

BALSH-STURDZA PALACE GARDENS OF IASSY

GRĂDINILE PALATULUI IEȘEAN BALȘ - STURZA

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Abstract. *Often, the occasion of some buildings rehabilitation or restoration lead to the discovery of important details, far older than the original historical dating. This is the case of the imposing palace Balsh-Sturdza, today the Central Post Palace of Iassy. The main building was located in the middle of a wide enclosure, containing both the annex buildings and the boyar courtyard gardens. Deciphering data of nineteenth century plans, coupled with evidence provided by archaeological researches, led to the reconstitution of the old boyar courtyard plan organization.*

Key words: palace, rehabilitation, boyar courtyard, gardens.

Rezumat. *De multe ori, cu prilejul unor reabilitări sau restaurări, cercetarea unor clădiri conduce la descoperirea unor detalii importante, mult mai vechi decât datarea istorică inițială. Acesta este și cazul impunătorului palat Balș-Sturza astăzi Palatul Poștei Centrale din Iași. Edificiul principal era situat în mijlocul unei ample incinte care cuprindea atât clădirile anexe, cât și grădinile curții boierești. Descifrarea datelor din planurile veacului XIX, corelată cu indiciile oferite de cercetările arheologice, au condus la reconstituirea în plan urbanistic a organizării vechii incinte boierești.*

Cuvinte cheie: palat, reabilitare, curte boierească, grădini.

INTRODUCTION

Many times, during some rehabilitation and restoration works, the research of some historically dated buildings leads to the discovery of some much older details than the initial dating. This is also the case of the impressive Bals-Sturza Palace, today the Central Post Office Palace of Iasi city. In the old Iasi city, the building was located at the upper limit of the Downtown Borough at the crossing point between the Main lane (today, Stefan cel Mare street) and St. Ilie lane (today Alecsandri street) and Golia's lane (today Cuza-Voda street). In competition with Cantacuzino-Pascanu Palace (today the Civil Registrar's Office Bulding) located on the other side of the crossing, the palace tried to dominate the area by its proportions and its outline. It was located in the middle of a large enclosure covering both outhouses and gardens of the boyar's courtyards.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In carrying out the work, specific research tools were used: library and historical archive research, overlapping and correlation of plans of 19th and 20th centuries in surveying the urban development stages, comparative analysis and correlation of

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archeological signs with the urbanistic ones. The deciphering of data of 19th century plans, correlated with the signs offered by archeological research, has lead to a reconstruction at an urbanistic level of the old boyar enclosure organization of Bals-Sturza Palace. In this paperwork, we had resumed some hypotheses and had extended one of the case studies from the doctoral thesis (Dascalu Doina Mira, 2004).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Brief history of the palace

The edifice faced a turmoil history (Dascalu Doina Mira, 2004). The historical documents reveal that, at the end of 18th century, the palace belonged to the boyar Iordache Bals. The house is then inherited by Iancu Bals, who sold it to some rich merchants. Constantin Bals, Iordache's brother, bought from them and afterwards gave it in 1850 to the logothete Dimitrie Sturza. In the urbanistic plan of Iasi worked out in 1857, executed by engineer Peytavin, the palace is a property of Sturdza. The edifice is then bought by Cantacuzino-Pascanu family who also possessed the opposite palace (the one that today is the Civil Registrar's Office). After 1857, the palace loses its function of aristocratic dwelling and became a public institution: first the Bank of Moldavia, later the City Hall of Iasi and after a while became again the Bank of Moldavia. In 1912, the building was in the property of Weisengrun, the edifice being later bought by Iasi City Hall. Beginning with 1912 and until 1924, it operated as a bank when the building faced a reconstruction-repartition work which leads to the destruction of many walls of historical structure, of the basement, ground floor and first floor. Since 1940, the function of the edifice was of post office and was consequently rearranged. After the war, the function remained as Central Post Office of Iasi. After revolution, ample archeological diggings took place occasioned by the rehabilitation plan of 2000.

2. Archeological research

The oldest archeological vestiges were chronologically framed at end of 17th century and end of 18th century (Cheptea Stela, 2000). Unfortunately, in the 19th and 20th century, the building faced numerous interventions both at basement level and at above ground structure. These interventions either changed or removed many elements of the old palace.

The edifice is impressive even today by its ample dimensions: 33 m x 27 m. Some of the old walls, dated back in 17th and 18th centuries, are 1 m over the present limits of the building (Cheptea Stela, 2000). Therefore, the old palace had longer dimensions even than the one rebuilt in 19th century maintained till today. The archeological research confirmed an important detail, illustrated by the old plans of Iasi City of 19th century: the main entry into the old palace was at the west façade to the present Vasile Alecsandri street. The current access from Cuza-Voda street was made available when the edifice became a bank in 19th century (fig. 1). The spatial amplitude of the palace involved special efforts of indoor organization by tracing two perimeter passing corridors around an ample central space, where today there is the great hall of the post office. Behind this hall, in the

19th century, on the median axis of the posterior façade, a large apse was erected that even today exists (fig. 2) (Dascalu Doina Mira, 2004).

In the central area of the posterior façade, the archeological diggings revealed another important detail certifying the fact that, prior to the construction of the above mentioned apse, there was an access way to outside. The bases of four stone pillars and a small stair head in between the pillars were discovered, a slab covered stair head with apparent bricks, all of them dating back from 18th century (Dascalu Doina Mira, 2004).



Fig. 1 - Façade of the palace in 1913 (Bogdan N. A., 1997)

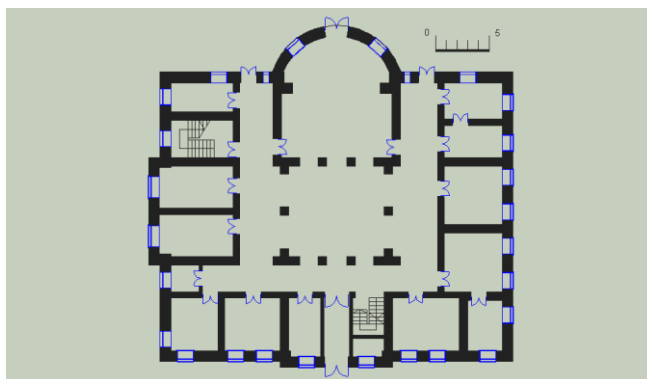


Fig. 2 - Bals-Sturdza Palace, today the Central Post Office of Iasi. Renewed ground floor plane (Dascalu Doina Mira, 2004)

3. Finding out the organization of the old Bals boyar courtyard

The discovery of the old access ways to the palace confirms some important hypotheses regarding the organization of Bals boyar courtyard of 17th—18th centuries (Dascalu Doina Mira, 2004). In order to find out the organization of the old Bals boyar courtyard, firstly it was necessary a study of the organization way of rural and urban boyar courtyards in Moldavia and Wallachia of 17th and 18th centuries (Dascalu Doina Mira, 2004; Nicolescu Corina, 1979; Bratuleanu Anca, 1997). The results of this study are briefly presented below.

As long as the towns of medieval Moldavia increased in size and density (Dascalu Doina Mira, 2004), the organization of the nobility courtyards had to be adapted in time to some smaller and smaller urban surfaces. They lost many important elements of the organization on large estates conferring them a “boyar” character in the large meaning of the word. Evidently, the form and dimensions of an urban boyar courtyard were determined by the surface of occupied land. In organizing the enclosures in the town area, the boyar courtyards followed the model of rural courtyards of estates, as much as the density of zonal urban tissue permitted, transposed in the dimension of the occupied land. Frequently, the enclosure was protected by a perimeter wall. Considering the reduced surface of the occupied land parcels, the urban boyar courtyards did not have a chapel as the countryside estate; the boyars founded and donated many churches in the city. One of the main characteristic of classical boyar courtyard organization was the separation of the dwelling itself as the main building from the outhouses represented by servant’s dwellings, kitchen, barns, stables as well as possible cellars. An important characteristic of the rural courtyard that is hardly maintained in the urban environment is also the orientation and placing of the dwelling. The boyar house was generally placed with the main façade to the south (Nicolescu Corina, 1979). If it was possible, within the rural boyar courtyards, the main façade had a view to a peculiar landscape (a lake, a meadow or a river or a forested hill). In the urban area, these favorite aspects were hard to meet considering the reduced dimensions of the occupied urban land parcel as well as the obliged orientation to the street line of the city. Another important element of the boyar courtyards is the gardens. These were represented by planted areas having a role of protection-leisure-rest-walking but also as useful plantations as vegetable gardens and orchards. Under conditions of densification of urban tissue, the gardens of boyar properties do not reach the dimensions and the number of rural estates.

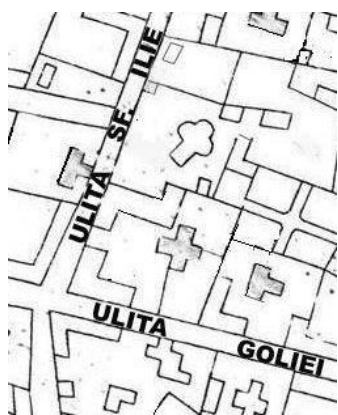


Fig. 3 - The courtyard in Bayardi plan



Fig. 4 - The courtyard in Peytavin plan

Regarding the old Bals courtyard, we may notice that although in 17th-19th centuries, Iasi City considerably developed in area and urban density, the palace

in time kept a large enclosure. This fact can be found out from Iasi planning executed in 19th century by engineer Bayardi in 1819 (fig. 3) and by engineer Peytavin in 1857 (fig. 4). In a detailed analysis we notice from these plans that the palace was retreated from St. Ilie lane (today Alecsandri street) and from Golia lane (today Cuza-Voda street) and located in the middle of the boyar courtyard. This retreat in the boyar courtyard intimacy is characteristic to 17th-18th centuries when the palaces defended their intimacy to the street by walls and areas planted with trees and shrubbery – in Iasi, especially with lilac, acacia and lime trees conferring a charm and perfume (Cantacuzino G. M., 1999). In the 19th century, wishing to expose their richness and rank, the nobility renounced to the protecting walls of the enclosures and brought closer the palace building to the street to make more visible the splendors of the facades. The enclosure and location of Bals palace, retreated from the street in the middle of the boyar courtyard, confirm, alongside the above mentioned archeological signs, the edifice age. By a compared analysis of Bayardi's and Peytavin's plans we notice that the space around the central building was structured in some enclosures: a large court for reception in front of the main western access way and secondary courtyard located to north, south and east. In the Bayardi's plan from 1819 (fig. 3) we may observe a partition of the boyar enclosure in three courtyards: the western courtyard, the northern one as well as a courtyard to south-east. In the Peytavin's plan of 1857 (fig. 4), we can not notice any delimitations of any inside courtyards so that we may emit hypotheses only by examining the site and the neighborhoods. The main access way to the boyar courtyard from St. Ilie lane (present day Vasile Alecsandri street) was flanked by a set of two outbuildings which can be noticed even today on the location (fig. 5).



Fig.5 - Nowadays situation

In Peytavin's plan, the two administrative building sets, that flanked the access way to the street, had proper enclosures. In 19th century, according to the époque's style and due to financial needs, the ground floors of these administrative buildings were transformed in commercial spaces bringing income to the palace and the courtyard owners. The commercial function was partly maintained till nowadays at the ground floor of the buildings. As we previously mentioned, the archeological research discovered elements of the main entrance

in the palace, centrally located, on the western façade, e.g. to St. Ilie lane. In both plans of 19th century, we may notice that in front of this entrance, a large reception court was opening. The other entrance, discovered by archeologists to the north side, mentioned in the previous section, offers signs of northern enclosure of the boyar courtyard. From the fact that this secondary entrance was architecturally treated with much care, with decorative pillars and a stair head plated with apparent bricks, we may presume that there was an important access way to an outdoor space of the palace, probably in a landscape arrangement. The placing to the north shows the existence of a shady summer garden intended for relaxation and rest. The only courtyard where it was possible to have existed useful plantations along with other outhouses could be the third courtyard, visible in Bayardi's plan to south-east. However, a small orchard and a vegetable garden could be placed only to the inside of the courtyard; to the street a protection plantation was created. In the context of Peytavin's plans, the location of the southern courtyard to an important lane of Iasi, Golia lane (present day Cuza-Voda street) excludes any utility function that could have offered an unaesthetic image. It is possible that this southern area would be decoratively planted with trees and shrubs. Therefore, only the space from the east, neighboring another property, could have been destined to utility plantations.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Deciphering by a detailed and a comparative analysis of data from 19th century plans, the correlation with 20th century plan of Iasi City and the signs offered by archeological research had lead to the reconstitution at urbanistic level of the old boyar courtyard organization.

2. The hypotheses issued in this paperwork about the gardens of Bals Palace represent a novelty in the field. They take over and continue the research from my doctoral thesis that is pending publication (Dascalu Doina Mira, 2004).

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