Each summer season, the sun-drenched coasts of Bulgaria and Croatia turn into densely inhabited, intensively exploited tourism industry hot spots. This book traces the various architectural and urban planning strategies that have been pursued there since the mid 1950s—first in order to create, and then to further develop, modern holiday destinations. It portrays (late) modern resorts of remarkable architectural quality and typological diversity that have lasted for decades: as anchors of the socialist states' 'social tourism', as playground for domestic publics in search of recreation and as a viable product on the international holidays market. Finally, it shows how individual resorts and outstanding buildings have been restructured both economically and physically since the fall of state socialism, and explores the present-day conflicts triggered by coastal development in the name of tourism.
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Holidays after the Fall

Seaside Architecture and Urbanism in Bulgaria and Croatia

Elke Beyer, Anke Hagemann and Michael Zinganel (Editors)
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Introduction

Elke Beyer, Anke Hagemann
and Michael Zinganel

This book goes to print at a time when critical discussion about tourism development (and the sometimes reckless neglect, in recent years, of regulatory planning) is on the rise in Bulgaria and Croatia. Although their political paths and planning cultures have radically diverged in state socialist and capitalist contexts, the two countries now face the same issues: firstly, how best to develop and maintain their respective coastal regions, both as a vital economic resource and as a natural and cultural asset accessible to all and secondly, how to evaluate the (built) legacies of the state socialist era. Architects and historians are starting to once again appreciate the urban planning guidelines and modernist architectures established by the socialist states. Moreover, for many people the beach and the sea evoke strong memories of summertime leisure and freedom in more egalitarian times. The loss of, or threats to, these recreational spaces—the sale of resources once ‘owned by the people’, or the permanent crises of the capitalist economy—therefore spark widespread discontent. In Bulgaria, a broad coalition of civic stakeholders and activists has been protesting for years against dubious tourism developments in protected environments, while architects such as Todor Bulev or Pavel Popov have openly voiced criticism of the architecture profession’s complicity in over-exploitation of the coast.  

1 Human beings love and cherish the sea because of what it is—planet Earth in the first person singular. This is why excessive building at the coast and the supersizing of what has been built here is a crime. From a legal perspective, architects’ complicity in this act is a crime, too. [...] In the name of profit we stole the sea from the people and placed it at the disposal of business, allegedly for the good of the country.” Pavel Popov, ‘The architecture of seaside resorts’, Abitare (Sofia), 2012, no. 017 (Nov./Dec.), pp. 72-85, quotes pp. 73-75.

In Croatia, architects and activists have deplored the non-regulated sprawl of private holiday homes and the intransparent rezoning of coastal areas following their privatization. It must be emphasized that neither Bulgaria’s nor Croatia’s intensive development of a coastal region was ever an isolated local phenomenon; rather, it was closely bound up with transnational streams of tourists and investments. Just as holidays on the Black Sea coast
featured in virtually every East German or Czechoslovakian family photo album of the 1970s and 80s, the long drive to the Croatian Adriatic was standard summer fare for the West German and Austrian middle-class of the same era. About a decade after what are often laconically referred to as ‘the changes’, both regions were (re-)discovered as attractive holiday destinations and/or promising investment territory. Today, the seasonal influx of foreign tourists is vital to the economies of both countries. Foreign banks and investors are heavily involved in some of the meanwhile privatized enterprises, especially in Croatia. [...] In Bulgaria, numerous properties along the coast have been bought up by foreigners, first and foremost by British and Russian citizens anxious to secure a relatively inexpensive place in the sun, within EU borders.

Seaside architecture and urbanism in Bulgaria and Croatia

The People’s Republic of Bulgaria, centrally governed and arguably the Soviet Union’s closest satellite in the Cold War era, and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, pioneer of the Non-Aligned Movement and the ‘Third Way’ between capitalism and Soviet-style socialism, both began developing large-scale modern tourism facilities in the 1950s, and quickly set about marketing them internationally. Although, as this book explores, each country adopted a different sales angle, their seaside destinations were underpinned by an essentially Fordist conception of leisure: namely they offered guests temporary respite from the arduous and boredom of everyday life in an industrialized, urbanized society. However, the planning, organization and ownership structures of each country’s tourism sector reflected its own particular brand of (state) socialism. Opportunities for recreation and reposé, and hence for the reproduction of domestic labour—which mainly took the form of state-subsidized holidays or convalescence trips—were created side by side with a complex, competitive market product (comprised of a built infrastructure, supply systems and services) that was designed both to meet economy of scale criteria and to appeal to an international clientele.

The focus on beach tourism, with its brief high season, was common to both countries. Yet their coastal landscapes differ significantly, and the architectural and urbanist approaches chosen to open them up for tourism likewise diverge. Bulgaria’s 380 kilometre coastline largely offers gentle slopes and comparatively long stretches of dunes and sandy beach, interspersed by the major cities of Varna and Burgas, and historically important towns such as Nessebar and Sozopol. In the 1950s and 1960s, this topography was an open invitation to plan large holiday resorts on an urban scale, with capacities of up to 30,000 beds. In the framework of comprehensive urban plans drawn up by Glavproekt, the central state institute for architecture and urban planning in Sofia, tourism development was purposely concentrated in a few distinct locations so as to preserve as much as possible of the coast’s natural assets. The layout and silhouette of the resorts gradually became more dense, as solitary high rises and clusters of similar hotel blocks were set amongst the low-rise, generously laid-out holiday complexes. Architectural and urbanist elements thus served as visual and spatial counterpoints to the natural landscape and essentially defined each seaside resort. [...] In the case of Croatia, countless bays, peninsulas and offshore islands together amount to some 6,000 km of coastline, among whose dramatic steep cliffs, gently rolling hills and flat, pebbly beaches nestle beautiful historic port towns, such as Pula, Zadar, Split and Dubrovnik, to name but a few. Here, the varied topography virtually calls out for a diverse range of architectural typologies, such as has in fact generally been realized in comparatively small holiday resorts along the coast. A handful of solitary high-rise hotels was built in the mid 1960s, but the typology was soon abandoned in favour of architectural models more compatible with the landscape, for example, staggered or terraced volumes and self-contained complexes skilfully embedded in the coast’s rugged rock formations. [...] Unlike in Bulgaria, commissions for such projects were awarded to a broad spectrum of planners, including those operating privately on a small scale. Croatia’s strong federalist tradition, the local authorities’ considerable political leverage and the economic model of workers’ self-management created favourable conditions for individual architectural solutions, respectful of local traditions. When the central government invited international planners and experts to draw up comprehensive development schemes for the entire Adriatic coast, including urban-scale resorts, local stakeholders either downsized them to match their own needs and budgets—or realized their own ideas instead. [...] More generally speaking, and despite these differences in the scale of the resorts and their architecture, a broad range of comparable holiday facilities was developed in both regions from the 1950s to the 1980s. The spectrum ranged from the nationalized relics of aristocratic and bourgeois tourism culture to the relatively Spartan trade union holiday houses, chalet parks and camping sites, to modernist high-rise
hotels with conference and spa facilities, or architecturally ambitious structualist complexes and luxury hotels; and it further included quite a substantial number of private holiday homes, apartments and rooms for let. Occasional joint ventures with Western companies, such as ClubMed and Penthouse, also came to fruition. [...] 141, 204, 246] Such diversity reflects the various holiday practices of the day: in addition to the ‘social tourism’ organized by the state respectively by trade unions and the package tourism developed for the international market, a fair range of options was available to individual tourists, whether domestic or foreign. The majority of tourists in Bulgaria hailed from Comecon countries and hence could enter their ‘sister state’ easily. The tourism economy there was centrally organized and structured by a very few state enterprises until well into the late 1980s, first and foremost by Balkantourist. Yugoslavia, by contrast, attracted more guests from the West, largely from central and northern Europe, and its tourist economy was overwhelmingly in the hands of smaller, regional and local enterprises. [...] 164] The governments of both countries made substantial investments in creating modern holiday resorts for international visitors, which were expressly designed to showcase the nation’s achievements. The resorts’ appeal as stylish, cosmopolitan places to meet and mingle was not lost on the countries’ domestic publics either. Maroje Mrđulaš therefore describes tourism infrastructures inter alia as a ‘social condenser’ of Yugoslavilan society. [...] 206]

In order to underscore the modernity and international standards of the holiday resorts, architects and urban planners created distinctive modernist structures, directly embedded in pleasantly landscaped parkland or natural settings. How these fit seamlessly into the global architecture trends of the post-war period is demonstrated in Elke Beyer and Michael Zinganel’s introductory chapter on the general prerequisites and typologies of modern seaside hotels and resorts worldwide. Bulgarian tourism architecture often evinces remarkable combinations of the modernist design idiom and materials and references drawn from vernacular architecture or the classicist ‘national tradition’. The large scale of Bulgarian resorts led to efficient type projects being used repeatedly, sometimes as a testing ground for the industrial prefabrication of elements for housing projects. [...] 89]

On the Croatian Adriatic, by contrast, Yugoslavilan architects and construction companies, compelled to find individual solutions for awkward sloping sites, developed remarkable expertise in the use of sliding formworks for cast-in-situ concrete, and realized spectacular structuralist formations. [...] 162, 166] In the late 1960s and 70s, both regions saw a surge of playful themed architecture as a backdrop for the gastronomic and entertainment options that were fast becoming an important feature of the tourist product: simulacra of fantasy worlds, garnished with luxury sports, casinos and mildly salacious stage acts. As a result, both the Bulgarian and the Croatian coast represented late-modern tourism landscapes par excellence. In many respects they resembled the commercial tourism machines of the West, yet insofar as they synthesized aspects of that consumer culture with basic socialist premises, such as the public ownership of land and property, and extensive rights and benefits for employees, they were also a typical instance of European Late Socialism. [...] 2

The disintegration of the socialist community of states initially plunged the tourism sector in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia into a deep and long-lasting slump. Both suffered the fall-out from Yugoslavia’s disintegration and above all from the war that broke out in June 1991. As the Comecon’s economic and political ties unravelled, many former regular visitors to the Bulgarian Black Sea Coast either opted to explore destinations hitherto barred by the Iron Curtain or found themselves unable to travel abroad at all, owing to the dire economic situation after ‘the fall’. Furthermore, judicial uncertainty and hyperinflation led to a medium-term economic crisis that in turn put the break on investments. The different political paths pursued by Bulgaria and the newly independent state of Croatia went hand in hand with different approaches to the privatization of former nationalized assets respectively; in the case of Croatia, of its ‘socialized companies’ under ‘workers’ self-management’—as Elke Beyer, Anke Hagemann and Norbert Mappes-Niediek highlight in their contributions to this volume. Bulgaria’s major resorts were mostly broken down into smaller units before the pace of privatization was stepped up in 1997. Thereafter, a construction boom set in in the tourism regions. The expansion of existing hotels in combination with new developments and only scant regard for the urban layout and maximum capacity guidelines established in the state socialist era ate up most of the remaining open space in the large resorts. In addition there began a veritable bonanza of speculative property development, with holiday apartment complexes sprouting even on hitherto unspoiled sections of the coast. [...] 108] When privatization got underway in post-war Croatia however, after 1999, tourism operations were
generally sold off in clusters, as a single package. This effectively cleared the field for a few major investment companies to acquire monopoly holdings that, in the new capitalist climate, far outweighed the local traditions of federalism and workers' self-management. [109] Unresolved legal disputes continue to hamper investment in Croatia today, while less welcoming local planning authorities impose very strict limits on construction activity. Therefore, the primary problem there at the time of writing is not so much major tourism developments but the random sprawl of smaller private residences. Upon EU accession in 2013, opponents of international investors' ambitions will have a hard time standing their ground.

Modernism revisited

In international architectural circles, the legacy of Modernism and particularly, of "Socialist Modernism" (aka 'Ostmoderne'), is a trendy topic these days. Yet the current physical and economic restructuring of erstwhile state socialist tourism architectures and leisure landscapes is addressed only rarely in urban research—which is quite surprising, considering how widely the resorts were acclaimed at the time of their construction, also internationally, as remarkable showcases of modern architecture and equally state-of-the-art urban concepts. Coverage of them in domestic trade journals was accordingly detailed and well illustrated.

In Bulgaria, there is substantial public interest in the Black Sea coast both as a major economic factor and a popular holiday destination. Its development has been closely observed by economists and geographers, and several excellent ethnographic and cultural history studies have examined Bulgarian society in the light of tourism. Construction for the tourism industry is also an appreciable factor for the Bulgarian architectural profession. Many offices participated in (and profited from) the Black Sea Coast boom years. However, the eclectic styles and oversized speculative developments that bloomed in that brief spring also gave rise to criticism of the local planning culture and the quality and sustainability of certain approved projects. Public discourse on the theme is led on the whole, however, not by architects but by activists, who demand greater transparency in matters of public finance and planning, as well as more effective measures for protection of the environment.

Restructuring processes 'after the fall' have been closely examined by economists and geographers in Croatia too, while outstanding recent research publications in the fields of history and cultural sciences have explored state-subsidized social tourism in Yugoslavia and the holiday culture of Yugoslavians. Yet very little attention has been paid to, from an architectural history perspective, to precisely those large-scale modernist tourism architectures built on the Adriatic in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and on which Yugoslavia, like Croatia today, pinned such high economic hopes—and research into the recent transformation and current state of these remarkable hotel complexes is likewise conspicuous by its absence. Architectural and urban research tends to examine tourism against the backdrop of the general development of the Adriatic Coast—as in the Croatian contribution to the Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2006—or to focus on the sprawling agglomerations of private holiday homes, or on the tourism potential of former industrial and military sites. Several research groups in the architecture and planning fields are currently protesting the spiralling commodification of land, a


5 See e.g. the journals Architektura (Sofia), Architektura Urbanizam (Belgrade), Architektura (Zagreb) and Čevljak i prostor (Zagreb).


consequence of further tourism industry growth, and advocating more effective regulatory and planning mechanisms. As Maroje Mrduljaš and Michael Zinganel explain in their contributions to this volume, some people believe Croatia may count itself lucky, given that the interplay of various factors prevented its Adriatic coast being as disastrously disfigured by overdevelopment and architectural monstrosities as certain more investor-friendly regions of Spain, Bulgaria or Montenegro. To keep things that way, and to steer further development by implementing well-thought-out, sustainable architectural and urban planning concepts is certainly nothing less than crucial to Croatia’s future as a tourism destination.

Synopsis

Thus, the focus of this volume is the initial construction and use of explicitly modern leisure resorts and hotels, as well as the various metamorphoses they have undergone in the intervening decades, from the planning processes initiated in the state socialist era through to post-socialist restructuring. The contributions compiled here address not only the many ways in which the resorts and individual structures have been physically restructured since the collapse of state socialism, or the new types of tourism architecture to be found in Bulgaria and Croatia since the deregulation of real estate; they deal also with economic change, which is to say, with revised models of mass tourism and the passage of ownership, investment and management into the hands of the respective countries’ new elites.

By way of introduction, Elke Beyer and Michael Zinganel present a survey of the origins and architectural history of mass tourism after World War II. The main part of the book is divided into two sections, one devoted to the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, the other to the Croatian Adriatic. In each section, an extensive overview of the region’s development is followed by eight or nine case studies: accounts of the fate of individual hotels or resorts, illustrating the broad spectrum of physical and economic restructuring, from dereliction, to refurbishment or conversion. In the first section, Elke Beyer and Anke Hagelmann discuss different phases of urban planning and architectural development in Bulgarian seaside resorts. In six chapters devoted to individual resorts, they demonstrate how radically both public images and architectural interpretations of Bulgaria’s Black Sea coast—the ‘tourist product’—have shifted from era to era, from the first centrally planned holiday resorts of the late 1950s through to the 1970s mass resorts, from different models of privatization to the consequences of ‘boom and bust’ construction on the Black Sea coast today. The second section on Croatian tourism architecture consists of three chapters with different thematic approaches: Michael Zinganel describes the transition from ‘social tourism’—the ‘ideologically sound’ state-subsidized workers’ holiday—to market-oriented, commercial mass tourism. Maroje Mrduljaš traces the planning history of socialist mass tourism resorts on the Croatian Adriatic. His contribution, in combination with a series of analytical drawings by Kerstin Stramer and Michael Zinganel, explores how different architectural typologies were used to integrate hotel buildings in the landscape, and how their specially commissioned modernist interiors fostered innovative design. Norbert Mappes-Niediek introduces the model of workers’ self-management (which was widely adopted in Yugoslavia’s tourism sector), analyzes the reasons for Croatia’s very hesistant, complex and on-going privatization process, and shows how certain parties have attempted to gain a competitive edge.

Two photo series frame the analytical section of the book. It begins with a series from the archives of the Zagreb travel agency Turistkomerc, showing freshly built hotel architectures on the Croatian Adriatic in an early 1970s glam aesthetic; and it ends with ‘Holidays after the Fall’, a series by Bulgarian photographer Nikola Mihov, who took a trip through the Bulgarian Black Sea coast’s overdeveloped holiday landscapes in late September 2012 and captured their low-season air of desolation for this book.

