

Article

The Impact of *Tabula Rasa* Actions and *Laissez-Faire* Planning Inaction on Urban Landscape Dynamics: A Bucharest Case Study

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Abstract

This case study of the Văcăreşti area in Bucharest documents what happened to an abandoned communist urban megaproject, which had been undertaken in a typical *tabula rasa* manner, applying the dictatorial politics of the communist regime. A significant monastic complex was razed, and a massive riverine holding basin was partially constructed in the 1980s. The area then experienced several decades of rewilding of the basin and of uncontrolled urban development around it until its recent designation as a Natural Urban Park (NUP). This study uses local observations, desktop research and the results of 48 semi structured interviews with planning and other specialists. It considers the impacts of *tabula rasa* and *laissez-faire* (i.e., uncontrolled and essentially market-driven) planning regimes on the local landscape from the viewpoint of Văcăreşti’s current and potential levels of ecological and cultural resilience and sustainability. The research addresses three questions: (a) what is the study area’s sustainability potential? (b) what, if any, physical interventions to recover the study area’s place memory might be feasible? and (c) how might the resilience of its new urban landscape be improved? The findings from this study have both local and general importance, demonstrating to urban communities why they need to define and act in time in order to capitalize on their natural potential and to recover cultural values which may have been destroyed or damaged. It notes the long-term inaction and lack of coherent urban renewal policies for this study area and concludes that these have magnified the challenges that it currently faces.

Keywords: abandoned spaces; urban megaproject; rewilding; landscape planning; resilience



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1. Introduction

Landscapes are both natural and social facts and the real and symbolic outcomes of cultural production [1]. Urban landscapes, in particular, are subject to pressures resulting from demographic and economic growth, technological and cultural change and shifts in ideological and governance priorities. Since urban areas are projected, by the United Nations, to contain 70% of the world’s population by 2050 [2], careful management of their landscapes is becoming an increasingly critical factor in achieving both local and global sustainability [3]. To this end, the European Landscape Convention (ELC), which defines landscapes as the result of interactions between natural and anthropic factors, advises

public authorities to adopt appropriate policies to protect and manage urban landscapes [4]. Furthermore, the ELC places an obligation on political and administrative decision-makers to consult local residents with regard to their views on current landscape quality and future landscape initiatives [5].

The processes of urban landscape change are highly complex. On occasion, these processes can involve wholesale transformations of neighbourhoods and localities. These transformations lessen or even obliterate local landscape heritage values as former buildings and/or land uses are erased in what Dahl [6] terms a *tabula rasa* sequence of demolition and redevelopment. In our paper *tabula rasa* refers to spaces which can be treated as empty by an authoritarian regime regardless of its pre-existing uses and values. Holistic urban redevelopment policies of this type essentially ‘replace’ one place with another in the same locality [7]. Taylor [8], among others, has described such urban planning approaches as unsustainable, citing both the volume of resources consumed in development and reconstruction and the (foregone) potential for the refurbishment and reuse of existing structures. Harvey [9] identifies the demolition and reconstruction that took place in Paris during its trajectory to modernity in the nineteenth century as an example of creative destruction, noting the high regard in which Haussmann’s townscape is now held.

Since many cities have experienced complex and traumatic urban transformation processes, and urban landscape resilience is growing in importance in a world where natural and anthropogenic disasters (including pandemics, refugee crises, wars and climate change) are becoming increasingly common. During the last decade, the concept of resilience has featured in academic debates in both the natural and human sciences, including those connected with urban and territorial dynamics. Resilience has been used as a conceptual tool which communities at varying scales can use to prepare themselves for new challenges, or to provide them with different responses to future crises [10]. On a more theoretical level, it can serve as a paradigm shift for planning thinkers and practitioners [11]. Davoudi [11] argues that the resilience concept has evolved beyond its initial engineering origins and is now being applied in ecological and evolutionary contexts.

The potential for urban resilience is threatened by exponential growth pressures and unpredictable “black swan” events [12] which also increase urban vulnerability. Furthermore, the actions of authoritarian regimes frequently decrease urban resilience levels [13] since their *tabula rasa* approach to (re)development lessens urban diversity and complexity [14]. While Nachmany and Hananel [15] argue that urban renewal should promote diversity and pursue a combination of social, economic and environmental aims, there is a tendency, under a sequence of *tabula rasa* and *laissez-faire* planning regimes, for certain parcels of land to be cleared and abandoned, sometimes for considerable periods. At one level, such land parcels tend to be resilient in and of themselves [16]. Areas abandoned for decades possess the natural capacity to create a secondary landscape, a re-naturalisation of a formerly anthropic area [11,12,17]. However, the future sustainability of such landscapes is dependent upon both the local climatic and pedological conditions, and government and community approaches to the returning natural phenomena [18].

Bucharest provides numerous examples of centrally planned *tabula rasa* redevelopment projects from the recent (1945–1989) communist period. These sweeping communist era redevelopments, which effectively reduced places to sites and then reconstructed them as different places [19,20], can be seen, in Schumpeterian terms, as processes of creative destruction. With the passage of time and changes in political circumstances, however, at least some of these *tabula rasa* redevelopments have become obsolete, thereby presenting opportunities to follow this phase of creative destruction with one of destructive creation [21].

The abandonment of a communist planning model and its replacement with a liberal urban development paradigm required a complete reorientation of Bucharest’s planning

structures, aims, and policies. In the chaotic and protracted period between the collapse of the communist system and the adoption of new planning legislation, numerous examples occurred where even the most basic norms of urban development were not respected. This lack of concern was particularly characteristic of the protection of urban green spaces and water bodies and their environs [22]. In a context of radical land reform, a relative lack of appropriate urban planning tools, and a weak institutional response to the pressures of population change, new real estate developers were able to rapidly transform the city's residential and commercial spaces strongly affecting the urban landscape [23]. Immediately after the collapse of the autocratic Ceausescu regime, the communist pursuit of urban densification ceased [24]. In the first years of the transition, the new government's land reform policies, including the total privatisation of the city's apartment stock, allowed for highly speculative developments. By the turn of the millennium, these administrative changes had enabled significant changes to be made to the urban landscape and especially to its green spaces and waterfront areas [25–27]. In recent decades both the state and the local authorities have allowed a *laissez-faire* style of management to characterise the city's development.

The case study of the Văcărești area presented here provides an illustration of all the planning and sustainability issues raised above and is an exemplar of the communist and post-communist shifts in urban landscape management in Romania. It therefore has potential relevance for urban planning and sustainability elsewhere in Eastern Europe and even in other nations where authoritarian urban management regimes have been succeeded by more liberal, democratic and/or capitalist systems, albeit though a variety of political and economic trajectories [28]. The Văcărești Monastic Complex, an important symbol of Bucharest's history, was razed to the ground by the "church phobic" Ceausescu regime and the area was repurposed as part of a hydrotechnical megaproject in the Arges basin [29]. The megaproject's aim was to ensure a sufficient water level in the city's Dâmbovița River to enable its use for year-round navigation [30]. In order to achieve this, the Văcărești area was repurposed as a water management reservoir. The resultant cleared space has become partially (and seasonally) inundated.

It has also experienced a degree of spontaneous revegetation, and, in 2016, it was formally designated as a Natural Urban Park. Although the administrative protection of this area, allowed for it to be explored as a natural space by local individuals and groups, policy interventions to ensure its sustainability and increased resilience did not exist [30]. For and the overall wellbeing of the local and wider communities [31], this area requires greater integration into the surrounding urban structure as an ecologically healthy landscape [32]. Unfortunately, the case study confirms that the main environmental issues confronting this abandoned area, have been ignored both by local stakeholders [33] and by developers, who have exploited the incoherence or lack of appropriate urban policy measures [30]. If sustainable urban development is to be achieved, the management of vacant land through the application of specific revitalisation policies is a high priority exercise [34]. Such land is a dormant resource. To realise its' potential, both an evaluation of its' suitability for different land use options and the creation of institutional and legal frameworks which meet local community expectations will be required [35].

After decades of destruction, large scale—and unpopular [36]—top-down repurposing and subsequent neglect, this locality now has the potential to become a sustainable component of Bucharest's urban landscape and, once again, to be a place of value for the local community.

Subsequent sections of this paper provide a brief summation of the turbulent recent history of the Văcărești area and an outline of the challenges inherent in its rehabilitation. We then describe the results of a survey of a range of technical experts on the nature

and causes of the Natural Urban Park's problems and their views on its future landscape planning and management. Our paper concludes with some thoughts on the impacts of both intervention and neglect on the resilience and sustainability of urban areas.

A consideration of the area's medium-term history as outlined above gives rise to three research questions: (a) what is the study area's sustainability potential? (b) what, if any, physical interventions to recover the study area's place memory might be feasible? and (c) how might the resilience of its new urban landscape be improved?

To assist in answering these questions, we have formulated five broad and interrelated working hypotheses:

- H1.** *The tabula rasa approach drastically reduces the resilient capacity of urban landscapes.*
- H2.** *The physical characteristics of abandoned spaces can contribute to the resilience potential of urban landscapes.*
- H3.** *Delays in the rehabilitation of abandoned spaces by post-communist urban administrations can be largely explained by their lack of financial and other resources.*
- H4.** *The reintegration of abandoned spaces into their surrounding urban landscapes requires an integrated vision for their future development.*
- H5.** *Sustainable redevelopment of such spaces entails both nature-based solutions to harmonise present and future needs and the (re)integration of the historical and cultural memories of these places.*

Given the challenges facing the park and the potential controversies relating to its development, these hypotheses were raised, rather than scientifically tested, in an interview survey which sought the views of a wide range of experts on the area's past, present and future. The development and the results of this survey are described in the following sections.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. The Study Area

The Văcărești study area is in the inner suburban zone of Bucharest. It includes the 183 ha. Văcărești Natural Park (Figure 1), which was designated as a natural urban park in 2016. Part of the park consists of a proposed artificial lake within a 10 to 12 metre embankment which was constructed in 1988–1989. Although it has never reached full capacity, its water is used for domestic supply and to regulate water levels in the adjoining Dâmbovița River.

The former monastic Văcărești complex (Figure 2), which covered 1.8 ha., was in the southwest of the study area. Following its demolition, it was replaced by the Sun Plaza Mall and other commercial buildings (Figure 3).

Prior to 1986, the urban landscape of both the contemporary lake area and the former monastery had remained relatively stable. In conformity with ecclesiastical practice, the monastery experienced only very small internal changes. After the Second World War what is now the Văcărești Lake area experienced slow residential growth. Both areas experienced radical changes over the following four years in conformity with Ceaușescu's megalomaniac attitudes with regard to urban landscapes [37]. He envisaged transformative urban projects affecting both the city of Bucharest and the Dâmbovița River. Between September and December 1986, the Văcărești monastic complex was demolished, and, in 1988, the excavation of Văcărești Lake commenced, together with construction of the

surrounding embankment. By the beginning of 1990, this *tabula rasa* approach ensured that the entire area was an empty space and, until 2016, it was essentially an abandoned landscape. These actions contrast with some communist/totalitarian practices elsewhere. For example, Hartog and González Martínez [38] highlight the importance ascribed to the recuperation of traditional values and the resignification of cultural memory in Chinese urban planning. The *laissez-faire* attitude of the local planning authorities over a period of more than two decades, and uncertainties over the land's legal and ownership status allowed natural rewilding processes to occur. Subsequently, local ecological associations were encouraged to propose the creation of an urban nature reserve on the site of the former projected lake. In mid-2016, the Romanian government passed an act creating the Văcărești Natural Park. However, the park area exhibits numerous shortcomings because of its recent turbulent and neglected histories and will require considerable rehabilitation if it is to operate successfully as a resilient and sustainable urban open space.

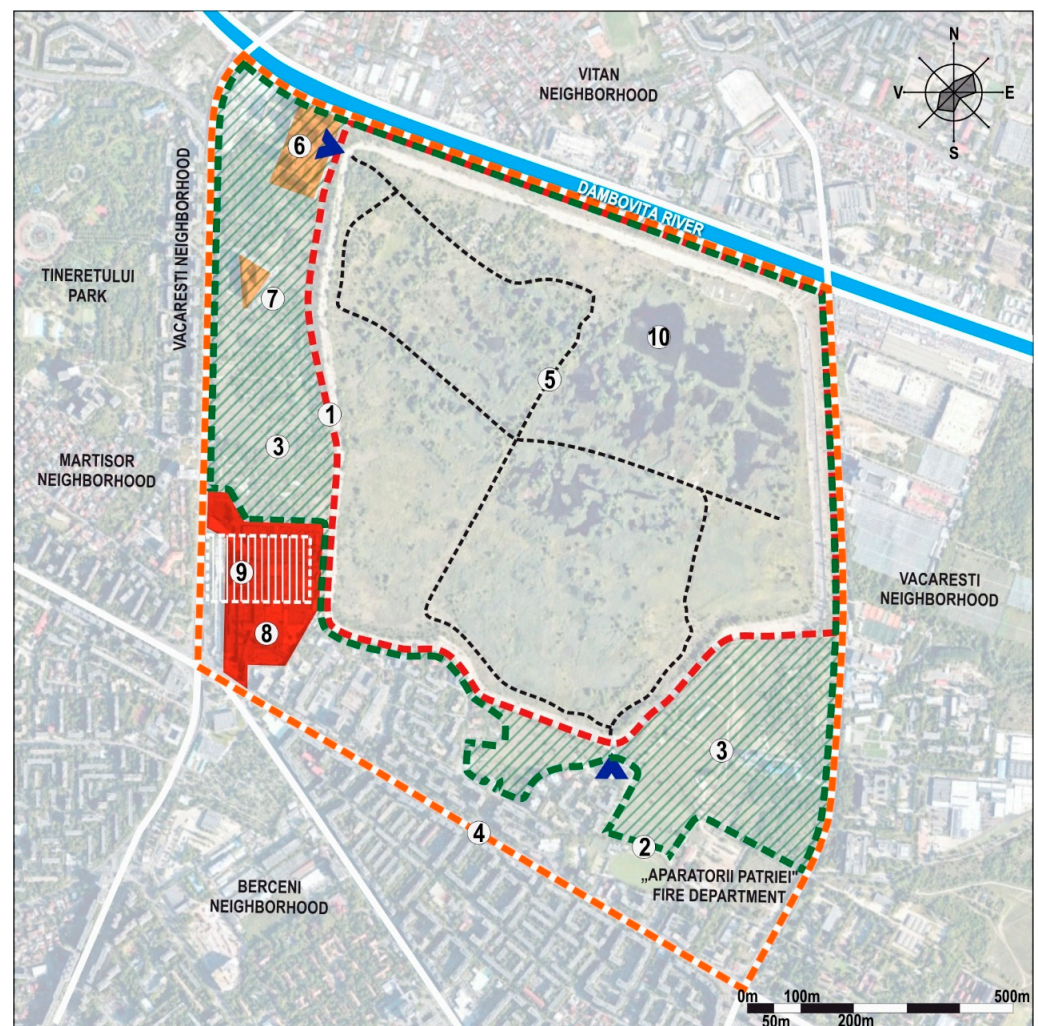


Figure 1. Văcărești Natural Urban Park area. Source: Authors. 1. Văcărești protected landscape boundary; 2. Buffer zone boundary; 3. Buffer zone; 4. Limit of the study area; 5. Walkways; 6. “Asmita Gardens” residential complex; 7. “Delta City” residential complex (under development); 8. “Sun Plaza” shopping centre; 9. The former Văcărești monastic complex; 10. Seasonally inundated areas.

The embankment and the park are now surrounded by a buffer zone which is partially occupied by residential and commercial buildings while the remainder of the zone is unused. A luxury residential complex, *Asmida Gardens*, was constructed in the buffer zone

in 2008–2009. The site of the demolished Văcărești Monastic complex is now partially occupied by a recently constructed commercial area which includes the Sun Plaza Mall and related infrastructure. The remainder of the western buffer zone has residential potential, and another investor is currently creating a development called *Delta City* (Figure 1). However, the land between Delta City and Sun Plaza remains unused because of ongoing uncertainties related to land ownership issues.

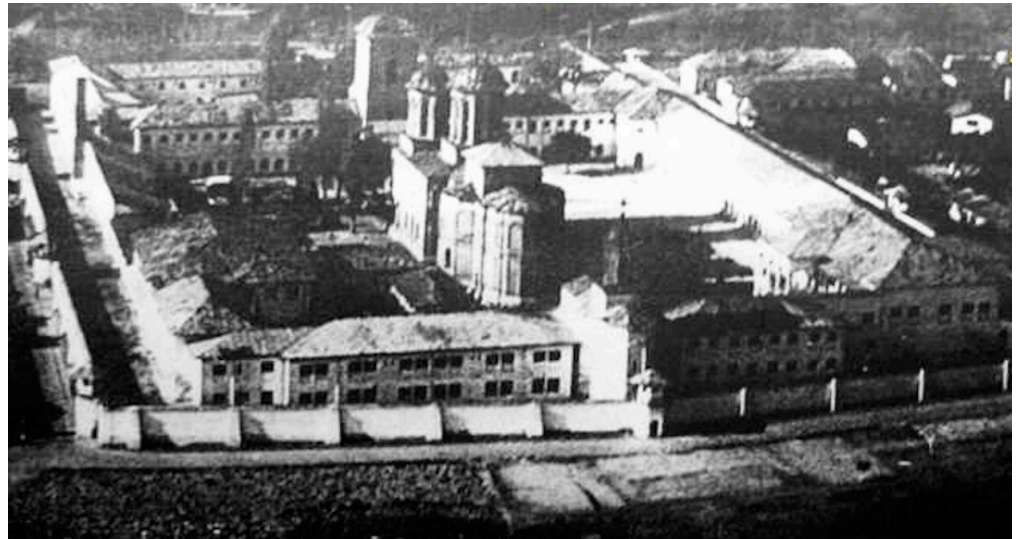


Figure 2. Perspective overall Văcărești Monastery in 1974. Source: Rotman, L., 1974, “Văcărești Monastery—Historical Notes”.



Figure 3. Perspective from Văcărești Urban Natural Park on the mall built on the site of Văcărești Monastery in 2022. Source: 2022 Google Earth.

For more than three decades, the area within the embankment has experienced rewilding as a result of its physical separation from the surrounding urban areas and its administrative neglect by the relevant planning authorities [39]. However, these factors have failed to prevent external disruptions by such processes as poaching, the lighting of fires and urban waste disposal. These urban interventions exacerbate the constraints on rewilding that were previously imposed by the incomplete *tabula rasa* construction project. These constraints relate to water circulation, soil quality and the isolation of the area’s ecosystem. The park’s soil cover is fragmented with numerous areas still covered by expanses of concrete left over from the megaproject. A permanent lake exists in the lowest

lying northeastern corner of the park where a concrete substrate was created to prevent infiltration between the holding basin and the Dâmbovița River. Elsewhere, the irregular nature of the land surface allows for the presence of numerous small water bodies which disappear and reappear seasonally. There is, therefore, a lack of regular freshwater surface flow through the park. This flow is also polluted by dust and garbage which are washed off the embankment walls into the park during heavy rainfall events. Together with the shelter and summer temperature increases provided by the surrounding embankment, this gives rise to eutrophication processes which limit the development of diverse and resilient ecosystems across the park area [32].

Given these constraints, it is unsurprising that there are divisions within the local community over the designation of and future directions for the park. Some see the proposed rewilding and beautification processes as a positive ecological and social addition to the inner urban landscape, or at least as a means of ridding the area of wild dogs and a homeless (and therefore potentially criminal) population. Others fear that ongoing rewilding might result in the local importation of pests and, therefore, diseases [39].

2.2. Methodology

Our exploratory research, as summarised above, focused on the relevant literature and on comparative analyses of maps, plans and photographic images. For maps and graphic representation, we have used Google Earth, land use cover data, and a GIS tool for classical information processing. Following this stage, our main source of data is a series of semi-structured interviews with a wide range of urban planning specialists. Some elements of social network analysis [40] were employed in this process and the work of Hâncean [41] and Rice and Yoshioka-Maxwell [42] was used to enhance our interpretations of the interviewees' responses.

Given the inherent diversity of the urban planning process, which involves specialists from a range of fields, we have identified four main categories of planning specialists, namely architects, urban planners, landscape planners and geographers. We have also added a fifth category of planning-related specialists comprising engineers and ecologists.

A snowball sampling process [43] was used to recruit a wide ranging and knowledgeable pool of respondents. Our starting point was a well-known local specialist who was also the Chief Architect of the first project to acknowledge the historical and ecological significance of the projected Văcărești lake area. As such, he had extensive and long-term experience of the area's planning and landscape issues and challenges. He agreed to our suggestion that we select locally knowledgeable respondents from four relevant domains of expertise, namely urban planning, architecture, landscape and geography and he proposed that an additional category of specialists in ecology and engineering also be included. He provided us with the names of one specialist for each of the selected domains. These five individuals then agreed to work with us, and they all provided the names of other specialists whom we then contacted. Through this iterative process, we contacted 124 specialists in all. Since their involvement in this process required participation in a 45–60 min semi-structured interview, only 48 of those whom we approached agreed to take part. Figure 4 documents and describes the sequential phases of this research process.

The specialist interviews took place in March, April, and October 2023. The 48 individuals who provided interview data represented a wide range of expertise directly or indirectly connected with our topic. The respondents were asked to provide their specialist opinions and/or perceptions on the effects of *tabula rasa* urban development procedures, on the management (or lack of it) of this area during the post-communist period, and on the strategies for local development that, they felt, should be applied into the future.

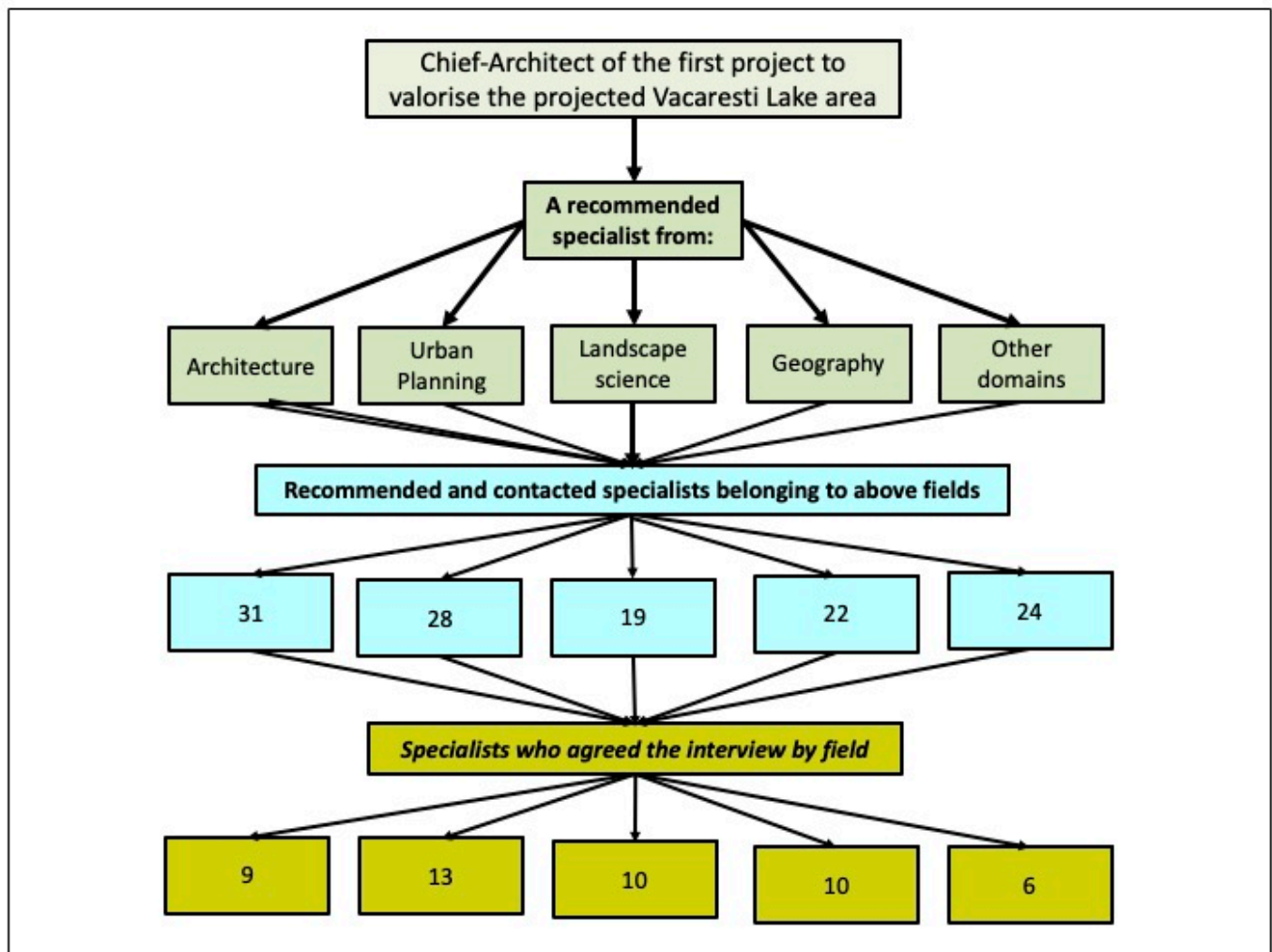


Figure 4. Selection procedure of interviewed specialists. Source: Authors.

Respondents were first asked about their knowledge and understanding of the natural protected area. They were then asked to focus on the resulting planning and land management dilemmas that were likely to ensue in an area so strongly affected by *tabula rasa* policies. They were also asked to consider the prospects for the sustainability or unsustainability of such an area following a protracted period of *laissez-faire* behaviour by the urban administration. Finally, they were asked to identify what they considered to be the best means of increasing the resilience of this urban protected area into the future. Figure 5 provides an indication of the interrelationships between the interview schedule and the landscape and urban management challenges facing the study area.

This analytical framework seeks to identify and, ideally, interrogate the difficulties of ensuring compatibility between the main environmental and built assemblages, the fragile relationships that exist between assemblages and actor-networks [44,45], and the challenges inherent in integrating natural and human assemblages both horizontally and vertically, and in a sustainable manner. It also acknowledges that the instability of natural and socio-material assemblages is exacerbated in contexts where there is high variability in the relationships between natural, ideological, social, material, and political elements [46]. Given the high levels of complexity and subjectivity inherent in this process, this information was analysed in the light of assemblage theory, and with reference to the five interrelated hypotheses listed above.

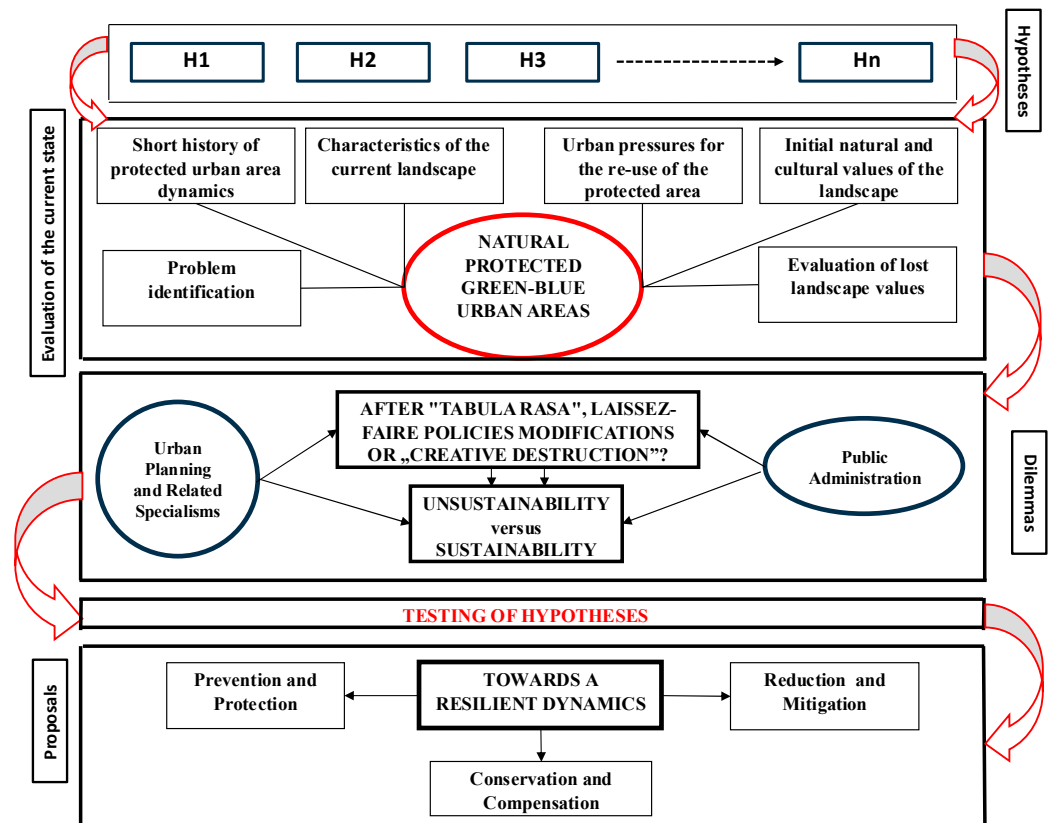


Figure 5. A general methodological way to analyse the urban protected area, affected by “Tabula rasa” actions and “Laissez-faire” policies. Source: Authors.

3. Results

3.1. Survey Analysis

Table 1 summarises and synthesises the responses of the interviewees from the various specialist areas.

Table 1. Summary of the Interviewee Responses by Specialism.

Summary of the Interview Questions	Summary of the Responses	Categorization of the Responses by Field of Specialism (%)				
		Architects	Urban Planners	Landscape Planners	Geographers	Ecologists and Engineers
1. Do you consider that the “tabula rasa” communist policies have had an impact on the on-resilience capacity of the Văcărești area?	Yes, multiple negative impacts. (Inappropriate interventions; the megalomaniac nature of the unfinished projects; destruction of historical patrimony)	77.8	84.6	80.0	70.0	83.3
	Yes and no. Building the projected lake would have had positive effects	22.2	16.4	20.0	30.0	16.7
2. In your opinion what are the main barriers to the resilient development of the natural protected urban area?	The existing embankment	44.5	38.5	40.0	40.0	16.7
	Lack of fresh water and eutrophication	22.2	38.5	30.0	20.0	33.3
	Aggressive real estate development	11.1	15.5	20.0	30.0	16.7
	Fires, governmental corruption, and the invasion of alien species.	22.2	7.5	10.0	10.0	33.3

Table 1. Cont.

Summary of the Interview Questions	Summary of the Responses	Categorization of the Responses by Field of Specialism (%)				
		Architects	Urban Planners	Landscape Planners	Geographers	Ecologists and Engineers
3. Can you identify the structures that would be required to ensure the resilience of the Văcărești area?	Ensuring the functionality of the natural ecosystem	55.6	53.8	50.0	50.0	33.0
	Harmonising the relationships between the NUP area and the buffer zone	33.3	23.1	30.0	10.0	50.0
	Higher levels of environmental protection for the area	11.1	23.1	20.0	40.0	16.7
4. Who should be involved in ensuring that there is compatibility between the protected and the buffer areas?	Specialists with local and topical expertise	55.6	53.8	50.0	50.0	33.1
	Local administrators	33.3	23.1	20.0	20.0	50.0
	Local inhabitants	0.0	7.7	10.0	20.0	16.7
	NGOs	11.1	15.4	20.0	10.0	0.0
5. Should there be a significant commemorative statement on the history of the entire area?	This would be too expensive	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	66.7
	It would add to the area's anthropogenic values and increase its attractiveness	55.6	61.5	90.0	50.0	16.6
	Information on the history of this area would be an educational resource for younger generations	44.4	38.5	10.0	40.0	16.7
6. How might the Văcărești monastic complex be reconfigured to enhance its collective memory?	By uncovering restoring, and protecting its foundations	11.1	23.2	10.0	40.0	16.7
	By providing a hologram and using other symbolic means	55.6	61.3	50.0	50.0	33.3
	By establishing a tourist center with a focus on material and other forms of historical evidence	33.3	15.5	40.0	10.0	50.0
7. Can you identify any landscape values which have been lost in the post-socialist period?	Landscape values were lost as a result of planning inactivity and indecision in the immediate post socialist period.	11.1	7.7	10.0	0.0	0.0
	Locations where the Văcărești monastic complex could have been reconfigured.	66.7	76.9	60.0	50.0	16.7
	The natural buffer zone is now fragmented by residential plots	22.2	15.4	30.0	50.0	83.3
8. Has the recent laissez-faire management style applied by public administrators had a positive effect on the entire Văcărești area?	No, because it has favored degradation, suppressed the appreciation of “time in place”, and allowed the chaotic development of vegetation fires, and disconnections within the urban space	66.7	76.9	80.0	70.0	83.3
	Yes	11.1	0.0	10.0	10.0	0.0
	Yes and no	22.2	23.1	10.0	20.0	16.7

Table 1. Cont.

Summary of the Interview Questions	Summary of the Responses	Categorization of the Responses by Field of Specialism (%)				
		Architects	Urban Planners	Landscape Planners	Geographers	Ecologists and Engineers
9. Do you consider that the local administration and urban community have adopted a passive attitude to the area because of a lack of resources?	Surely, no. The administration has lacked an urban strategy, which explains the abandonment of all local initiatives; they have lacked the courage to take any decisions regarding the future of this controversial area	44.4	61.5	50.0	60.0	66.7
	Yes, because they have had many other priorities regarding urban development during this difficult transition period	55.6	38.5	50.0	40.0	33.3
10. How has the lack of an integrated vision to enhance resilience affected the entire Văcărești area?	The indecision of an administration which adopted laissez-faire policies, created an environment in which real estate entrepreneurs could aggressively exploit what was essentially an abandoned area	33.3	7.7	20.0	10.0	16.7
	The lack of an early strategic vision explains the incoherence of the current local landscape.	22.2	15.4	20.0	20.0	0.0
	Through the recently created NUP, this area needs to develop a clear integrated vision to, at the very least, acknowledge the cultural heritage that was destroyed during the former regime.	44.5	76.9	60.0	70.0	83.3
11. How could the existing ecosystem be managed to increase landscape resilience?	Through strict managerial regulations for the green elements of the buffer zone	44.4	23.1	60.0	40.0	16.7
	Through interventions to rewild the current green areas inside the embankment	11.2	69.2	20.0	50.0	83.3
	Through public awareness campaigns on the natural values of the area to encourage local people to take a more active role in its management	44.4	7.7	20.0	10	0.0

While differences of opinion can be seen both within and between the various specialist groups, their views frequently converge. There is something of a consensus regarding the importance of the current natural protected area, and concerns relating to its sustainability and ecological functionality in the face of climate change and to the deficiencies of the existing local planning framework. Despite the complex and even conflicted nature of the Văcărești area, this indicates that there is a basis for the development of both a landscape vision and an implementation plan for this locality. With reference to resilience, many of the specialists (77% of the urban planners, 70% of the landscape planners and 66.7% of the architects) consider the nature of the existing embankment and the resulting eutrophication

processes to be a major concern. Other significant issues include aggressive, high rise real estate development (cited by 30% of the geographers), administrative corruption (cited by 33.3% of the engineers and ecologists), fires, and the invasion by exotic species.

For the areas beyond the embankment, many of the respondents emphasised the need to better integrate the natural area with the surrounding more urban buffer zones. The engineers noted the difficulties of integrating the scientific findings provided by specialists to the local authorities and the more emotional views of the local inhabitants. Any treatment of the former monastic complex was also seen as a challenge since restoration was unfeasible. However, some form of commemoration of the area's former function was seen as having the potential to increase the local population's interest in and attachment to the area. Chronologically, many respondents attributed several of the area's problems to the adverse effects of the former *tabula rasa* policies on its resilience. Equally, there was general agreement that what was essentially a policy vacuum for at least a decade following the end of the communist regime exacerbated the area's problems. Nevertheless, there was overall agreement that a properly planned and managed large water body close to the centre of Bucharest could have a positive ecological and social impact. How these ideas might be realised will be considered further in the discussion section below.

3.2. Testing the Hypotheses

Given the semi-formal nature of the interviews, the overlapping nature of the interview responses, and the broad and interrelated nature of at least some of the hypotheses, we did not seek to test specific hypotheses by means of specific question responses. The discussion below therefore draws on appropriate responses from across the interview results.

H1. *The tabula rasa approach drastically reduces the resilient capacity of urban landscapes.*

This was certainly the case. Construction of the embankment and the holding basin saw 75–85% of the area being razed and left in an undeveloped state. Several specialists failed to fully appreciate the magnitude of the brutal change of this formerly urban-rural area into a lacustrine basin and attributed many of the negative effects to the subsequent period of planning inaction. About one third of the geographers noted that the projected major lake (180 ha) would have a significant positive impact, becoming the dominant destination within the natural urban park. The respondents generally agreed that the subsequent abandonment and rewilding of the area has seen it regain a degree of resilience except in those areas, such as Sun Plaza, where commercial construction has occurred.

H2. *The physical characteristics of abandoned spaces can contribute to the resilience potential of urban landscapes.*

The Dâmbovița high terraces were removed and replaced by the embankment and the lacustrine basin [47]. This new relief form has increased the area's potential ecological and social resilience (by providing parkland and recreational spaces). In the long term, however, most of the specialists, though not the engineers, feared that the embankment could form a barrier without complex reconstruction. This physical barrier decreases landscape resilience due to eutrophication, according to the urban planners but, as a physical buffer, it curbs the aggressive actions of real estate developers.

H3. *Delays in the rehabilitation of abandoned spaces by post-communist urban administrations can be largely explained by their lack of financial and other resources.*

Most of the interviewees (engineers, urban planners and geographers, for example) felt that it was a lack of vision and of urban strategising that delayed the prompt and integrated development of this area rather than any lack of financial resources. Certainly, the local authority chose to adopt *laissez-faire* policies and therefore to accede to the development pressures exerted by certain urban actors. This kind of management favoured landscape degradation. Wild vegetation with related faunal incursions flourished and this encouraged the developers' aggression, resulting in the land use fragmentation of the buffer area.

H4. *The reintegration of abandoned spaces into their surrounding urban landscapes requires an integrated vision for their future development.*

Even though 80% of this area currently possesses distinct functional characteristics, there is no clear and integrated vision for the optimal use of the entire space (including the buffer zone). The interviewees, from all categories considered that an integrated vision shared by the local and central authorities was a planning priority. Furthermore, there has been limited public debate about the future health of the local landscape [38]. It would be beneficial for the city if the built space around the Văcărești Natural Park were to be increased. But the technical problems related to such developments are considerable especially if such initiatives seek to increase the resilience of this critical environment.

H5. *Sustainable redevelopment of such spaces entails both nature-based solutions to harmonize present and future needs and the integration of the historical and cultural memories of these places.*

The local and central authorities seeking to recreate the identity of the Văcărești area, have two important challenges: firstly, to ensure the sustainability of the Natural Urban Park (which is a new urban entity), and secondly to restore a lost landscape value, that relating to the former Văcărești monastic complex. The interviewees appreciated that this process will require a multidisciplinary approach. It was broadly agreed that the restoration of local cultural heritage values, would add to the overall sustainability of the existing (ecologically) protected area. To retain structurally lost historical and cultural values of the place in the collective memory, the specialists suggested using holograms or other symbolic means, and the creation of a tourist centre and display points adding information and images on the former monastic complex to the area's natural attractions.

The study area is an urban space characterised by unfinished projects dating back to an earlier *tabula rasa* planning approach. It is therefore important for the local, community, working with government, to first define a vision for the area. However, time does not wait for such a vision. In a vision and policy vacuum, nature tries to replace the inaction of the community by creating a new landscape following its own laws. Both the local inhabitants, who were interviewed by Ianos et al. [30] and the specialists consulted for this study acknowledge that the recent nature-based landscape now connects them with the area's past. Likewise, planners and stakeholders [33] and local inhabitants [30] seek to retain images of items of historical value destroyed by the Ceausescu regime. Potentially, AI can be used to ensure that the former Văcărești Monastery is recontextualised in the new urban structure and in the local collective memory.

4. Discussion

In this section we consider: the limitations facing a full ecological restoration of the area through natural means alone; the limitations placed on the resilience of the area as a result of its historical, political and bureaucratic contexts and the limitations inherent within this case study.

4.1. The Self-Naturalization Limits of the Văcărești Natural Urban Park

For more than 30 years, this area experienced a disrupted rewilding process characterised by poaching, vegetation wildfires and dumping within a broader context of bureaucratic neglect [48]. This rewilding took place inside a concrete embankment which separated the projected holding basin from the surrounding urban landscape. The rewilding of the area was achieved with relatively limited disturbance from external factors.

Governmental Decision no. 349/2016 designated the Văcărești lake area as a “Natural Urban Park” with protected status. Elements of the local community, including several NGOs, welcomed this decision since the area had previously attracted the homeless, the criminal and packs of dogs. Others disagreed some fearing that an unmanaged rewilding process could lead to disease outbreaks caused by exotic insects or citing the lack of a wildlife corridor to other natural spaces [39].

Since the designation, both the central and local authorities have embraced the opportunity to involve themselves in a rewilding opportunity while many local residents have appreciated the presence of an evolving natural landscape close to the centre of the city.

Notwithstanding the natural progress of rewilding, which has occurred unassisted to date, the former lake area remains a fragile ecosystem. Its long-term survival is limited by deficiencies in its soil, its water circulation and its physical isolation. Human interventions will be needed to remove these deficiencies.

The soil cover is very fragmented. Extensive concrete surfaces, the former floor of the holding basin, extend across much of the park. These are merely covered by a superficial layer of atmospheric dust deposited over the last three decades.

As a wetland, this park needs soil with *permanent humidity*, and some areas with *permanent water*. The concrete base does little to ensure permanent water in the depressions which would ideally create the conditions for a lacustrine ecosystem with varied species of vegetation, fish, animals, birds, insects and so on. The most important source of water in the current small lakes is from precipitation. The lowest accumulation point, in the north east contains a permanent lake since the concrete substrate was built to stop potential infiltration to Dâmbovița River. During rainy periods many of the other depressions become small water reservoirs, but during the winter and dry summer periods only a single lake remains.

The main problem for the wet sector of the park is *eutrophication*. There is no permanent flow of fresh water through the basin. Eutrophication will therefore have negative effects for the development of biodiversity and natural resilience within the park and its surroundings.

The concrete barrier surrounding the park is also a limiting factor. It traps heat during the summer creating inappropriate microclimates and inhibiting sustainable natural development within the local ecosystem. Trapping the heat also increases the lacustrine water temperatures further inhibiting ecosystem diversity. It also traps torrential rains during the summer, and this runoff (charged with dust and garbage) drained from the slopes can cause severe ecosystem damage.

4.2. Improving the Resilience of the New Urban Landscape

Landscape sustainability, a key target of urban planning, requires increases of local ecosystems' resilience if they are to ensure their optimal functionality within urban areas. Nature-based solutions are the best way of managing all the components and resources of ecosystems, including those which ensure the sociocultural sustainability of cities [49]. The Vacaresti area has experienced multiple land use changes most which paid little regard to the locality's sustainability. The land has, successively been used for allotments, and for water storage before its long-term abandonment and subsequent designation as an urban natural park. Degros [50] described this process in a paper “From Rasa to Reserve”

outlining the succession of destructive creation and creative destruction processes through which this area has sought to achieve a new and more permanent urban identity [51].

With reference to the re-naturalization limits of the Văcărești natural urban park, the new landscape needs to be guided towards sustainability by increasing its capacity for resilience. The responses of the interviewees to questions 1–3 and 11 (Table 1) permit us to outline some ways in which the huge efforts being made by nature to survive can be supplemented, particularly given the Văcărești area's currently limited potential for resilience. The responses to question 1 show that the specialists are unanimous in regarding the impacts of the communist era *tabula rasa* actions as being highly detrimental to the area's resilience capacity. The architects, landscape planners and geographers all highlighted the negative impact of existing embankment. Most of the specialists (though not the engineers and ecologists) saw the creation of conditions for the sustainable functionality of natural ecosystem as being crucial in this regard. A difference of opinion exists between the landscape planners, who highlighted the importance of buffer zone, and the engineers and urban planners, who argued for a focus on the green areas inside the embankment. On the basis of our numerous visits to the site during all seasons, and additional discussions with the experts, we contend that, at the heart of this area, there should be a constant and sustainable blue surface. A strict correlation between water extension and precipitation shows that the ecosystem is only stressed in the dry seasons. An analysis of blue surface variation, by comparative images, indicates that during the dry seasons it reaches a minimum value of less than 20% of the maximum spring levels. The water scarcity in this endoreic area explains the frequency of the vegetation fires, and the lack of a specific microclimate for these wetlands accentuates the effects of heating processes, especially around the concreted slopes. At the same time the small and inconsistent water surfaces are not able to engender specific lake breezes, which would refresh the entire park ecosystem.

Furthermore, building the “Sun Plaza” mall deprived the entire area of a significant amount of its potential resilience [52]. Its paved and concrete surfaces are very extensive, especially given a perverse approval for the construction of a large commercial complex specializing in the selling of construction materials near Sun Plaza Mall. This led to the development of huge parking and logistics space, which is incompatible with an urban natural park. This development renders it difficult to gain resilience, by creating a buffer zone with green spaces around the Natural Urban Park. Lack of vision and integrated thinking characterized the period following the abandonment of the Ceaușescu era project. The absence of an appropriate design for the sustainable development of the entire area, has resulted in a very fragmented land use pattern. The inadequacy of the ecological resources required to sustain a natural park, the loss of historical structures and the current land use trends, which are dominated by the aggression of real estate developers in the buffer zone, all reduce the resilience potential of the area. These three factors indicate that there is still a risk that future development will follow a non-resilient trajectory, as has occurred in other European urban areas [53]. Nevertheless, several survey respondents considered that is not too late to reconstitute at least aspects of the former Văcărești Monastery in the Southern part of NUP buffer zone, given its historical and cultural significance to Bucharest.

Direct intervention by the municipality or even by the Romanian Government may well be required to preserve this valuable and vulnerable area. But urban planning for such a fragile area should be characterized by adaptability, legitimacy, rationality, and operability [54]. At the same time, decisions need to be taken rapidly if the collective memory of future generations is to retain past values, and if these are to be integrated into local urban planning initiatives [55]. In addition, such measures will need to improve the aesthetic aspects of the current urban landscape, diminishing the visual impact of the inappropriate Sun Plaza area and its surroundings.

A clear conclusion is that Nature, in this case, needs to be helped, because it lacks sufficient potential for resilience in the face of more than half a century of incoherent and unsustainable landscape renewal. Perhaps the creative destruction defined by Doxiadis [56] was not the best solution in this case. An adaptive approach could well have achieved more that would have been in the public interest and could have been achieved with the expenditure of fewer resources. Overall, a balance needs to be achieved between the interests of the private and public actors if a truly multifunctional area is to be created [57]. This multifunctionality has the potential to encompass the re-wilding processes occurring in the former drainage basin, limited residential development in the buffer area, and at least some (re)integration of the historic cultural landscape.

4.3. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

With regard to our interview surveys, this study has several limitations. We acknowledge that urban redevelopment is a complex and highly interdisciplinary topic. While this is one reason why we surveyed participants from a wide range of specialisms, we note that they only constitute one of several groups of stakeholders in any urban (re)development process. We note that local residents, businesses and bureaucracies also have views that need to be heard on contentious planning issues. We have reported on the views of the local residents elsewhere [30] and it is our intention to expand this research project to include institutional stakeholders. Over the course of the interviews, as the overlapping nature of the respondents' knowledge of the study area and its planning issues became apparent to us, we realized the difficulty of establishing any simple correlation between their responses and our discussion points. Nevertheless, given the depth and breadth of their expertise and the pressing nature of the issues besetting this area, we feel that this study presents valuable insights into the interrelated challenges facing those who now have to plan for this area into the future.

A minor problem was related to the high level of local knowledge combined with the diversity of experiences possessed by many of our respondents. Because of this, several of the interviews took longer and produced more detailed material than we had anticipated. The richness and complexity of the data that we obtained from the interviews, combined with the eventful and chaotic nature of our study area's trajectory, made the application of formal methods of data analysis difficult. The analysis was therefore conducted by empirical and qualitative methods.

It could be argued that our study is limited, because it is focused on a specific urban area, with an idiosyncratic history of erasure, reconstruction/redefinition and subsequent neglect. But, in the recent history of many countries, especially those affected by wars or major natural hazards, examples of similar trajectories may have occurred or may well eventuate. Even though our case study area was deeply affected by particular political regime changes, areas abandoned for long periods after *tabula rasa* processes and subsequently reintegrated into existing urban structures exist across the planet. The deindustrialization processes in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe offer other examples, where industrial areas have been abandoned and then put to other uses, albeit not always after such a long period of abandonment as in our case study. We also note that some countries of the former Yugoslavia, Gaza and Ukraine appear to be facing or may well face similar situations.

Future research, surely, will continue to demonstrate that, in isolated areas, Nature will require assistance, through intervention or guidance, by Society if such areas are to achieve sustainability, and/or increasing resilient capacity.

5. Conclusions

In planning terms, the Văcărești study area has experienced a phase of intense, if not excessive, intervention (*tabula rasa*) followed by near-total neglect (*laissez-faire*). The former phase massively reduced the area's resilience, leaving a legacy of concrete megastructures from an abandoned megaproject. While the return of a degree of resilience can be observed in the latter phase, as a result of natural rewilding processes, these have been constrained by the environmental limitations imposed by the former megastructures and threatened by the uncontrolled and disparate nature of the buffer zone's more recent urban developments. What has been lacking in both phases is any integrated and coherent planning for the future wellbeing and sustainability of this locality and its surrounding areas. The megaproject had national, if not continental, concerns—linking Bucharest to the major European waterway of the Danube. In the *laissez-faire* phase, individual developers were primarily concerned with maximising their returns from single plots of land.

The recent designation of the Văcărești Natural Urban Park and its buffer zone provides Bucharest's planners with a number of opportunities. These include: working with natural rewilding processes to increase the ecological resilience and sustainability of a hitherto abandoned area; providing a major open space as a natural and recreational resource for the inhabitants of the surrounding localities; acknowledging the cultural and historical significance of the site for current and future generations [46]; and protecting the park and its surrounds from further inappropriate commercial and residential development. It is to be hoped that these issues can be addressed by future planning initiatives. To date, however, such initiatives do not exist. The administrators of the Natural Park only have responsibility for this reserve area and the Bucharest city planners have yet to devise a strategy for the entire area.

This study demonstrates that the lack of clear legislative guidelines and prompt intervention by planning authorities to guide the trajectories of problem areas renders them vulnerable to chaotic interventions. All five categories of our respondents expressed the same broad view, namely: the long period of abandonment has multiplied the costs of attaining sustainable development for the entire area; the developers' aggression has eliminated the possibility of reconfiguring the former monastic complex on or near its original location; and a new strategy involving interdisciplinary teams, the main stakeholders and the local population, needs to be adopted to limit further destruction of the green buffer zone. Some also argued that a prompt decision to complete the initial project and develop a reservoir, within an existing green buffer zone would have been much more useful to a city of 2 million inhabitants.

We argue that inaction by the authorities and the local community has transformed an empty space into an even less productive and functional one, with a high risk to its sustainability on all counts. We therefore emphasise the necessity for synergistic action by all stakeholders in such cases. Without a vision, the current landscape can be appreciated as a destructive creation. To avoid the perpetuation of such eventualities here and elsewhere, landscape planners and relevant authorities need to reflect more on potential ways to help Nature to work towards the sustainable development of natural areas within cities.

Based on our local observations and research and on the responses to the expert surveys, we suggest that the following measures require urgent implementation to ensure the sustainability and landscape resilience of the NUP and its buffer zone:

- mitigation of the isolation effects caused by the impressive embankment (from outside of NUP, the place resembles a stadium!) by creating gaps to facilitate atmospheric, hydrological and human circulation.
- Replacement of the concrete embankment and revegetation of the slopes left behind thus emphasising park's re-naturalisation processes.

- removing the numerous concrete remnants on the floor of the drainage basin, to improve water circulation in the soil and facilitate both pedogenesis and plant growth.
- mitigation of the eutrophication risk by developing an appropriate water circulation system.
- increasing the extent of permanent, water coverage to create a more favourable micro-climate for the park ecosystem.
- introducing adequate restrictions to control urban development in the buffer area, placing particular limits on building heights.

The Văcărești study area is a particularly extreme example of long-term land abandonment and of natural rewilding. However, these processes are not uncommon and are particularly characteristic of areas that have experienced political and economic turmoil. While Eastern Europe has provided examples of these processes in the recent past, financial crises and radical regime changes, have frequently led to the abandonment and subsequent neglect of *tabula rasa* schemes in many parts of the world. This study provides an example of how both *tabula rasa* and *laissez-faire* planning regimes can contribute to the weakening of local area resilience.

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Data Availability Statement: This study is an observational one, based on totally anonymized datasets. Its elaboration did not require any ethical approval from an institutional review board. The individual informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this research. Some statistical and general information derived from publicly sources. The processed data can be downloaded through the links in Table 1.

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