at the same time increasing the social and economic value of the area. But, depending on people's age and physical shape, walking may be also tiring, that is why people may be very careful in choosing their routes. Therefore, large deviations from the main direction or point of interest may not be easily accepted, as whenever people walk direct routes and shortcuts are preferred.

The second question of the study focused on the main beneficiaries of the revitalisation works. Theoretically, this was a people-based strategy, aimed at increasing life quality and comfort within the area, while ensuring the preservation of the built heritage; the main beneficiaries listed by the local authorities were the inhabitants living in the city centre (not only those in the study area), people working within the study area either for private companies or public institutions nearby, as well as all the persons that need the services they offer. For most of these people, the revitalisation works did have the benefits envisaged: new areas of recreation were created, new consumption places and green area appeared, the maintenance of the public domain improved. For the people actually living in the study area (less than 100 persons in 2013), life quality increased only to the extent they could cover the costs for the improvement. The technical infrastructure (water and sewage system, electric energy and gas distribution) was indeed updated, but only on the public domain. The findings of the current study point to the fact that not all the owners could afford or were interested in investing in the buildings for proper consolidation and improving the living standards.

Another question that guided this research addressed similarities between the revitalisation strategy adopted by the local authorities in Craiova and those elsewhere. Generally, many revitalisation projects are focused on the economic component, quite often targetting tourism development (Aigwi et al., 2018; Aykaç, 2019; Balsas, 2000; Ozus & Dokmeci, 2005; Tanrıku, 2023), sometimes to the detriment of the local community. This is the case especially for the already popular tourism destinations. Although Craiova has witnessed a steady growth of tourist flows during the last two decades (between 2010 and 2019, the number of tourists increased four times and in 2022 it reached almost the same number as pre-pandemic times), it still struggles to emerge as a competitive destination for city breaks in CEE. So, although from a wide perspective one of the goals of the project was to increase the area's appeal to tourists and increase the economic role of the city, the main focus was not on the economic component, but rather on the cultural and social one.

Whereas generally people-based strategies focus on 'human renewal' and improving the lives of residents through investment incentives, local hiring clauses and similar policy tools (Sutton, 2008), for Craiova this strategy was limited only to beautification projects and improvements of the public domain, so as to allow for new consumption spaces. Moreover, previous research has proven the importance of community participation for the revitalisation process, since without social engagement it is quite difficult to achieve the revitalisation of any area (Li et al., 2020; Murzyn, 2006; Rich & Tsitsos, 2016; Ripp & Rodwell, 2016; Šlebocka, 2021; Tanrıku, 2023). In Craiova, there were no social consultations regarding the revitalisation project, inhabitants were not encouraged to actively participate in the process. For a press interview, the mayor declared that she had talked to the people living in the area targetted by the project and that they all understood the need for investments and restructuring and were supportive of the project (Ungureanu, 2013). But that is the extent of the community participation.

Another issue is related to the process of gentrification. Whereas gentrification has been documented in numerous cities that underwent similar projects (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007; Larsen, 2005; Murzyn, 2006; Nedučin et al., 2019; Zielenbach, 2000), contributing to 'human renewal' (Sutton, 2008), this phenomenon does have some peculiarities in the study area. Whereas there are clear changes pointing to gentrification, mainly conversion of residential units into commercial space and an increasing number of rentals instead of owner occupancy, transforming lower class inner-city housing into middle and upper-class neighbourhoods (Chelcea, 2006), due to the new zoning approved by the city hall, all those who buy buildings in the area can no longer inhabit them permanently; they can only convert them to accommodation facilities for short term rental, commercial or other services.

There are several limitations of this study. The residents' survey was taken during the summer of 2021; therefore, some results may be influenced by the particular events caused by the restrictions during the pandemics. Also, the public use of spaces and economic use (vacancy of commercial spaces, rents) were also affected to some extent by the forementioned period. Moreover, given the peculiar Romanian context, the size of the city and its characteristics, the findings of the current research may limit the generalisation of results to other cities in different parts of the world.

6. Conclusions

This paper aimed to present an up-to-date discussion on the recent city-centre revitalisation intervention in Craiova, with a particular focus on the physical, economic and social aspects of the revitalisation process. The architectural wealth of the area together with the growing demand for entertainment places in the city centre were some of the major supporting factors of the revitalisation process. From this point of view, physical changes are undoubtedly the most striking ones in the city centre, as the degradation of the urban space was a major problem for both the residents and the authorities. Instead of the rundown and derelict environment, there appeared cozy restaurants, pubs and shops that capitalise on the historical buildings, as well as a large pedestrian area which favours numerous leisure and recreational activities. The mixed-use concept has proven to be only partially successful. The activity on some of the streets flourished after the revitalisation works – mainly those concentrating pubs and restaurants, while the commercial streets have had quite a high number of vacancies. If in the early 2000s, the area was not at all popular among residents, after the revitalisation project, the same area is the place where all ages, classes and lifestyles flock to either for meeting with family and friends or just to take a walk or for public interaction. This shift in the perception of the area is a great achievement on its own.

This study using space syntax analysis correlated with the locals' opinions on revitalisation projects of Craiova historical quarter can represent a starting point for local authorities in decision-making process concerning future urban planning projects, as connectivity is intricately linked to accessibility within urban environments. The study can be extended at the level of neighbourhoods or even the entire city, as a well-connected street network enhances mobility, reduces travel distances, and fosters an environment where people can easily access a variety of services and destinations. Connectivity maps can also be used to identify areas with lower connectivity where improved lighting, surveillance, or other safety measures may be necessary in order to prevent crimes or to enhance emergency response planning, ensuring that emergency services can efficiently navigate the urban network to reach different areas. This connection is a key consideration in urban planning and design efforts aimed at creating more accessible and liveable cities.

The study has wider implications for similar cities in developing countries that consider pursuing revitalisation projects, as well as for the local actors in Craiova that intend to invest in another revitalisation project for the remaining historical quarters of the city, providing empirical examination on the success and/or failure of urban interventions.

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