

ARCHAEOLOGY IN PITEȘTI. ‘THE SPIRIT OF PLACE’. THE CASE OF “THE TOWN CLOCK CHURCH”*

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Keywords: Pitești, St Nicholas and St Panteleimon Church, urban archaeology, identity, recovery of archaeological remains.

Abstract: In the summer of 1962, a defining element for the old architecture and identity of Pitești, the Church of Saint Nicholas and Saint Panteleimon (“The Town Clock Church” – built by the inhabitants at the beginning of the nineteenth century over an older one, built in the mid eighteenth century), was demolished so that a new systematized centre of the region’s capital city to be built. In a new stage of modernization of the city centre, in 2007, the foundations of the two successive churches with numerous adjacent tombs were discovered in a vast archaeological rescue excavation. The author, a member of the archaeological team, shows in this article how the residents of the nowadays city identify themselves to the symbol of the old town during the archaeological excavations, the perception of archaeology by the urban contemporary, as well as the manner of municipal authorities (as commissioners of the public utility works and hence of the archaeological excavations) to assume and restore the archaeological remains.

Rezumat: În vara anului 1962, un element definitoriu pentru domeniul arhitectonic și identitar al Piteștiiului vechi, Biserica Sfântul Nicolae și Sfântul Pantelimon (“Biserica cu ceas” – lăcaș de cult de la începutul sec. al XIX-lea ridicat de mahalagii peste unul mai vechi, de la mijlocul sec. al XVIII-lea), a fost dărâmat pentru a face loc noului centru sistematizat al municipiului reședință de regiune. În contextul unei noi etape a modernizării centrului orașului, în anul 2007, fundațiile celor două biserici succesive, împreună cu numeroase morminte adiacente au fost date la iveală în cadrul unui amplu șantier arheologic de salvare. Autorul, membru al colectivului arheologic, prezintă în acest articol modul cum locuitorii orașului actual s-au raportat la acest simbol al orașului vechi pe durata șantierului, percepția arheologiei în mediul urban contemporan, precum și maniera autorităților municipale (comanditare ale lucrărilor edilitare și implicit ale șantierului arheologic) de asumare și valorificare a vestigiilor arheologice.

For those who pass through the city of Pitești by car or on foot, the feeling of a new and modern city with no past and no personality is, beyond any doubt, a real and pervasive one. The admirable geographical position of the town (“There, where in Argeș flows the Doamnei River” – Ion Pillat) given by a clever use of environmental conditions, was not completed by the building and protection of an identity based on the assumption of the values of the past. The impression that one finds oneself in the middle of a city founded in the second half of the twentieth century is probably stronger than in any other urban area between the Carpathians and the Danube. Concrete, cement, asphalt, marble, stainless steel (too much steel), aluminium, plastic, glass of all colours, matte, translucent, gray, silver... all mixed in a developed urban chaos, rebellious and presumptuous, which doesn’t want to take into account any architectural system, not even follow an elementary common sense. Deprived of the perennial old town’s identity elements, the inhabitants of Pitești always look forward, never to the past they barely know. Perhaps this explains, among other things, the absence of a city museum...

Meritoriously still standing, against all odds, in the downtown area, St George Church, a voivodal foundation from the start of the second half of the seventeenth century (Constantin Șerban - 1656), improperly called “cathedral” (neither recommended by its size, nor justified by its past or present function), and a few other late medieval churches fail to counterbalance the great loss of secular architecture. Even the memorial houses, spots closely related to the memory of eminent representatives of national culture, found no escape from destruction under the road rollers of recent years: the house where the painter Costin Petrescu was born – scraped from the earth in order to build a private parking and a new building; on the same central street, the house where another famous painter was born, Rudolf Schweitzer-Cumpăna, is crumbling under the weight of time and indifference; at Valea Mare, right next to the city, the house of the writer Liviu Rebreanu, where he lived the latter part of his life and where he finally passed away, is to receive its new conditions, of winery; and also at Valea Mare, the voivode Constantin Brancoveanu’s mansion, where the prince spent the late autumns with the entire suite, harvesting “the vineyards in Pitești”, has been transformed *ad hoc*, in the bleak years of

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** Argeș County Museum.

“popular democracy”, in a dirty bottle collection center, as in the recent years, those of “wild capitalism”, to end miserably, simply turned into a landfill. *Sic transit gloria mundi!* Architecture and heritage, Piteşti has nothing to be proud of. A ‘reversed’ Kronos who is insatiably devouring not his own children but his ‘ancestors’.

Full, blind and indiscriminate destruction of the old city center was a complex process, started in 1957, under new plans for urban systematization.¹ The demolition of the old architectural structures (with the street network, the public space layout, the street fronts) – meaning a total cancellation of the identity of the patriarchal provincial town – was intended to create a new city, exponent of “socialist reconstruction”, inhabited, obviously, by “the new man” who meant “the revolutionary conquest of the highest peaks of civilization and progress”. It was actually a little foreshadowing of the fate that Bucharest was soon to endure, nothing but a tragic and cruel experiment, finally translated on Capital city. Perhaps not coincidentally Piteşti was taken down by the systematization wave so early. The city has a real tradition in replacing the old with the new, by being betrayed with a certain voluptuousness by the authorities and residents: the downtown was destroyed by fire in summer 1848 and has been reconfigured starting with the following year according to a project elaborated by architect Gheorghe Rosetti; the Buliga hermitage, with its beautiful church built in 1746, which impressed so much Grigore Tocilescu, was completely demolished in the last years of the nineteenth century for being replaced by the new county administrative offices (The Argeş Prefecture Palace - 1898-1899);² the stylish public garden established in 1896 with great efforts in the city center, a promenade area of the city elite par excellence, was halved in 1938 by the Military Club, a building of a doubtful, banal and unrepresentative architecture, and the examples could go on.

The latest campaign to modernize the city center had three successive stages (completed in 2000, 2003 and 2008) and targeted the entire central axis with a length of 800 m, represented by the pedestrian area between “Vasile Milea” Square (end south-east) and “Alexandru Davila” Theatre (north-west). Atypical and unexpected for Piteşti, this massive modernization action led to the rediscovery and restoration of one of the most important symbols and landmarks of its identity: St Nicholas and St Panteleimon Church (known as “The Town Clock Church”), gone missing about half a century ago, also a victim of the actions of modernization and systematization.



Fig. 1. St Nicholas and St Panteleimon Church, Piteşti. Different views on old picture postcards and photos, ca. 1900-1961.

Built by the locals, right in the heart of the town of Piteşti, at the northern end of the urban block surrounded by the streets Şerban Vodă (east) and Domniţa Bălaşa (west) (which no longer exist), the church dedicated to St Nicholas and St Panteleimon as patron saints (Fig. 1) and belonging to the community of townsmen, was one of the most representative monuments of the city’s architecture.³

The dedicatory inscription mentions a first small church (probably dating from the mid-eighteenth century) damaged by the earthquake of 1802, rebuilt

¹ Greceanu 2007, pp. 156-206.

² Greceanu 2007, p. 144, Figs. 59-61.

³ Bobancu 1933, pp. 36-39; Greceanu 1982, pp. 80, 82, Figs. 23, 25; Greceanu 2007, p. 92, Figs. 13, 19.

and much enlarged in 1812, at the expense of the town ("the people of the *maballe*").⁴ The "great fire" in the summer of 1848 will affect St Nicholas Church (contemporary notes indicate that on August 18, 1848, "three hours of the night" [10 pm], burned the entire Pitești town, three neighbourhoods (*maballe*) and three churches, among which St Nicholas Church),⁵ which will be repaired again in 1864. Since 1874, in the bell tower above the narthex was to be installed a clock with four dials (donation made to the church by Maria and Ștefan Babic family). Thus, the Church enters into the collective memory of urban community as "The Town Clock Church".

Large (approximately 25 m x 9 m) single nave type (without side apses), consisting of altar, nave, narthex and an open porch, having two high towers, one above the nave, the other on the porch, St Nicholas Church played an important role in city life. It acted as a cathedral church; on 30 April 1878 the independent Romania's first *Te Deum* was officiated here, in the presence of Prince Carol I. In the square next to the northern wall of the church, a statue of Ion C. Brătianu was erected around 1905 (sculptor D. Mirea), which was to disappear, too, after 1947. Registered as monument of architecture in 1955, St Nicholas Church did enjoy this status for only seven years, being demolished by the communist authorities in July 1962 for reasons related to the new urban facilities of Pitești.⁶



Fig. 2. Greceanu 1982 first cover's artwork (1), reproducing a detail from a photograph taken by Ștefan Butak in 1961 (2).

Not everything of the old church was destroyed: the liturgical vessels, the bell and the chandelier were preserved in various other churches in the city and county, the stone inscription from 1812 and the clock with four dials donated by the Babic family are preserved today in the collection of Argeș County Museum. An important set of photographs depicting the interior ambiance of the church are kept in Andrei Pănoiu's personal archives⁷). The decades after the demolition, during the period when Pitești was gradually and irreversibly transformed in a "red city", by a plenary working enthusiasm, have almost completely erased the remembrance of "The Town Clock Church" from the collective memory of the inhabitants. The ruins were not marked in any way, but covered with asphalt instead, the narthex overlapped by a newly built hotel, the nave crossed by a busy pedestrian street (the "High Street", compulsory route for the May 1st and August 23rd parades), the altar covered by a stylish new green area. In a few years nothing reminded of the important architectural and ecclesiastical monument, a symbol of the city, which used to stand once in that very place. The status of memory was denied to "The Town Clock Church", diving directly, bluntly, in the taboo. However, there were exceptional, atypical cases when some authors have dared to circulate and propagate the image of the church in the very glorious years of "great achievements" (Fig. 2).⁸

⁴ Bobancu 1933, p. 38; Braniște, Diaconescu 1971, p. 262; Bălan 1994, p. 386, catalogue no. XV 549.

⁵ Novac 1980, p. 311; Popa, Dicu, Voinescu 1988, p. 135; Pănoiu 2004, p. 79.

⁶ Popa 2009, p. 199. E. Greceanu places the demolition in 1963 (Greceanu 2007, pp. 92, 166, Figs. 19, 62).

⁷ Pănoiu 2004, photos at pp. 82-83.

⁸ Greceanu 1982, the first cover's artwork according to a photo taken by Ștefan Butak in 1961.



Fig. 3. Discovery of the nave foundations built in 1812. Photo by D. Măndescu.



Fig. 4. The foundations of the altar and nave of the churches from 1812 and from the mid eighteenth century, unveiled during the excavations of June-July 2007. View from the west. Photo by D. Măndescu.

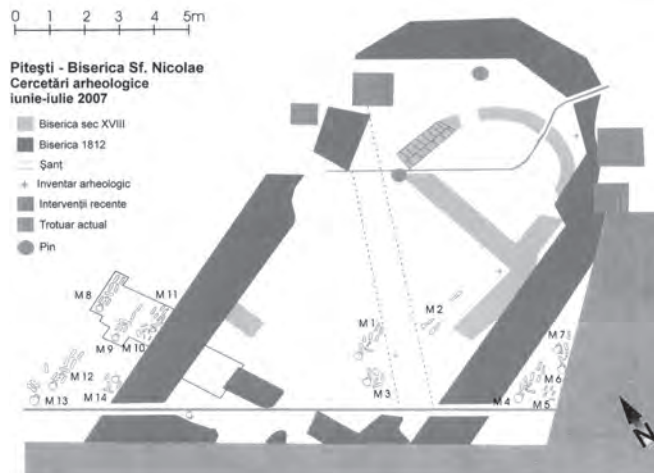


Fig. 5. General plan of the archaeological remains discovered in June-July 2007. According to Maschio, Măndescu, Cioflan 2008.



Fig. 6. Research of a grave outside the southern nave wall of the church from 1812. Photo by D. Măndescu.

In the summer of 2007, 45 years after the demolition, the unexpected opportunity arose to bring to light the remains of “The Town Clock Church”, as many as they were still preserved, under the imminent start of the third stage of modernization of the central area of Pitești (the sector between “Muntenia” Square to the south and “Alexandru Davila” Theatre to the north). Where did the exact site of the church lie and how much of it was preserved under the asphalt of the pedestrian street, no one could give an unequivocal answer. There were even suggestions to cut off the archaeologists’ impetus from the very beginning, arguing that the archaeological investigation would not find any justification or reason, being completely useless since the demolition of 1962 was a total one, wiping from the earth any trace of the church. We’ll see...

The archaeological excavations, fully financed by the beneficiary (The Municipality of Pitești) ran for almost a month, from June 12 to July 9, 2007. The first challenge for the archaeological team was tracking the exact location of the church in urban areas completely redesigned in the ‘60s and ‘70s of the twentieth century. Correlating information from the old plans of Pitești and some period picture postcards, and benefiting from the fact that one of the buildings nearby (the former “Argeșul” Restaurant), contemporary

to the church, had escaped demolition, still standing on its location today, the measurements started from this building, used as an initial bench mark.

Immediately after the removal of the recent asphalt layer, two parallel red stripes emerged, visible in the grit and gravel bed of the asphalt coating. The stripes traced the northern and southern walls of the church (Fig. 3). It became clear that measurements had not failed and that some parts of the old church, even if only the foundations were still *in situ*. The foundations of the building from 1812 (of single nave type, without side apses), made of bricks bound with lime mortar, were only partially found because the west of the nave and the narthex are superimposed by the actual "Muntenia" Hotel (building A, built in 1970).

From the first church, built in the mid-eighteenth century, of brick construction and consisting just of nave and altar, the excavations recovered the foundation of the south wall of the nave and partly of the altar, as well as a small fragment of the foundation of the west wall of the nave (Figs. 4 and 5). Fourteen graves were identified and investigated during the archaeological research (Fig. 6), three indoor and eleven outdoor (four on the south side and seven on the north side of the nave), only six of which contain the whole skeleton in anatomical connection. The archaeological inventory was modest: an alloy ring discovered in the tombs inside the church (eighteenth century), another silver ring found in one of the graves outside, a bead of amber of goldish-yellow colour discovered in the south-east corner of the nave, and a coin of 100 lei from 1937, discovered in the altar of the second church. The team of archaeologists has done its duty with honesty until the end, pretty soon the technical excavation report being published in the usual *Chronicle*.⁹ A scientific expanded report with rich illustration and numerous details was published in the journal of the museum where the archaeologists work.¹⁰ The popular sector was not forgotten, either. Shortly after the excavation, an article written in an attractive and unpretentious language, understood by all persons interested in local history, without technical and specialized terms, was published in a cultural and historical magazines issued by the Cultural Center Pitești under the auspice of the City Hall.¹¹

It is worth being recorded how these discoveries were perceived by the inhabitants of Pitești and by the public in general. One must not forget that it was the first ever archaeological excavation performed in Pitești (if we leave aside the small archaeological surveys conducted over time at various churches in town, on the occasion of restoration or consolidation works). Visibility and impact on city inhabitants has been greater since this site was located in one of the most frequented public spaces of the city, on a busy pedestrian street. So, archaeology left its exotic dimension that was perceived by the collective mentality and has gone down in the street, among the people, in the service of community. This was therefore the first meeting of the inhabitants of Pitești with archaeology and reactions came out accordingly. The older ones remember well the church, sometimes impressed to tears by the bringing back to light of the remains. The youngest, not knowing the history of the place, are very surprised, never ever imagined that under the asphalt on which – until the previous day – they were walking calmly the children's trolleys could lay church and a cemetery a few hundred years old. Archaeological excavations and the gradual unveiling, day after day, of the remains, led to a manifest emulation among the city population, of a hitherto unprecedented intensity in Pitești. Together with archaeologists, the urban people rediscovered a significant piece of their own city's history, an identity element of primary importance. The local press, tirelessly present throughout the conduct of research, contributed greatly to the extent and evolution of this positive attitude, by providing large reports and news releases about "what's new" on the archaeological site from "the city center" (Fig. 7).

After the discovery of the two superimposed churches (from mid-eighteenth century and from 1812) and the related graveyard, the documentation of the archaeological situation, the conservation of small finds and the publication of primary results, the work of the archaeological team was considered complete. Upon completion of the excavations, the area with the vestiges of the two churches was left uncovered and turned

⁹ Cristoceca *et alii* 2008, pp. 227-229.

¹⁰ Maschio, Măndescu, Cioflan 2008, pp. 145-164.

¹¹ Cristoceca *et alii* 2007, pp. 69-71.



Fig. 7. Press report, “Argeșul” newspaper, year CXXX, no. 5055, June 14-15, 2007, p. 16.



Fig. 8. Press conference held at The Argeș County Museum, July 13, 2007. Photo by D. Măndescu.



Fig. 9. Spot lights embedded in the actual pavement, on the track of the nave walls of the church from 1812. Photo by D. Măndescu.



Fig. 10. Unveiling ceremony of a miniature church, December 26, 2008. According to www.centrul-cultural-Pitești.ro.

in as such by the construction company to the City Council (the beneficiary of the works). Soon a decision should be taken in relation to the possibility of *in situ* preservation for the church remains (a first for Pitești), an option which – as the local press articles began showing – the City Council tended to make, and to which city residents expressed their enthusiasm and full agreement.

On 13 July 2007, a few days after the completion of archaeological excavations, the institutions more or less involved in the project of “The Town Clock Church” after 45 years of oblivion, held a joint press conference in the auditorium of The Argeș County Museum. (Fig. 8). Several prominent figures of Argeș culture and administration were there to answer questions from the press: the deputy mayor, the county director of cultural heritage, the museum director, the bishop’s vicar. After the presentation of the main results of the archaeological research, a new issue was raised: the proper preservation and enhancement of the remains. Many proposals and solutions more or less revolutionary and spectacular were presented: preserving the ruins and covering them with a glass passageway with night lighting, rebuilding the church, 50 years from its demolition (expected year: 2012), placing the newly planned place of worship under an extended patronage: St Nicholas, St Panteleimon (the first patronage) and Saints Constantine and Helen (the patron saints of the city).

All the rest of summer 2007, the dreamers and innocent-naïve resident population waited for the start of the project dealing with the preservation of the ruins from city center. But soon it became obvious that something was not working. The archaeological remains left uncovered at the beginning of July seemed to suddenly no longer interest anyone. Local media also lowered the tone and sharply reduced till suppressing

the stories about the bright fate reserved to ruins, about the glass and reflective passages, about the new church building with many patron saints... Already in August the area of the ruins, still open, was turning slowly but surely in a landfill.

The agony did not last long. Suddenly, in a September morning, the passers through the central area, by then already accustomed to the archaeological trenches opened three months earlier, saw a whole new landscape. The entire archaeological area with the foundations of the two churches had been covered with a thick layer of earth, filled in to the current street level. Soon, in October, the pavers appeared and levelled everything. The ruins' fate was sealed, buried again under a thick layer of earth and cement. Of all the options and solutions, the most economical, hassle free and convenient was chosen, even if petty, modest and dull as vision and execution: the covering of the entire area with cement pavers (coloured in the same yellow as those of the rest of the central pedestrian area) with embedded spotlights to mark the outline of 1812 church (Fig. 9). It was a great distance from the solutions presented at the press conference, now entirely forgotten, but it passed quickly and easily without any significant reaction in the local press or civil society. A cowardly silence and a shameful lack of reaction, broken here and there by the rare (but more meritorious) interventions against the slaying for the second time of "The Town Clock Church".¹² But these isolated opinions had no power (or maybe they were not intended to have any) that would lead to the finalizing of a coherent form of protest.

To avoid any potential reproach, the City Council and the Cultural Center considered necessary to honour the memory of the place at least through a miniature model of the church, if they had not managed to preserve of ruins. So, the second day of Christmas 2008, in the presence of a numerous assistance and, of course, with the blessings of a group of priests, customary on such occasions, over the altar of the true "Town Clock Church", the mayor, the bishop of Argeș and the director of the Municipal Cultural Center, with the sense of duty fulfilled, unveiled the wood and sheet copper miniature of a church (Fig. 10). I deliberately say of *a church*, because the respective miniature (the term "scale model" is too demanding in this case, even inappropriate, since it involves respect for the proportions and the defining features of the monument) had nothing in common with "The Town Clock Church". Except, perhaps, the location. But the simple overlap of the pseudo-symbol above the ancient church, buried again under tons of cement, should have been deemed an impiety. Absolutely embarrassing, ignoring the scale and architecture of the original church, spruced up with colourful windows suggesting stained glass, with a plastic clock (a table clock 'made in China', running on batteries) attached to the western wall (!), and the image of St Nicholas, in a carved bas-relief, placed above the entry, the wood case rather reminiscent of souvenir houses that filled, before 1990, the handcrafts stores (and sometimes the stalls of popular fairs). The towers, made of copper sheets clumsily set together by hammer blows, contributed to the image of complete ridicule. The whole ensemble was completed by a cement pedestal having a base purpose, whose raw and unprocessed surface roughly arose in surrounding green space, the few pine branches that piously-pathetically enveloped the cement failing to conceal it (Fig. 11).

Aside this miniature, an explanatory panel (once the place of advertising display to a mobile network) depicts the church (but a wrong picture due to the erroneous reproduction - reversed - of a period illustrated postcard) and a brief history of the monument (Fig. 12). Of course, the authors of the explanatory text had not forgotten to mention that "the excavations conducted in summer 2007 have not revealed a relevant archaeological inventory" (an excerpt from the archaeological report, but intentionally presented truncated, out of context). For those accustomed to read between the lines it is obvious that in this forced and artificial minimization of the archaeological excavation's results finds its roots a feeble excuse of the decision to send back in asphalt and concrete all the church remains.

Once again, the critical reactions of the community proved to lack coherence and consistency. Nevertheless, there were several interventions full of substance, propagated especially in the 'blogosphere'.¹³ But totally insufficient to counteract the poisoning propagated by the bombastic first page titles of the local

¹² Grigore 2007.

¹³ Antone 2009; Radytz 2009.



Fig. 11. Miniature church and explanatory panel. Photo by Alex Șerban. According to <http://syvantone.blogspot.com>.



Fig. 13. Press report, “Argeșul” newspaper, year CXXXI, no. 5497, December 29, 2008, p. 1.



Fig. 14. News release, “Argeșul” newspaper, year CXXXII, October 8, 2009, p. 5.

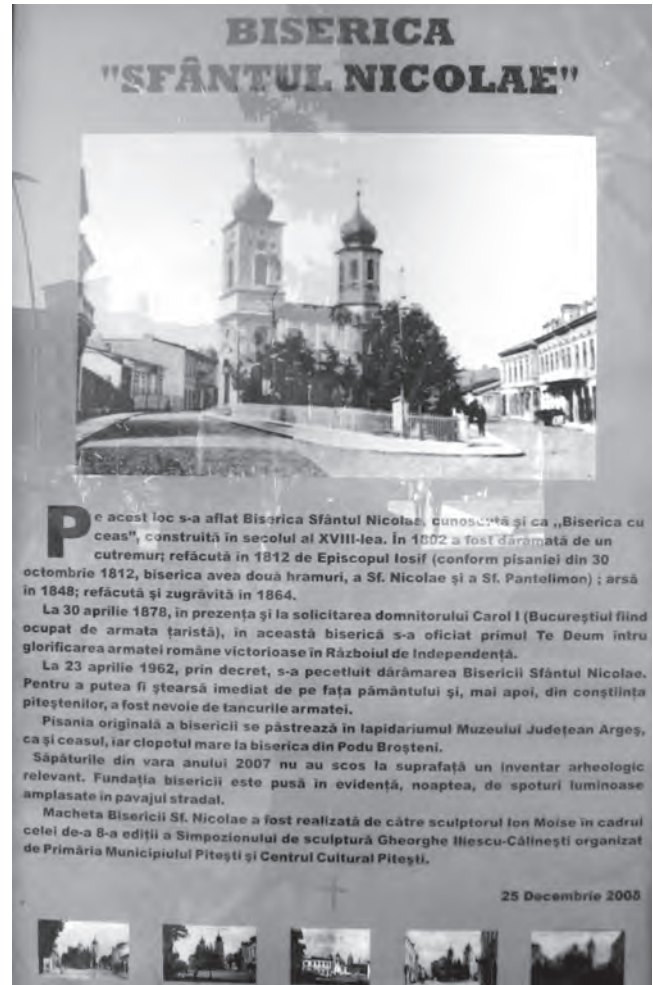


Fig. 12. Explanatory panel mounted on the site of the former “Town Clock Church”. Photo by D. Măndescu.



Fig. 15. Empty base, nearby the explanatory panel (April 2011). Photo by D. Măndescu.



Fig. 16. Pedestrian area under which are the remains of "The Town Clock Church", immediately before the start of archaeological excavations – June 2007 (1) and at present – June 2011 (2). Photo by D. Măndescu.

media, unanimously fallen in ecstasy: *The Town Clock Church has been given again to us* (Fig. 13) and *The Town Clock Church brought back into Pitești life* ("Argeșul", 29 December 2008), *St. Nicholas Church was rebuilt in the city center* ("Curierul Zilei", 29 December 2008) etc.

Almost a year was necessary for the authorities to realize that the simulacrum model, so pompously unveiled during a ceremony worthy of better causes, did not fit at all with the dignity, piety and sad history of the monument which it claimed to symbolize, not to mention its total discordance to the old church in terms of appearance, size and architectural features. In autumn 2009, the repulsive kitsch from Pitești center, served to the community as an evocative monument and urban decoration, was wrapped in a military tarpaulin and stood so for a long time without any 'official' explanation. A short press notice revealed information that the 'model' would prepare for restoration (Fig. 14). It disappeared from the base one morning, as suddenly as it had appeared, following, of course, the path of restoration workshops. Ugly and grey, the cement pedestal remained unoccupied since then (Fig. 15), evidence of a total unsuccessful and not at all inspired attempt to recover a valuable symbol of urban identity.

Today, the only element that evokes to the habitual passers that under their steps are buried the vestiges of "The Town Clock Church" once existing in the middle of Pitești is the explanatory panel displaying the mirrored image of the monument. As for the two rows of spots embedded in the actual pavement, sparsely lined along the perimeter walls, meant to suggest the location of the church at night, soon proved to be an unfortunate solution: some spots would often fail to work, their light quite dim even when they did, and the blasted vitreous material covering them quickly scratched by dust and weather, as well as by the steps of the passers-by. These latter cross the area as indifferent now, as they were in June 2007 - actually, there is no difference in the way of perceiving (ignoring, rather) the historical meaning and significance of the space before and after the archaeological excavations (Fig. 16); there are only a few who dare to read the text on the panel and there are even fewer 'insiders' who understand the purpose of the two parallel lines of spotlights. Another opportunity to save and redeem a piece of former Pitești was missed.

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