

**THE RESILIENCE OF URBAN AESTHETICS: A STRATEGY OF HOPE FOR
BISTRIȚA'S BUILT HERITAGE**

Good Practices, Public Policies and Sustainable Interventions in the Historic City Center

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ABSTRACT

Bistrița is currently in a rare strategic moment: a fragile balance between heritage conservation and the modernization of the historic center; between the pressure of real estate investments and the need to preserve local identity. This article proposes a positive and applicable vision on the management of the built heritage of the municipality, at a time when the city has the chance to become a regional model of good practice.

Through the historical analysis of interventions in the protected area, the identification of current dysfunctions and the reporting on international examples of effective public policies (Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Oradea, Bruges), the article outlines concrete directions for the creation of good practice guides applicable in Bistrița. These include: the rehabilitation of facades, the integration of businesses and terraces into the historic fabric, the reactivation of passages and the mineralization of the Central Square.

In a period when urban development is becoming increasingly accelerated, but fragmented, the municipality has the chance to manage its heritage not only through protection, but through a sustainable, circular and productive architectural strategy. This article is based on field observation, public policy documentation and the author's direct experience as an architect actively involved in the local urban regeneration process and aims to serve as a methodological preamble for a future doctoral research in the field of architecture.

KEYWORDS: *urban heritage, public policies, good practices, Bistrița, facade rehabilitation, sustainability, circularity, contemporary architecture, regeneration*

J.E.L. Classifications: *H0, N14, N94, Z13*

1. INTRODUCTION

In Romania, discussions about urban heritage often remain tense between two extremes: on one hand, the discourse of rigid conservation, seen as a moral and legal obligation; on the other, the impulse of aggressive modernization, often contemptuous of the context. A real space for dialogue between past and future, between identity and utility, rarely appears.

Sibiu, Romania



1974

2011

Sibiu before and after mineralization

Bistrița, with its well-preserved but unevenly exploited medieval historical center, offers today a rare opportunity: that of intervening with brains, with an aesthetic sense and with a long-term strategy. If Sibiu was the Romanian pioneer of urban revitalization in the 2000s, followed by Cluj of cultural projects and Oradea of firm aesthetic regulations, Bistrița is at the exact moment when it can learn from all these models and adapt them to its own context.



Cluj before and after mineralization

The modernization of the old center is not only inevitable — it is already underway. Fortunately, it did not go for a forced rehabilitation or a trivialization of public space. It is precisely this “active pause” in the evolution of the center that provides an ideal framework for implementing coherent public policies and professional intervention guides. Without these, the risk is the loss of visual coherence, the destruction of valuable details and the alienation of the community from its own historic center.



Oradea before and after mineralization

In contemporary urban design discourse, mineralization refers to the process by which open public spaces, particularly in historic or central urban areas, are transformed through the introduction of hardscape elements — such as stone, concrete and other non-vegetal surfaces. This

term captures more than just a shift in material palette; it reflects a deeper, strategic intervention in the urban fabric aimed at redefining the use, perception and resilience of public space.

The "heart of the city" — often the central square or main civic gathering place — has traditionally served as a multifunctional stage for social, economic and political life. However, over time, many of these spaces have become fragmented, underused, or degraded due to vehicular dominance, poor maintenance, or incoherent additions. Mineralization offers a way to reclaim these spaces by creating unified, durable and legible surfaces that invite pedestrian activity, support events and accommodate urban infrastructure more efficiently.

In the context of this article, mineralization is not synonymous with sterilization. Rather, it is presented as a calibrated design approach that balances the permanence of built surfaces with the flexibility of public life. It seeks to enhance spatial clarity, historical legibility and the material identity of the urban core while ensuring functionality and durability.

By “mineralizing the heart of the city,” we refer to the intentional act of reinforcing the civic and symbolic role of central public space through high-quality materials, thoughtful detailing and a reimagined choreography of urban uses — all within a framework that respects the site’s historical layers and socio-cultural significance.

Therefore, this article has three objectives:

1. To create a brief **historiography** of interventions on the heritage of Bistrița.
2. To identify current **problems** in the protected central area.
3. To **propose** a series of thematic **guides** of good practices, inspired by international examples and adapted to local specifics.

These steps are not just theoretical. They reflect a real need of the city and can represent an applicable basis for the development of a doctoral thesis that connects architecture with sustainable, participatory and identity-based urban policies.

2. HISTORIOGRAPHY OF INTERVENTIONS ON THE HERITAGE OF BISTRITĂ

2.1. The communist period (1947–1989): between systematization and indifference

During the communist regime, the historic center of Bistrița was largely spared from the massive demolitions that affected other cities (such as Bucharest or Alba Iulia). This was partly due to the city's recognized historical importance, but also to the fact that the central area had a

relatively stable urban functionality. However, the interventions during that period were limited to minimal, standardized repairs and in some cases to improper additions (plaster over stone details, inappropriate sheet metal roofs). The architectural intervention was essentially one of functionalization without valorization.

2.2. Post-1989 period: urban freedom and legislative confusion

Immediately after the Revolution, the real estate market and the lack of clear regulations led to a series of chaotic interventions in the old center: the location of bulky companies, spontaneous extensions, terraces built without authorization, the use of inappropriate materials (polycarbonate, white insulating windows, exterior tiles). This was the period in which authenticity was blurred under the wave of "modernizations" lacking stylistic coherence.

In the absence of an updated Zonal Urban Plan and intervention guides, the historic center was left to chance. Many of the valuable buildings were sold to owners lacking vision or financial means, which led to the gradual degradation of architectural details.

2.3. 2005–2015: European funding and the first coherent projects

With the access to the first European structural funds, Bistrița City Hall managed to initiate specific projects to rehabilitate the infrastructure in the central area: pavement restoration, public lighting, works on the sewage systems. In parallel, several public buildings (such as the County Library) benefited from repairs. However, interventions on the private built stock remained fragmented and without aesthetic guidance.

During this period, there was an increase in public interest in the city's historical values, but the lack of a coherent framework for intervention meant that efforts did not create a unified image.

2.4. 2015–2023: Civic participation, creative initiatives and strategic stagnation

Recent years have brought a series of innovative bottom-up projects, supported by civic organizations and initiative groups. The most notable example is the historic gates project, carried out through participatory budgeting and coordinated by the Petrus Italus Trust, with the support of the authorities. This project demonstrated that quality intervention can start from citizens and that

collaboration between architects, craftsmen and administration can produce results with visual and symbolic impact.

However, despite these positive signs, Bistrița still does not have an official set of good practice guides for the protected area. Interventions continue to be carried out ad hoc and the pressure of commercial and tourist developments risks transforming the historic center into a decorative space, emptied of authenticity.

2.5. 2024 – Present: the strategic moment we find ourselves in

The year 2024 marks a turning point for Bistrița. After two decades of fragmented interventions, alternating between administrative concern and bureaucratic indifference, the city has reached a window of opportunity. There is a rare balance between the pressure of development and the time needed to rethink the future of the historic center with care and professionalism. There has not been massive construction (yet), but there has not been a unitary qualitative intervention either. This is exactly where Bistrița's chance lies: not to repeat the mistakes of others and to learn from the successes of others.

More and more factors indicate that Bistrița is approaching a crisis of urban coherence if it does not make clear and responsible decisions regarding its heritage:

- Real estate investors are increasingly interested in the historic area;
- Terraces and businesses are starting to reappear, without a clear regulation;
- The central market is in a discussed process of mineralization, but still without a clearly communicated vision.

Therefore, **2024 must be treated as year zero** for an integrated strategy of good practice – not just as an aesthetic intention, but as an urban governance tool.

3. CURRENT PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

In the absence of a clear framework for intervention, the historic center of Bistrița risks becoming a chaotic visual collage, lacking a unitary identity. Here are the main observable dysfunctions:

3.1. Lack of technical guides: facades, terraces, businesses

Currently, interventions on facades are made arbitrarily. PVC joinery replaces historic wood without control and repair works are often done with inappropriate materials (e.g. decorative plasters instead of lime mortars). Terraces appear seasonally, but with aggressive or improvised furniture. Commercial businesses are located with strident volumetric letters, ignoring the proportions of the buildings.

3.2. Inconsistent decisions in public space

Some buildings benefit from well-made aesthetic interventions, while others, next to each other, remain degraded or visually contaminated. The lack of a common regulation and a unitary architectural control leads to incoherence. Thus, public space loses the meaning of an "urban ensemble".

3.3. Lack of a sustainable and circular approach

Traditional materials (brick, wood, stone) are not encouraged and the reuse of original elements is rare. No local program supports sustainable restoration or training of traditional craftsmen. Interventions are only made to "repair", not to protect an architectural capital in the long term.

3.4. Degraded and underused passages

Passages that connect pedestrian streets to inner courtyards or other arteries (e.g. Sugaleti Ensemble) are left in disrepair. These spaces could become key places for cultural, commercial or educational activation, but the lack of a plan turns them into urban dead zones.

3.5. The central square as an unmineralized space/still uncertain in function

Although there are proposals for the redevelopment of the Central Square, the aesthetic, material and functional direction is not clear or assumed at the community level. If we go towards mineralization, we must also think about social, cultural and commercial functions. Otherwise, we will have a "beautiful" but empty market.

4. NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC POLICIES

To avoid improvisation and build a coherent model, Bistrița must learn from cities that have gone through similar challenges.

4.1. Sibiu – *Facade guide and aesthetic control*

The City Hall of Sibiu, in partnership with the Order of Architects, published a guide for the rehabilitation of facades that includes:

- color schemes compatible with the history of the building;
- details for carpentry and hardware;
- recommendations on architectural lighting.

The result? A center that has become a national landmark in visual coherence.

4.2. Cluj and Oradea – *Regulations for terraces and businesses*

Both cities have implemented local regulations that regulate:

- the size and location of businesses;
- urban furniture for terraces;
- the color palette allowed in the historic area.

Merchants receive models and support, not just prohibitions.

4.3. Alba Iulia – *Integrated heritage + branding strategy*

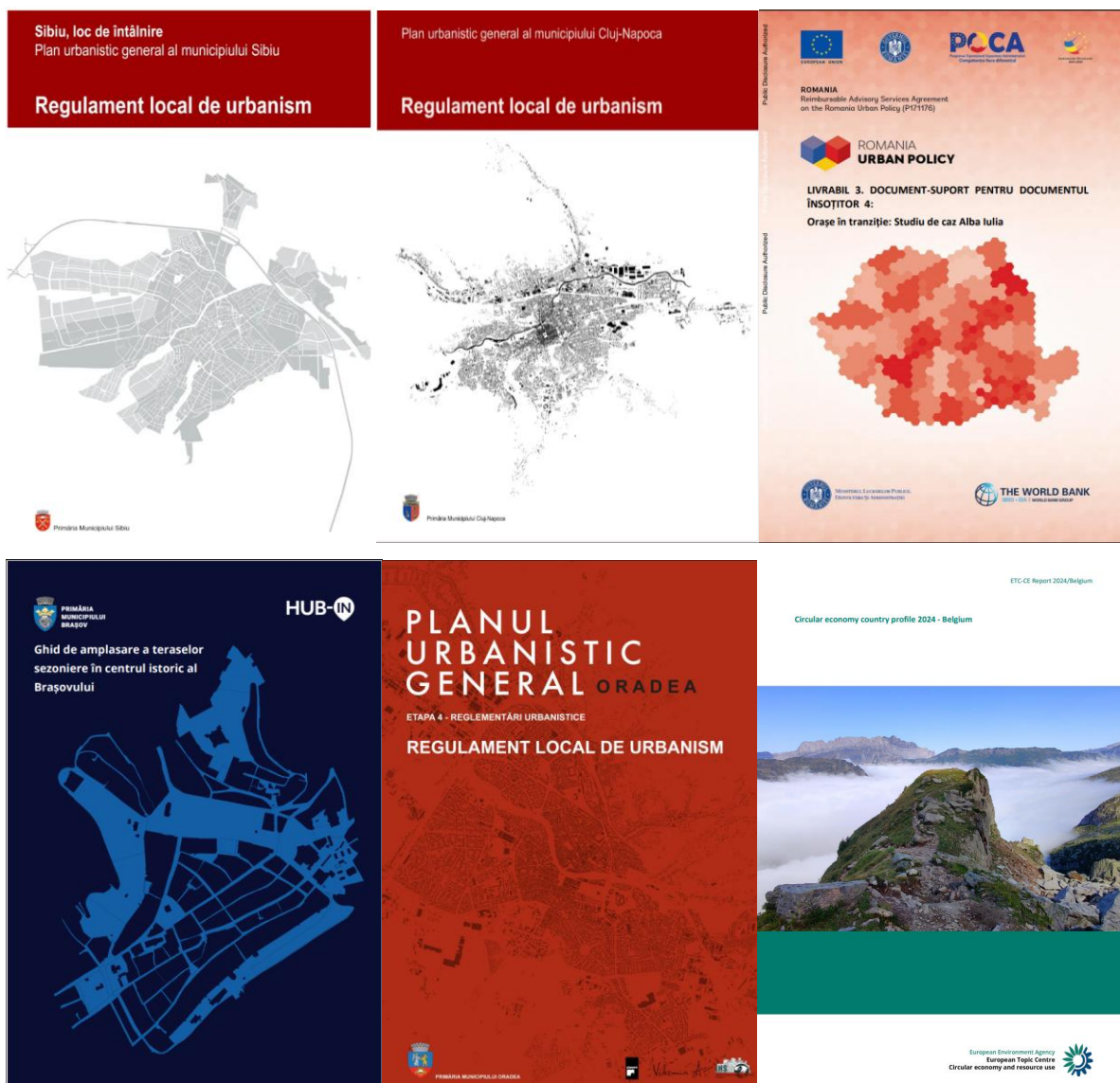
The “Alba Carolina” project transformed the fortress into a visited, but also lived space, with mixed functions: culture, commerce, education. The fortification was fully restored, but also reinterpreted through tourist routes, discreet urban furniture, ambient lighting and interactive markings. The branding of the city was built simultaneously with the restoration – resulting in a coherent identity that attracts tens of thousands of tourists annually. Alba Iulia thus managed to combine the military past with contemporary functions.

4.4. Brasov – *Guides for facades, businesses and public space*

Brasov published a series of thematic guides in 2022, including:

- Guide for the rehabilitation of facades in the historic center;
- Guide for the location of commercial businesses;
- Guide for urban furniture and seasonal terraces.

These were made available to citizens in online format, with clear illustrations and technical explanations. Moreover, the city hall conditioned urban planning approvals on compliance with these guidelines, which led to an elegant uniformity of the main streets.



4.5. *Bruges, Salzburg, Barcelona – Circular and educational interventions*

These cities combine clear regulations with citizen education. Brochures, online platforms and guided tours explain why it is important to preserve wooden joinery or choose an elegant company. In addition, they promote training programs for local craftsmen, essential in preserving heritage.

5. PROPOSALS FOR BISTRIȚA: NECESSARY GUIDES + CONCRETE STEPS

In order for Bistrița to make a qualitative leap in heritage management, a series of thematic guides is needed, professionally written, supported by the administration and made available to citizens, architects, traders and investors.

5.1. *Facade guide for the historic area*

- color palette based on stratigraphic analysis;
- recommendations for finishes (mineral plasters, silicate paints);
- technical solutions for carpentry, hardware and lighting;
- illustrated examples of good interventions and common mistakes.

5.2. *Guide for the location of commercial companies*

- dimensions and proportions in relation to the facade;
- allowed materials and fonts;
- examples of location in historical settings;
- clear prohibitions for aggressive elements (LEDs, banners).

5.3. *Guide for urban furniture and seasonal terraces*

- types of furniture allowed (wood, matt painted metal);
- solutions for paving, delimitation and shading;
- integration into public space without obstructing facades;
- rules for mobile vs. fixed furniture.

5.4. *Guide for the rehabilitation of passages + functional proposals*

- minimal cleaning and repair interventions;

- ambient lighting and contextual murals;
- proposals for functions: bookstores, galleries, tourist information points;
- activation through periodic events.

5.5. *Guide for the redevelopment of the Central Square*

- paving options with natural materials (cubic stone, local limestone);
- integration of existing trees;
- functional scenarios: farmers market, shows, book fairs;
- solutions for permanent furniture + seasonal installations.

6. GUIDING PRINCIPLES: SUSTAINABILITY, CIRCULARITY, LOCAL IDENTITY

If Bistrița's heritage is treated only as a technical problem or as a bureaucratic burden, then we lose its essence: it is a cultural and economic capital, but also a renewable resource, if approached with clear principles.

6.1. *Sustainability does not mean spending less, but thinking long-term*

Sustainability in heritage rehabilitation does not only refer to energy efficiency. In the case of Bistrița, it must be:

- functional: buildings should be constantly used, not just "restored" and abandoned;
- social: spaces should remain accessible to the community and not be excluded from market prices;
- material: interventions should use techniques and resources compatible with the structure of old buildings.

A good practice guide that encourages the use of natural plasters, wooden joinery and energy-efficient lighting can become a tool for architectural sustainability, not just conservation.

6.2. *Circularity in heritage: from material reuse to functional cycle*

In many cities in Europe, the circulation of building materials (reused bricks, recovered doors, refurbished wooden elements) is part of the logic of rehabilitation.

For Bistrița, circularity can mean:

- creating a center for the recovery of traditional materials from partial demolitions or interventions;
- supporting local carpentry and restoration workshops that can work on order for projects in the historic center;
- stimulating the short circuit: architect - craftsman - beneficiary - administration.

But circularity is also functional: a building does not have to have a single purpose, but can host different types of activities depending on the needs of the community. A space used during the day as a place for cultural education can become a screening room or workshop in the evening.

6.3. Local identity: not a museum heritage, but a heritage to live

Bistrița has the advantage of a coherent built heritage, which has not been devastated by chaotic development or massive demolitions. That is why it is essential that this identity be made aware of, assumed and updated.

This means:

- promoting a contemporary local aesthetic that respects the spirit of the place, without slavishly copying the past;
- encouraging cultural and educational projects that involve heritage (e.g. open-air drawing workshops, historical guides, community exhibitions);
- developing a unitary visual language in public space – through signs, urban furniture, displays.

Identity is not preserved in formaldehyde. It is actively built, through coherent gestures and continuous involvement.

7. THE ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

In the context of urban heritage, the architect is not just a technician or an executor of rules. He is, or should be, a mediator between the memory of the place and current needs, between legislation and creativity, between administration and community.

7.1. *The architect – actor of urban policies*

In Bistrița, recent experiences (such as the historical gates project carried out through participatory budgeting) show that architects can have an active civic role, becoming credible voices in public consultation and in the development of guides, not only in the design itself.

The author of this article – architect, teacher, trainer and consultant within the County Directorate for Culture – assumes a clear position: the future of Bistrița's heritage cannot be built without the contribution of local architects. Not through imported theoretical expertise, but through direct involvement and knowledge of the context.

7.2. *The architect – translator between professional and community languages*

A good guide to facades or terraces is not a collection of prohibitions. It is a dialogue document, which must explain and convince. The architect is the one who can build these bridges between the demands of the heritage and the aspirations of the traders, between the technical norms and the values of the inhabitants.

Through urban workshops, public consultations or educational initiatives, the architect becomes a facilitator of urban processes, not just a provider of solutions.

7.3. *The architect – guarantor of visual and functional coherence*

In a world of rapid interventions and instant “solutions”, the architect is the one who must advocate for quality, proportion, detail. Even in a modest project – a company, a pergola, a sidewalk – the architectural vision can make the difference between the banal and the memorable.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Bistrița does not just need a list of rules. It needs a strategy of hope, a positive model through which heritage becomes a living part of the city, not just decoration or a problem.

8.1. *From symbolic protection to functional activation*

Beautiful facades are important. But equally important are the spaces behind them: how they are used, who lives in them, what energy they generate. Protecting heritage should not mean freezing it, but its intelligent integration into everyday life.

8.2. *From ad-hoc decisions to coherent public policies*

If we want a coherent center, we need:

- clear, illustrated and accessible guides;
- administrative responsibility;
- collaboration with the Order of Architects, DJC, the academic environment;
- citizen involvement through participatory budgeting and real consultations.

8.3. *From isolation to regional example*

Bistrița can become a benchmark for other cities in Romania, if it structures its efforts around clear principles: sustainability, circularity, local identity.

A local model of good practices, applied professionally, transparently and collaboratively, can generate a wave of positive interventions and can also contribute to the economic and tourist development of the city.

8.4. *From article to doctoral thesis – a research path*

This article is not just an analytical exercise. It is a methodological basis for a doctoral research in architecture, focused on:

- historical and morphological documentation of urban heritage;
- comparative analysis of local policies in Romania and Europe;
- proposal of a replicable system of guides and strategies for medium-sized cities.

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