ANNALS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CRAIOVA

Series: ✓*Biology*
✓*Horticulture*
✓*Food products processing technology*
✓*Environmental engineering*

Vol. XXXI (LXVII) - 2026

FRAGMENTATION OF THE URBAN IMAGE IN THE HISTORIC COURTYARDS OF CRAIOVA

Trif Andreea[1]*
[1*]University of Craiova
* *Correspondence author. E-mail*: andreea.trif@edu.ucv.ro

Keywords*: Historic courtyards; Urban morphology; Plot fragmentation; Architectural heritage; Integrated conservation.*

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the fragmentation of historic courtyards along Calea Unirii and adjacent streets in Craiova through diachronic cartographic analysis and the mapping of residential typologies, plot occupation and courtyard conditions. Comparison of historical and contemporary evidence reveals preserved, subdivided and substantially reconfigured courtyards. Fragmentation also affects plots containing listed monuments, indicating that the protection of individual buildings does not necessarily preserve their spatial settings. The findings support integrated conservation of buildings, plot structures and open spaces as interdependent elements of urban heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Craiova developed as a commercial and administrative centre of Oltenia around the Bania residence, St. Demetrius Church and the Old Market, near Hurezi Inn. Its early urban fabric combined aristocratic and monastic estates with generous gardens and smaller properties along major trade routes (Rădvan and Ciobanu, 2023).

Nineteenth-century commercial growth consolidated the dense, narrow plots and continuous frontages of Lipscani, while aristocratic and merchant residences occupied larger properties. This contrast between compact commercial and spacious residential fabric shaped the city's morphology (Conzen, 1960) and its architectural identity (Boangiu, 2021).

Courtyards and gardens provided functional, social and representational space and formed an essential part of the historic townscape (Cullen, 1961). Their relationship with buildings and plot boundaries is central to the integrated urban-landscape perspective promoted by UNESCO (2011).

Nationalisation and property subdivision during the communist period, followed after 1989 by restitution, development pressure and individual additions, progressively altered historic compounds.

Preserving a listed building does not necessarily protect its setting: subdivision, infill and inconsistent architectural or landscape interventions can undermine the physical and visual coherence of its courtyard (ICOMOS, 1987).

The study identifies patterns and mechanisms of courtyard transformation in central Craiova and assesses their implications for the integrated conservation of historic plots, buildings and open spaces.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research employs a diachronic urban morphological approach, combining the comparative analysis of historical cartographic documents with the mapping of surviving historic residences, the examination of plot occupation patterns, and the assessment of present courtyard conditions. This integrated methodology aims to identify the processes that have progressively transformed the spatial organisation of historic residential properties and to evaluate their implications for the morphological coherence of Craiova's historic urban fabric.

The study area encompasses Calea Unirii and its adjoining streets, forming a representative urban corridor that connects the former commercial centre with Nicolae Romanescu Park, developed from the historic Bibescu Garden. The park was redesigned by French landscape architect Édouard Redont, whose project received a gold medal at the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition. Beyond its historical and landscape significance, this urban axis was selected because it incorporates a considerable diversity of architectural typologies, plot configurations, and patterns of open-space occupation.

The northern section is characterised by the compact commercial fabric of Lipscani, with narrow and elongated plots, continuous street frontages, and relatively high building density. Towards the southern section, the urban morphology gradually changes, incorporating larger residential properties, including former aristocratic and merchant residences traditionally associated with reception courtyards and landscaped gardens. This morphological diversity provides a suitable framework for comparing different relationships between buildings, property boundaries, and open spaces, as well as their subsequent transformations.

The first analytical stage consists of a diachronic comparison of cartographic documents corresponding to four chronological reference points: 1780, 1854, 1970, and 2026. These sources allow the examination of changes in the street network, urban block configuration, plot structure, building footprints, and the distribution of built and unbuilt spaces. Particular attention is given to the persistence of inherited morphological elements and the identification of discontinuities resulting from successive phases of urban development.

To facilitate comparison, historical plans were brought to comparable scales and spatially aligned using relatively stable urban features, including major streets, intersections, and identifiable elements of the inherited urban structure. However, differences in cartographic accuracy, surveying techniques, and graphical representation were explicitly considered when interpreting the results. The earliest documents primarily support the reconstruction of general urban evolution, while the more detailed plans allow closer investigation of individual plots, building arrangements, and courtyard configurations. Consequently, the interpretation prioritises identifiable spatial transformations rather than attempting to establish precise dates for changes that cannot be reliably documented.

The second stage involves the identification and classification of surviving historic residential buildings according to their architectural character and relationship with the surrounding urban fabric. Four categories were distinguished: historic dwellings incorporating ground-floor commercial functions, imposing

aristocratic residences, substantial residential buildings of notable architectural quality, and more modest but architecturally ornamented dwellings. Their spatial distribution was mapped to highlight the relationship between architectural typology, historical urban functions, and plot organisation.

A complementary analysis examines the position of buildings within their plots, distinguishing three principal occupation patterns: continuous street-front buildings, semi-detached buildings associated with lateral courtyards or gardens, and detached residences with front reception courtyards. This classification provides a basis for understanding how the original arrangement of buildings conditioned the dimensions, functions, and spatial significance of associated open spaces.

The third analytical stage focuses specifically on the present condition of historic courtyards and gardens. Three categories were identified: courtyards that have largely preserved their spatial integrity, fragmented courtyards associated with subdivided plots, and properties where the original open-space organisation has been substantially or completely altered. This classification considers the continuity of courtyard space, the presence of later constructions, and the legibility of the historical relationship between principal buildings and their surroundings.

The resulting cartographic layers were subsequently correlated with the distribution of listed historic monuments and protected heritage areas. This procedure enables the identification of situations in which protected architectural structures coexist with modified or fragmented courtyard configurations, highlighting potential discrepancies between the conservation of individual buildings and the preservation of their wider spatial settings.

The analysis also records morphological indications of plot subdivision, incremental infill, secondary constructions, extensions, and altered building–courtyard relationships. Importantly, changes in mapped plot boundaries are interpreted as evidence of spatial reconfiguration rather than definitive confirmation of changes in legal property ownership.

Finally, the three analytical maps were comparatively interpreted to identify recurring patterns and mechanisms of courtyard transformation. Where available, contemporary photographic documentation complements the cartographic investigation by illustrating visible changes in architectural materials, enclosure elements, landscape arrangements, and spatial continuity. The combined interpretation provides a qualitative understanding of historic courtyard fragmentation and its potential consequences for the architectural, morphological, and landscape coherence of Craiova's historic residential ensembles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The comparative examination of historical maps reveals the predominantly organic development of Craiova's urban structure, shaped by the convergence of regional trade routes, local topography, and the gradual consolidation of commercial and residential areas. The earliest cartographic documents identify several major access routes converging towards Răscruciul Mare, the principal commercial and administrative intersection, situated near the former Bania residence and Hurezi Inn. The resulting street network displays an irregular configuration, reflecting the progressive adaptation of the settlement to geographical conditions rather than the implementation of a predetermined urban plan. Its development was also influenced by the local topography, particularly the terraces of the Jiu Valley, which contributed to the distinctive morphology of the historic town (Rădvan and Ciobanu, 2023).

By 1854, the street network had become increasingly consolidated, with the introduction of secondary streets and the gradual densification of the commercial centre. The development of smaller circulation routes, particularly around the area known as Răscruciul Mic, contributed to a more articulated urban structure. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, railway development, new boulevards, and successive modernisation initiatives introduced additional connections. Nevertheless, considerable portions of the inherited street network remained recognisable, demonstrating the persistence of earlier urban patterns.

The historical plot structure reflects the coexistence of different forms of land ownership, social organisation, and urban functions. Large aristocratic and monastic estates occupied extensive properties, while smaller commercial and residential plots developed along the principal streets. Within the Lipscani district, narrow and elongated parcels, continuous building frontages, and intensive land occupation generated a compact commercial morphology. In contrast, representative aristocratic and merchant residences were generally associated with larger properties, including reception courtyards, landscaped gardens, and secondary buildings.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, changing property arrangements and increasing urban density encouraged the subdivision of larger plots and the progressive occupation of previously open areas. However, differences in the accuracy and level of detail of historical cartographic documents limit the possibility of establishing the precise chronology of individual subdivisions. These transformations should therefore be interpreted primarily as observable morphological changes rather than direct evidence of specific legal or administrative processes.

A different transformation mechanism emerged through large-scale redevelopment during the communist period, when traditional plot configurations were frequently replaced by larger development parcels and new building typologies. Unlike gradual densification, these interventions produced more substantial discontinuities in the inherited urban fabric, altering the relationships between street frontages, buildings, and open spaces.

Consequently, two major processes can be distinguished: incremental transformation through plot subdivision, extensions, and infill construction, and extensive redevelopment involving the replacement of existing spatial structures. Both processes influenced the configuration of historic courtyards, although their effects varied according to the original building typology and plot dimensions. Importantly, plot subdivision does not necessarily result in visual fragmentation, just as the preservation of property boundaries does not guarantee the continuity of the original architectural and landscape composition.

The analysis of surviving historic residential buildings reveals a differentiated distribution of architectural typologies within the study area. Four categories were identified according to architectural character, building dimensions, and urban significance: historic dwellings incorporating ground-floor commercial spaces, imposing aristocratic residences, substantial but less elaborate residential buildings, and more modest ornamented dwellings (Figure 1).

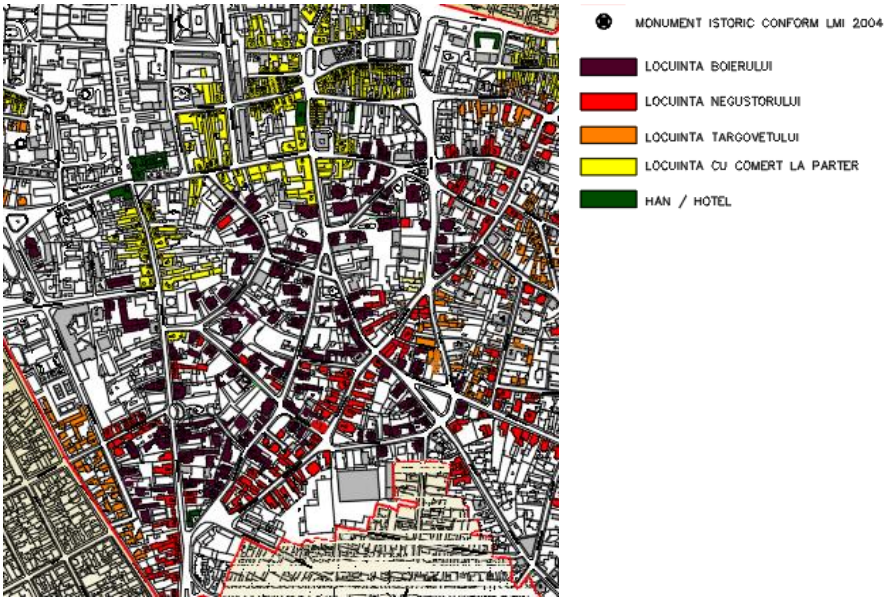


Figure 1. The architectural quality of historic residential buildings

The yellow-coded category, corresponding to mixed-use historic buildings, is predominantly concentrated within the former Lipscani commercial district. These buildings generally occupy narrow, elongated plots and form continuous street frontages, reflecting the historical importance of commercial activities and the intensive use of urban land. Their configuration illustrates the close relationship between architectural form, economic function, and the morphology of the traditional commercial centre.

The dark-purple category includes imposing aristocratic residences, generally associated with larger plots and more generous open spaces. Historically, their courtyards and gardens performed functional, social, and representational roles, contributing to the architectural composition and the relationship between the residence and the public street. These properties represent a particularly significant component of Craiova's historic residential heritage.

Buildings marked in red form an intermediate category, comprising substantial residences of notable dimensions and architectural quality, although generally less elaborate than aristocratic houses. Their distribution reflects the development of a prosperous residential environment during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The orange category identifies more modest but still ornamented dwellings, which contribute to the architectural continuity and finer grain of the historic urban fabric.

The spatial distribution of these categories demonstrates that the study area is not morphologically homogeneous. Instead, it comprises overlapping layers of commercial, aristocratic, and middle-class residential development, each associated with specific relationships between buildings and open spaces. This diversity is particularly relevant to the present research because the original architectural and social character of a property influenced the dimensions, configuration, and importance of its courtyard or garden.



Figure 2. The buildings plot distribution

A second analytical map examines the position of historic residential buildings within their plots, identifying three principal patterns of occupation: continuous street-front buildings, semi-detached buildings associated with lateral gardens, and detached residences with front reception courtyards (Figure 2). This classification reflects the relationship between building typology and urban morphology, consistent with the interpretative approach developed by Caniggia and Maffei (2001).

The yellow-coded plots correspond to continuous street-front buildings, generally without formal reception courtyards. This arrangement is characteristic of the compact commercial centre, where direct street access and frontage continuity were prioritised over generous private open spaces. Consequently, the remaining unbuilt areas were often situated towards the rear of the property and fulfilled predominantly utilitarian functions.

The orange-coded plots represent buildings attached to one party wall and accompanied by lateral reception gardens. This configuration provides an intermediate relationship between the street-oriented commercial building and the detached residential property. The lateral courtyard creates a transitional space between the building and its surroundings, allowing a degree of architectural representation while maintaining a relatively compact plot organisation.

The red-coded category comprises detached and setback residences, generally associated with front reception courtyards. These configurations are typical of more representative residential properties, where the courtyard forms part of the architectural composition and mediates the transition between public and private space. Its proportions, accessibility, vegetation, and relationship with the principal façade contribute to the perception of the property as a coherent ensemble.

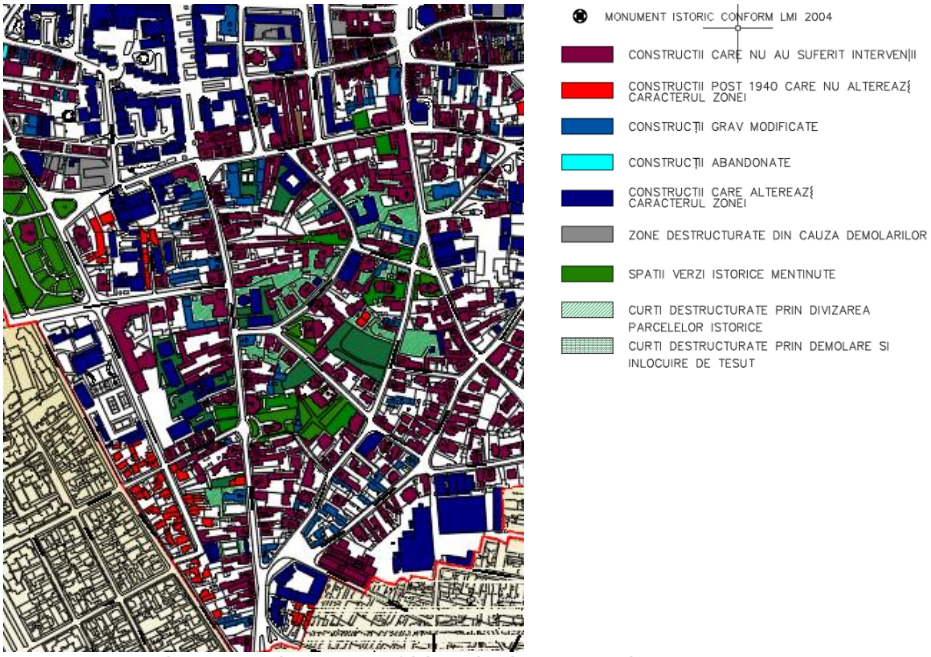


Figure 3. The state of historical courtyards

The typological differences identified through this map are essential for understanding the later transformation of historic courtyards. Larger detached and semi-detached properties generally offered more substantial open spaces, but their dimensions also created greater opportunities for subsequent subdivision and additional construction. By contrast, in the compact commercial fabric, transformations more frequently affected the internal depth of plots, rear buildings, and secondary open spaces.

The original configuration of the property can therefore be understood as a factor influencing its morphological vulnerability. Nevertheless, the presence of a larger courtyard does not automatically imply a greater degree of fragmentation. The actual condition of each property depends on the cumulative effects of subsequent interventions, making it necessary to correlate building placement with the present organisation of open spaces.

The third analytical map examines the current condition of historic courtyards and gardens, distinguishing three principal categories: preserved courtyards, fragmented courtyards associated with subdivided plots, and properties whose original open-space configurations have been substantially or completely altered (Figure 3).

Continuous green identifies courtyards that have largely retained their spatial integrity. These are generally associated with larger residential properties, particularly former aristocratic and representative dwellings, where the relationship between the principal building and its surrounding open space remains identifiable. Although individual architectural or landscape elements may have changed, the courtyard continues to function as a recognisable component of the historic property.

Green lines indicate plots where subdivision has resulted in the fragmentation of originally coherent courtyards. In these cases, open space has not

necessarily disappeared, but its spatial continuity has been interrupted through the introduction of boundaries, secondary constructions, or separate functional arrangements. The original courtyard may survive as several smaller areas, often with reduced architectural and landscape coherence.

This distinction is important because fragmentation cannot be evaluated exclusively through the reduction of open-space surfaces. A courtyard may retain a considerable unbuilt area while losing its historical proportions, visual continuity, or relationship with the principal residence. Conversely, minor alterations do not necessarily compromise the overall legibility of the ensemble. The qualitative assessment must therefore consider both physical configuration and spatial relationships.

Green points identify properties where the original courtyard or garden has been substantially transformed through new construction, extensions, or extensive spatial reorganisation. In these situations, the inherited relationship between building, open space, and landscape is largely obscured or no longer identifiable.

The distribution of these categories reveals different degrees of preservation and transformation across the study area. Courtyards retaining their integrity are more frequently associated with larger representative residential properties, while fragmented courtyards are encountered in areas where historic plots have undergone successive subdivisions. Transitional zones between the compact commercial centre and the more spacious residential fabric display particularly complex combinations of inherited plot structures and later interventions.

The comparative interpretation of the three analytical maps highlights four recurring mechanisms of courtyard transformation: inherited typological vulnerability, subdivision of historic plots, incremental occupation of open space, and complete reconfiguration of the property.

These mechanisms frequently operate in combination rather than independently. For example, the subdivision of a large residential plot may initially preserve portions of the original courtyard, while subsequent extensions, fences, and secondary buildings progressively reduce its spatial coherence. The cumulative effects of these relatively small interventions can ultimately produce a transformation comparable in significance to more extensive redevelopment.

Such processes demonstrate that courtyard fragmentation is neither uniform nor necessarily accompanied by the disappearance of the principal historic building. In some cases, the architectural structure remains recognisable while its original spatial setting has been considerably altered. This distinction is particularly relevant to the perception and continuity of the historic urban image, in which the relationships between buildings and surrounding spaces contribute to the identity of the urban environment (Lynch, 1960).

An additional analytical layer was introduced by identifying listed historic monuments within the study area, represented by black circles on the maps. Correlating heritage designation with building typology, plot occupation, and courtyard condition reveals a discrepancy between the protection of individual architectural objects and the preservation of their associated spatial settings.

The analysis indicates that several properties containing listed historic buildings have experienced subdivision or courtyard reconfiguration despite the continued presence of the protected architectural structure. In such situations, the historic building survives, but its original spatial relationships with gardens, reception courtyards, secondary buildings, or property boundaries have been partially altered.

This phenomenon is particularly significant in the case of former aristocratic residences, where the courtyard was frequently an integral element of the architectural composition. Its proportions, vegetation, and visual relationship with the principal façade contributed to the representational character of the property. Consequently, the preservation of the residence without equivalent consideration of its associated open spaces may result in an incomplete conservation of the original heritage values.

The findings also suggest that the cumulative effects of successive interventions deserve particular attention. Individual alterations may appear relatively limited when evaluated independently, but their combined influence can progressively weaken the morphological continuity and landscape character of historic residential ensembles. This reinforces the need to understand heritage conservation as an ongoing process involving the management of spatial transformations rather than exclusively the protection of architectural structures.

Although Romanian heritage legislation establishes mechanisms for protecting listed monuments and their surroundings, the observed morphological transformations suggest that heritage designation alone does not necessarily prevent the progressive alteration of historic plot configurations. The cartographic evidence does not establish the administrative circumstances or legal status of individual interventions; it nevertheless illustrates the importance of considering their cumulative spatial consequences.

An integrated conservation perspective should therefore address historic buildings, inherited plot structures, courtyards, gardens, and the relationships between built and unbuilt spaces as interconnected components of the urban landscape. This approach is consistent with the principles of the UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (2011) and the ICOMOS Washington Charter (1987), which emphasise the significance of urban structure, spatial relationships, and the wider historical setting in heritage conservation.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the fragmentation of Craiova's historic courtyards represents a gradual and differentiated process, influenced by inherited morphological characteristics and successive phases of urban transformation. Preserving the architectural identity of the historic city therefore requires attention not only to the survival of individual buildings but also to the continuity of the spatial relationships that originally defined their architectural and landscape character.

CONCLUSIONS

Craiova's historic fabric combines a dense commercial core with more spacious representative residential plots. This morphological diversity shaped both the historic use and the subsequent vulnerability of courtyards and gardens.

The three maps distinguish preserved courtyards, those fragmented by subdivision and incremental construction, and plots substantially reconfigured by redevelopment. These changes can erode spatial coherence without removing the principal building.

Fragmented courtyards associated with listed monuments demonstrate the limits of building-centred protection. The cumulative effects of individually modest changes are particularly consequential where reception courtyards and gardens formed integral parts of the historic ensemble.

Effective conservation must therefore address plot boundaries, courtyard structure, landscape elements and the relationships between built and unbuilt space.

Managing these interdependent components is essential to maintaining the morphological and visual identity of historic Craiova.

REFERENCES

Boangiu G. 2021. Identity, Cultural Memory and the XIX Century's Architecture in Craiova City and Bucharest, Romania. University of the Arts Helsinki.

Caniggia G., Maffei G.L. 2001. Architectural Composition and Building Typology: Interpreting Basic Building. Alinea Editrice, Florence, 252 p.

Conzen M.R.G. 1960. Alnwick, Northumberland: A Study in Town-Plan Analysis. Institute of British Geographers, Publication No. 27, George Philip & Son, London, 122 p.

Cullen G. 1961. The Concise Townscape. Architectural Press, London.

ICOMOS. 1987. Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas (Washington Charter). International Council on Monuments and Sites, Washington, D.C.

Lynch K. 1960. The Image of the City. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 208 p.

Rădvan L., Ciobanu M.A. 2023. Două planuri necunoscute ale Craiovei din a doua jumătate a secolului al XVIII-lea – jumătatea secolului al XIX-lea. Historia Urbana, 31, 219–239.

UNESCO. 2011. Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, Including a Glossary of Definitions. UNESCO, Paris.