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ȘERBAN (SHERBAN) CANTACUZINO (1928 – 2018)

The cultural heritage community has lost a model, a great friend and tireless supporter, and at the same time one of its most active members, Șerban G. Cantacuzino, who died on February 19th, 2018 in London.

Born in Paris, son of renowned Romanian architect George Matei Cantacuzino, Șerban grew up in Romania until the age of 11, when, in 1939, he was taken to England for studies, but also for shelter from the developing political situation in Romania of that time. With the outbreak of World War II, followed by the forced set in of the communist regime, he was not to see his country again for more than three decades. He followed in the footsteps of his father, and, after studies at Winchester College, he enrolled at Magdalene College in Cambridge, to study architecture. His professional career of architect, in the Steane, Shipman and Cantacuzino partnership, was soon complemented by writing and editorial achievements. Of his writing on modern architecture and, later, on cultural heritage one can remember *Modern houses of the world* (1964), *Great modern architecture* (1966), *European domestic architecture: its development from early times* (1969), *Architecture conservation in Europe* (ed., 1975), *New uses for old buildings* (1975), *Saving old buildings* (with Susan Brandt, 1980), *Architecture in continuity. Building in the Islamic world today: the Aga Khan Award for Architecture* (1985), *Re-architecture: old buildings, new uses* (1989), and *What makes a good building? An inquiry by the Royal Fine Art Commission* (1994). To these add the numerous articles and keynote contributions he wrote in the *Architectural Review*, where he started as a member of the editorial board in 1967 and continued as Executive Editor, from 1973 to 1979.

From 1979 to 1994, Șerban Cantacuzino was Secretary of the Royal Fine Art Commission. He also held other high functions, with ICOMOS and ICOMOS UK – Chairman (1987-1993) and then President (1993-2000) – and was member of award juries and panels, rapporteur and rapporteur general of UNESCO and ICOMOS conferences.

Since the late '70s, when, in the wake of the devastating 1977 earthquake, Ceaușescu had launched his attack on the historic environment across Romania, demolishing historic centres – most dramatically in Bucharest – to make room for new political and administrative centres and residential developments, and planning a massive destruction of villages across the country, the so-called systematization policy, Șerban Cantacuzino has been one of most important voices of Romanian diaspora to expose this disaster and speak up for the protection of cultural heritage, through constant efforts and through articles, such as those published in *The Times* or in the *ICOMOS Information*. Through his positions, he pointed to the most notable monuments that were being razed, such as the Mihai Vodă Monastery, Schitul Maicilor, the outstanding Văcărești Monastery, or the church of the Cotroceni Monastery, which had been built by his forebear and namesake, Șerban Cantacuzino, reigning prince of Wallachia, in 1679. At the same time, he advocated the protection of wider urban landscape, introducing a then new perspective, still not consistently applied in Romania to this day, of integrated conservation of historic areas and towns, grounded in the *UNESCO Recommendation concerning the safeguarding and contemporary role of historic areas* (Nairobi, 1976) and the following *ICOMOS Charter for the conservation of historic towns and urban areas* (Washington, 1987). His approach to the developing situation in Bucharest and across Romania was inevitably heartfelt, but unprejudiced and rational, indicating other European examples of “sensible balance of conservation, re-use and redevelopment”, instead of complete

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irrational demolition. He also introduced the broader perspective onto the case under discussion, asserting that “Romanian architecture belongs to the wider European heritage and as such the responsibility for its preservation lies not only with Romanians but with all Europeans” (ICOMOS Information, 2-1987). Fate would bring him back to this position, of building international support for Romanian heritage again, in the 1990s and through his last days, fighting for the rescue of Sighișoara, threatened by an improbable Dracula Park, and later for the possibly most well-known case, the historic mining landscape of Roșia Montană.

From those early 1990s, following the change of political regime in Romania, Șerban Cantacuzino has been constantly involved with the reconstruction of the cultural heritage system, the writing of new laws, the establishment of institutions, the Commission and the Directorate for Historic Monuments, Ensembles and Sites. He was very active, offered advice, participated to debates, organised seminars and tours.

In 2000 Șerban Cantacuzino established the Pro Patrimonio Foundation, intended as a National Trust of Romania, with headquarters in London and branches in France, the USA and, of course, Romania. This was his most effective and long lasting contribution to the protection and re-appreciation of cultural heritage in Romania. Over the years, he was personally involved in protecting the famous wooden churches of Maramureș (UNESCO World Heritage), the churches of Voroneț (UNESCO World Heritage) and Părhăuți in Moldova, he attempted pioneering projects like the restoration of the park of the Bánffy Castle in Bonțida, or the commercial nucleus around the Princely Court of Bucharest, the Lipscani area. Here, he sought to determine the ministry of culture to recognize the value of the area and invest in it, once again bringing his modern vision on the integrated conservation of historic areas, to no avail. Another project, Gates of Brașov, started from one individual request from an owner and grew to include several properties and attract cooperation of the County Directorate for Culture and the Evangelical Church. It was a seed for a possible wider community involvement and for the necessary joint projects of civil society and public authorities, an approach that would become specific to Pro Patrimonio.

The Foundation has grown and is now running projects that can be considered pioneering for Romania, like the 60 Wooden Churches, the Enescu House, the Țibănești traditional craft centre, the Petricari-Davila Manor House, the Landscape Observatory at the Golescu Villa in Câmpulung, to name just the more important ones.

But the activity of Șerban Cantacuzino in the field of cultural heritage went beyond the work of the Foundation; he was always attentive to the actions and endeavours of other groups or organisations and to their potential need for support; he was equally seeking to involve authorities, to help them take the right decisions in support of heritage. Probably one of his greatest such efforts was that for the rescue of Roșia Montană, the famous, outstanding gold mining site in the Apuseni Mountains, the western branch of Romania’s Carpathians.

After a first visit to the site, he decided to act immediately, and organized on February 10, 2004 a first major information event in London, hosted by the Royal Geographical Society, and attended by more than 500 people. He also became a constant supporter and sponsor of independent actions organised at the site, from the yearly Fân Fest - Hay Festival, to the Adopt-a-House at Roșia Montană programme. His most powerful move in this campaign was undoubtedly his commissioning, on behalf and at the request of the Romanian Ministry of Culture, of a scientific assessment of the value of the site’s cultural heritage, entrusted to eminent British archaeologists from the universities of Oxford and Leicester. The by now notorious report, *Statement of Significance. Cărnic Massif, Roșia Montană, jud Alba, Romania*, by Prof Andrew Wilson, Prof David Mattingly and Michael Dawson, 2010-2011, was so positive about the outstanding value of the site, that it was declared inexistent by the minister, and only became public two years later, in autumn 2013, after Șerban Cantacuzino called a press conference, presented the case and announced that Pro Patrimonio had brought it to the court. This report is now among the landmark documents that substantiate the nomination of the Roșia Montană Mining Landscape for inscription on the World Heritage List. The official nomination has been submitted by Romania to UNESCO in 2017.

He was following this case tirelessly: just a few months ago he was phoning to check on the UNESCO nomination, after the then prime-minister had declared publicly his intention to withdraw the file. After so many years of intense commitment, he will not be here to see the outcome, whenever this may come.

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Șerban Cantacuzino was a fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects. He was appointed a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the 1988 New Year Honours. In 1990 he became honorary member of the newly established Romanian National Commission of Historic Monuments, Ensembles and Sites, and of the Romanian Union of Architects. In 1998, on turning 70, he became Professor honoris causa of the “Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urbanism. 10 years later, in 2008, on turning 80 he was celebrated by the Romanian Academy, whose Committee for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology presented him with the “Academic Merit” diploma. Earlier that year, he had received the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage – the Europa Nostra Award, in category Dedicated service.

His generosity, his friendly yet discreet way, his professionalism, his commitment to moral values will remain with us, those who were fortunate to have known him. He will continue to inspire and motivate us to be better. And we will miss him greatly.
Farewell, Șerban Cantacuzino!

Ștefan Bălici