

Kalliopi Dimou, Sorin Istudor and Alina Șerban (curators)

Enchanting Views – Romanian Black Sea Tourism

Planning and Architecture of the 1960s and '70s

Exhibition Dalles Hall, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest

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The democratisation of tourism after World War II – respectively mass tourism – had long been one of the less accepted or at least less prestigious fields of scientific research and artistic representation. Mass tourism represented primarily an object of distinction for social and intellectual elites, scientists and artists alike. Only recently scholars had adopted a more respectful approach towards mass tourism, since tourism obviously had an enormous impact on the modernisation of post-war societies and modern tourism resorts had been a perfect showcase to display the modernisation of nation states – in the East and West as well. Especially in the case of Romania the large-scale tourism projects at the Black Sea Coast represented a laboratory that triggered a breakthrough for an explicit Modernist architecture, urbanism, and landscape design, entirely liberated from neo-classical models that dominated the establishment of socialism at the beginning of '50s. Although tourism resorts had also been intended to be tools for ideological representation, propaganda, and even indoctrination, they also offered the opportunity for the domestic and foreign tourists to lead a new lifestyle that served perfectly to escape the pressures of everyday life and political ideologies (be they communist or capitalist). The literal heterotopic architecture had been as modern as the Seaside experience, and both had been more affiliated to the general Fordist consumer culture of that period than to local Socialist policies. But of course Socialist policies on site enabled the accurate urban planning of a whole coastline from scratch, the buildings, their program, and their affordability to be inhabited with enchanted people of all kinds – both the domestic working class and hard currency spending tourist from the West –, and it supported the production and circulation of the images that are on display in the exhibition *Enchanting Views* in Bucharest.

The exhibition, indeed an aesthetic and enchanting pleasure, was curated by architects Kalliopi Dimou and Sorin Istudor, and art historian Alina Șerban. *Enchanting Views* had been shown from 10th of October to 23rd of November 2014 at Dalles Hall in Nicolae Bălcescu Avenue, hosted by the National Museum of Contemporary Art Bucharest (MNAC), which thankfully on this occasion had reactivated this centrally located venue for exhibitions.

Archives on Display

There is myth about a general problem when doing research on issues of Socialism in the recent post-socialist period and even in the current days: since the projects of the Socialist period had long been considered to be evil, at least conspicuous, the material giving evidence of the achievements had not been much appreciated and maintained, and much of the material got even lost, when formally centralized archives had been “privatized”. Many experts of and for the Socialist period time use to answer invoking that argument. The reason is often to be found in distrust towards the researchers and a general confusion about how the material might be evaluated and the potential source or lender credited or discredited. Indeed, it is a very difficult endeavour and takes an enormous effort and a lot of patience to find archives and moreover to get access to the appropriate material. And if the material is finally made available it is often of a very heterogeneous character that can cause severe curatorial problems when curators are obsessed

with aesthetically stringent exhibition design and displays, which seems typically for those with a background in art and architecture.

Here the curators managed to acquire a body of visual material, dominated by photographs, tourism promotional films and printed materials. Therefore they developed a set of displays where almost all the material is framed, elevated, glued on little boxes, lit from the backside, arranged in clusters, or projected on walls. Since the historic models of buildings had been missing they were reproduced in a coherent style to fit the overall design. The exhibition is therefore far from being a typical historic or anthropologic exhibition. It is obviously characterized by a strong artistic approach based on an elaborate architectonic language – an aesthetic pleasure treating even banal photos like jewels or art pieces.

A Short Voyage into the Exhibition Design and Display

As tourism architecture at it's best is guiding both the feet and the gaze of the tourists, so does this exhibition. Tourism architecture is surely structuring the tourist landscape and becomes part of the visual culture of leisure time and personal / family histories. As the seaside tourism experience was both distinctively modern, and highly emotional (and often even regressive) the exhibition offers both a seductive exhibition design, display and items but also several emotional triggers, although transformed by artistic translation.

There is a very clear choreography to be followed: first a dark entry hall with a film-projection designed as a spatial threshold and as an emotional and atmospheric appetizer, then a large, high, well lit space, painted all in white, emphasizing on the planning history, in juxtaposition to a smaller space with a low ceiling and all walls painted entirely in black, displaying a collage of representations of professional image-production for tourism purposes with interviews of architects involved and other artistic interventions (such as the '70s films of artist Ion Grigorescu).

Through the small entrance door from the street to the building the visitor enters the very large and high, but surprisingly dark foyer, where he / she is immediately captured by an almost cinema size video-projection of seaside images, which might be considered to be historic material, because obviously shot with a film camera and supported by the original soundtrack of a tourist promotional films of the historic period of time. But actually the images had been shot only recently by the artist Nicu Ilfoveanu, commissioned especially for this exhibition. On the one hand the video presenting a distant gaze from a static position on to numerous people enjoying to play in the flat waters might be read as a visual evidence for the unbroken fascination of the most simple and rather regressive seaside experience at the shores of the Romanian Black Sea (and elsewhere at other Seaside destinations I would like to suggest). On the other hand the consciously chosen distanced view and the very similar behaviour of masses of individuals on display might be interpreted as a critique of tourism industry that had been (and still is) the dominating distinctive approach of intellectual elites (and artists) towards mass tourism.

Using artistic strategies like above for playing out an ambivalent approach between affirmation and distance seems to be programmatic for the whole exhibition: all current visual documentation or documentation about the current status of buildings is either consciously shot with old technique (Super 8 film) or displayed by old devices, like slide projectors, that automatically produce some reference and atmosphere of bygone family holiday slideshows.

After passing this strong threshold visitors enter the large central exhibition hall, but even before arriving and reading the curatorial text display explaining the content of the exhibition, they pass by a large aesthetically appealing abstract black and white map displaying the Romanian Black Sea littoral zone with all the resorts that have been built from scratch in the period between 1957 and 1973 and that are therefore covered by that exhibition.

The centrepieces of the exhibition space are two very large pedestals, showcasing materials about the two significantly different construction periods of the Romanian seaside.

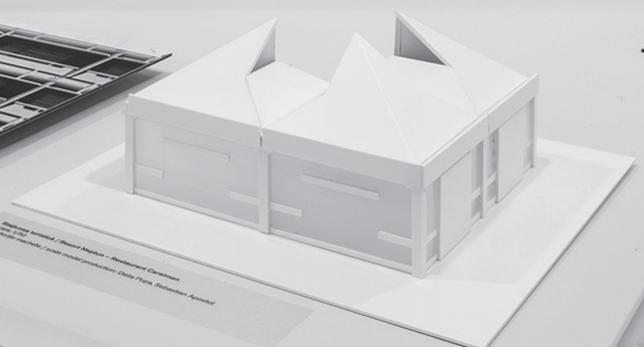
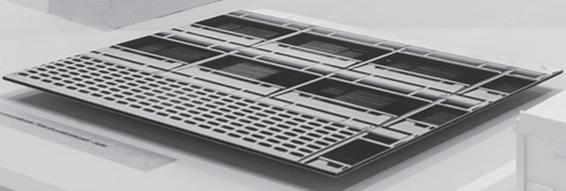
The first period from 1956 to 1962, characterized by a sober modernist language introduced by architect Cezar Lăzărescu and his team, is represented by resorts and individual masterpieces like

COSTINEȘTI



Lida Cărbă
Construcții împotriva morții /
The Builders of New Times
1975
aquatinta / etching
70 x 50 cm
MNAC

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the waterfront developments of the Eforie Nord (1958) and the Mangalia resorts (1959), followed by Mamaia resort (1960), and – most notably because also presented here in scale models – the emblematic restaurant Perla Mării in Eforie Nord by Cezar Lăzărescu, Lucian Popovici and their team (1959), and Hotel Perla in Mamaia by M. Laurian and his team. (1962), both reflecting international trends in a specific high quality design: Restaurant Perla Mării is characterized by a fully suspended aerial floor on a free open ground floor, supported by small size metal columns. But with several small patios cut out and a facade fully covered in glass it offers both improved ventilation and perfect gazes towards the seaside and the people on stage in the other parts of the building, especially these moving on the theatrically designed ramps and stairs. Hotel Perla is representing a typical late modern hotel type juxtaposing a slightly suspended horizontal slab around a large patio for the semi-public communal collective programmes of the hotel with a spectacular high vertical slab for accommodation.

The second period, from 1966 to 1972, characterized by a significant increase of tourist resorts at the Black Sea Coast, opens up a different approach towards tourism facilities and policies. The affiliation to mass tourism international tendencies determined the densification of resorts, the necessity to build larger scale buildings in order to accommodate a great number of guests, and the extensive usage of prefabricated construction in architecture, some with Structuralist features. The second period was focusing on the development of the area called Mangalia Nord, best known for its resorts Neptun, Venus, Olimp and Cap Aurora. Olimp (1971), followed two years later by Cap Aurora, represents a new large scale typology of resort, constituted by a mix of different building types inspired both by earlier Modernism and the criticism of Team X. Cap Aurora consisted of a number of identical single freestanding hotel towers with large capacities juxtaposed by a large central complex of staggered volumes expanding alongside a vast part the coastline, incorporating a pedestrian zone with collective facilities, while building an artificial mountain landscape of its own.

The distinction between the two periods – characterized by significant changes of tourist capacities, style, and production means, and displayed on separate white pedestals – is underlined by a long but small vitrine with a floor painted in red, displaying various international architecture magazines from that time to which the Romanian architects had access (belonging to the later architect Laurențiu Vasilescu) featuring tourist projects from all over the world.

Alongside the walls of the space one finds several extensions of the information presented on the pedestals – such as the blueprints of the iconic hotel Raluca from Venus resort (architects Irina and Constantin Ghioca) and of resort Cap Aurora (architect Dinu Gheorghiu). A separate chapter is dedicated to public art / monumental art on the socialist seaside, presenting on a smaller pedestal the specific case of the extension of the Youth Camp by Ion Mircea Enescu, 1970-1972. The references to the actual condition of the architecture and monumental art on the post-transition period in Romania is reflected by the slide-installation of Nicu Ilfoveanu *Seaside 2013-2014* a photo-essay documenting the current status of the projects – ‘anachronistically’ displayed as an old-fashioned slide show.

The side room with lower ceiling, entirely painted in black, is segmented into several more intimate spatial sections: In the first one the visitor is exposed to popular tools for production and re-production of the longing for the seaside: a very limited selection of historic black and white photos produced by AGERPRES – the Romanian national news agency – had been reprinted and displayed like pieces of a photo essay on one of the walls, showing tourists enjoying themselves in front of the backdrop of modern architecture. In contrast, a large number of private postcards, once sent from seaside resorts and collected by the curator, are mounted like a “mobile” art piece, hanging above the heads of the visitors. These postcards – at least the selection – had explicitly and prominently featured the new architecture as the main attraction, not the romantic literal landscape or historical sites, as had been the fact in other destinations. It had been all brand new to the people, both the modern seaside experience and the Modernist architecture, tells us a short quotation by Cezar Lăzărescu in the second section. Here three interviews with important architects of that period are shown: with Dinu Gheorghiu, student and collaborator of Cezar

Lăzărescu, and the architect behind many of the seaside projects, most notable the resort of “Cap Aurora”, with Victor Sebestyen, responsible for the general planning and architectural design of “Neptun” resort’s first phase, including villas for the party nomenclatura, and with Kemal Ghengiomer, one of the main architects of the Venus resort, where he had built several hotels and restaurants. The third section offers two videos, this time by well-known conceptual artist Ion Grigorescu. In contrast to the introduction video that showed many people from an only slightly elevated angle – masses playing simultaneously – the two selected films, *Colentina* and *Balta Albă* (from the ‘70s) are presenting the newly-built neighbourhoods of Bucharest, the urban reality from which the people ‘escape’ to the seaside.

The visitor is then guided through a small path back to the entrance of the main hall, but without getting a direct view into the space, his gaze is directed towards the large overview plan that he had seen when entering the first time – a reminder of what he had seen when walking through the exhibition. But moreover he / she is guided to the exit, which means passing by the large dark entry hall, hearing the significant soundtrack and seeing the video a second time, an intense threshold before returning to everyday urban life. On the way to the exit, the visitor also finds a stand with film stills printed as postcards to be taken away as souvenirs from the exhibition.

Metaphorically speaking the scenography of the exhibition seems to suggest an escape from everyday life and an opportunity to dive into a heroic period of modern planning in Romania, so much different from the most recent years: A well organized and deliberately planned production of a modern leisure landscape and architecture for celebrating a modern hedonistic lifestyle, that for many people had been a rather heterotopic experience. There is a set of clear and strong thresholds that seem to frame the central big white sacral chapel as the place where to worship or at least to discreetly appreciate – enchant – these obviously brilliant jewels of modern architecture built during Romanian Socialism.

