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# From Polyglot Playgrounds to Tourist Traps? Designing and redesigning the modern seaside resorts in Bulgaria

ANKE HAGEMANN

## Abstract

*Between the mid 1950s and early 70s, the People's Republic of Bulgaria planned and built four large-scale holiday resorts on the Black Sea Coast – for domestic 'social tourism' as well as for international holidaymakers. According to fordist principles, sun, sand and sea were turned into an all-round 'tourist product', including architecture and urbanism as essential components. The seaside resorts were testing grounds for an uncompromisingly modern architecture, urbanism and lifestyle – with comfortable hotel complexes, restaurants and leisure facilities in a wide variety of architectural styles and design themes. Modern spaces par excellence were created, interfaces for professional exchange across the Iron Curtain and places of encounter between tourists from East and West. Tourism became an important sector for the Bulgarian economy under state socialism and has remained so under present-day capitalism. However, the shifts in organizational structures and property relations since 1989 have profoundly changed the resorts' architectural appearance.*

*This contribution discusses how planning practices and architectural images of modernism have shifted from era to era, starting with the resorts' foundation in the 1950s and their development towards mass tourism in the 1960s. It then deals with privatization and the construction boom on the Black Sea Coast in the post-socialist decades. Case studies of the Sunny Beach and Albena resorts demonstrate how differently tourism, planning and real estate actors deal with the built heritage and modernist ideas today: from radical neglect within an eclectic urban chaos to a more respectful, clear-sighted upgrading of the original modern architectures.*

Bulgaria, Black Sea, tourism, resort, architecture, urbanism, planning, modern/Modernism

## Zusammenfassung

### Vom Polyglot Playground zur Touristenfalle? Bau und Transformation der modernen Küstenresorts in Bulgarien

*Von Mitte der 1950er Jahre bis in die frühen 70er plante und baute die Volksrepublik Bulgarien vier großmaßstäbliche Ferienresorts an der Schwarzmeerküste – für den bulgarischen 'Sozialtourismus' wie auch für internationale Urlaubsgäste. Nach fordistischen Prinzipien wurden Sonne, Sand und Meer in ein umfassendes 'touristisches Produkt' verwandelt, wobei Architektur und Städtebau eine besondere Rolle spielten: Die Küstenresorts waren Laboratorien einer kompromisslos modernen Architektur, Planung und Lebensweise – mit komfortablen Hotelkomplexen, Restaurants und Freizeiteinrichtungen in vielfältigen Architekturstilen und Gestaltungsthemen. So entstanden moderne Räume par excellence, Schnittstellen für den blockübergreifenden Planungsdiskurs und Begegnungsorte für Urlauberinnen aus Ost und West. Seitdem hat sich der Tourismus zu einem der wichtigsten Wirtschaftssektoren Bulgariens entwickelt. Der Wandel der Wirtschafts- und Eigentumsstrukturen nach 1989 führte allerdings auch zu einer tiefgreifenden baulichen Transformation der Resorts. In diesem Beitrag wird ausgeführt, wie sich die Planungspraktiken und Architektursprachen über die Jahrzehnte veränderten, beginnend mit der Gründung der Resorts in den 1950er Jahren und der Ausprägung des Massentourismus während der 1960er Jahre. Dann wird die Privatisierung und der Bauboom an der Schwarzmeerküste nach dem Systemwechsel in den Blick genommen. Anhand der kontrastierenden Beispiele der Urlaubsresorts Sonnenstrand und Albena wird dargestellt, wie mit dem baulichen Erbe der Moderne in den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten umgegangen wurde: radikale Missachtung des Bestehenden und planlose bauliche Verdichtung auf der einen und weitsichtigere Aufwertungsstrategien innerhalb des modernen Bestands auf der anderen Seite.*

Bulgarien, Schwarzes Meer, Tourismus, Resort, Architektur, Städtebau, Planung, Moderne

In the 1950s, the sandy beaches, warm climate and green hills of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast were discovered and developed as a destination for large-scale tourism – offering recreation to domestic guests as well as international holidaymakers. Over the next two decades, the construction of entire new bathing resorts provided architects and urban planners with unprecedented opportunities to experiment. The Black Sea coast became a testing ground for the renewal of resolutely modern design, and the resorts that sprang up there showcased the very latest in contemporary Bulgarian architecture. Development of the coast to accommodate millions of holidaymakers laid the foundations for an economic sector that was vital to Bulgaria under state socialism, and has remained so under present-day capitalism.

This article begins with a short overview of the development of the Bulgarian Black Sea resorts since the 1950s, reflecting on the modern and modernist concepts within this ‘socialist’ architecture and urbanism. Then, it focuses on the physical and economic transformation of the seaside resorts since the 1990s by comparing two very different cases: Albena and Sunny Beach. It concludes by contrasting their transformations with the modernist ideas behind their formation. The paper is based on results from the research project ‘Holidays after the Fall: Urban and architectural transformation processes of South-East European leisure peripheries’, which conducted comparative research of Bulgarian and Croatian seaside resorts built during socialism and their architectural developments up to the present (BEYER et al. 2013). Together with Elke BEYER, the author focussed on the large scale holiday resorts along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, their formation and development in the state socialist era, and especially their physical and economic transforma-

tion after the fall of the Iron Curtain up to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

### The foundation and development of the Bulgarian Black Sea resorts from the 1950s to the 1970s

Between the mid 1950s and early 70s, the People’s Republic of Bulgaria planned and built four large holiday resorts on an urban scale: Druzhba, Zlatni Pyasatsi (Golden Sands), Slanchev Bryag (Sunny Beach), and Albena (HESS 1973). This enterprise was accompanied by the construction of more hotels, holiday homes, youth camps and holiday villages in other places along the coast – not to mention the mountain resorts in the interior, which were developed during the same period. Initially, the seaside resorts were dedicated to recreation for domestic workers. As early as 1948, the socialist People’s Republic of Bulgaria introduced the universal right to an annual paid holiday and made ‘social tourism’ a permanent feature of its social policy – following the model of the Soviet Union. Hence, a large share of the tourism facilities was allocated by workplaces, mass organizations and state institutions in the name of state-subsidized ‘social tourism’ (GHODSEE 2005; TAYLOR 2011). Later on, the Bulgarian government began to recognize beach tourism as a valuable asset and as a commodity for international trade: it could be exchanged with other comecon countries in the form of barter agreements, either to encourage travel across the socialist nations (TAYLOR 2011, p. 13), or in exchange for other economic

goods or benefits.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, tourism on the Black Sea coast could bring in hard currency from international holidaymakers (GHODSEE 2005). Hotels in the upper categories in particular were designed to appeal to an international clientele who started to visit the country in the mid 1950s.<sup>3</sup> The centralized national tourist agency ‘Balkantourist’, which was launched in 1948, owned, managed and marketed all tourist accommodation and facilities in the country. It also maintained offices abroad, and invested in international marketing campaigns. Streams of foreign guests were thus ‘steered into the country according to plan’ (HESS 1973).

Likewise, the resorts, hotels and holiday facilities were centrally planned and designed by one institution only: Glavproekt, the central state institute for architecture and urban planning. The responsibility for the design and structural development of each new resort in its entirety was assigned to a team of architects, planners and engineers under the direction of a chief architect at Glavproekt. The centralized masterplanning of the Black Sea Coast allowed for the concentration of tourism in designated areas, leaving large parts of the coast protected as nature reserves (OSCHLIES 1990). Selected locations and their natural surroundings, the climate and national folklore were neatly packaged and marketed internationally as an all-round ‘tourist product’.<sup>4</sup> Architecture, urban design and landscaping were considered an im-

1 In accordance with the focus of the research project, this paper investigates the development of the Bulgarian seaside resorts from the disciplinary perspective of architecture and urbanism and attempts to include the broader economic, political, and cultural circumstances that majorly affected the resorts’ construction and physical change, such as concepts of tourism and ownership structures. However, it cannot exhaustively represent the Bulgarian tourism economy within the changing macropolitical and -economic contexts. A promising field of future research would appear to be the exploration of the resorts’ history from the perspective of Bulgarians and tourists, including their perception of modern tourism architecture and the changing face of the resorts after 2000.

2 Tourism from Comecon countries was initiated in the late 1940s by a barter agreement with Czechoslovakia, who received vacation packages on the Black Sea coast as reparation payments for Czechoslovak investments in industrial facilities that Bulgaria had nationalized (Ghodsee 2005, p. 82).

3 At that time, the construction of the holiday resorts was also facilitated by the death of Stalin, who had given clear priority to the development of productive industries and did not regard tourism as an economic force (Ghodsee 2005, p. 85).

4 To describe the different phases of development, the concept of the ‘tourist product’ was employed. This term is used in the tourism industry for all goods and services provided to the consumer during a holiday, including also the climate, landscape and cultural attractions. We were particularly interested in the function of architecture and urban design within the creation of this ‘tourist product’ throughout the decades.

portant part of this product, creating the physical preconditions for a successful holiday.

cial tourism'. Fairly low-rise hotels and holiday homes were spread throughout carefully landscaped parks and gardens,

KOLOV 1957; SHARLIEV 1958; DZHANGOZOV 1960). The concept of collective leisure and recreation was pursued by generously proportioned indoor and outdoor communal areas. At that time, the tourist product simply promised quiet recreation in a pleasant natural environment – for Bulgarians and international guests alike (Photograph 1).

In the 1960s and 70s, the resorts' capacities were increased, mirroring the growing demand (DINEV 1984). The urban layouts of the resorts were densified by bigger and taller hotel buildings: modernist high-rises, slabs or large hotel complexes comprised of several structures. The architecture of the early and mid 1960s was characterized by a White Modernism or International Style, with playful elements and details (AWRAMOW 1971) (Photograph 2). Later, the spectrum of building types and design themes was broadened, more contemporary late-modern architectural styles were adopted, such as Structuralist or Brutalist elements, and references to regional building traditions were made (TANGAROV et al. 1972; BULEV 2007).

Mass tourism was catered for with ever greater professionalism: more variety in accommodation typologies and new facilities for entertainment, sports and culture were introduced, turning the simple beach holiday into a more diversified tourist product (AWRAMOW 1971; SAUER 1973) and the Bulgarian shoreline into an 'exciting new polyglot playground for the world' (Promotional film 1965). In this context, the style of the architecture was expected to support the promised holiday experience and eye-catching hotel buildings became trademarks of the resorts (Photograph 3). In addition, some trivial amusement architecture created the backdrop for shopping, dining or evening entertainment.

Until the late 1980s, the continuing upgrade of the tourist product steadily boosted visitor numbers, but the expansion of the resorts was pursued only up to the calculated maximum capacities (based on the respective beach areas).



Photograph 1: Druzhba resort: first (right) and second (left) generation hotels in generous parkland, 1964  
Source: BTA (Bulgarian News Agency)



Photograph 2: Sunny Beach resort: modernist hotels in the early 1960s  
Source: Lost Bulgaria ([www.lostbulgaria.com](http://www.lostbulgaria.com))

The first construction phase of the resorts – the late 50s and early 60s – was characterized by a large share of holiday homes and simple accommodation for 'so-

along with follies, pergolas or fountains. Their architecture was basically simple and modern, but still influenced by the neoclassical style of the Stalinist era (Ni-



Photograph 3: Golden Sands resort: beach life in the 1970s, background: Hotel International, architect: Georgi Stoilov, 1969  
Source: S. SIVRIEV (no date): Bulgaria, Sofia

### The Bulgarian seaside resorts during state socialism: modern spaces par excellence

Planning and building spaces exclusively for recreation and leisure was part of an essentially Fordist agenda being carried out all across Europe. In the post-war decades, social policies such as a paid annual holiday and the implementation of affordable transportation facilitated the recreation of the working population, the 'democratization of leisure' (TAYLOR 2011, p. 2) and, eventually, mass tourism. Equalling Fordist modes of production, the tourism industry provided an increasingly standardized 'tourist product' to the masses, based on the commodification of all aspects of holiday-making and its itemization into packages (LÖFGREN 1999).<sup>5</sup> According to LÖFGREN, 'the

making of mass tourism is an important part of the modern project' (ibid., p. 274) and TAYLOR argues that 'opportunities for travel and holidaymaking in the socialist homeland proffered an invitation to join a more modern and democratic society' (TAYLOR 2011, p. 17). On both sides of the Iron Curtain, holiday facilities were planned within the context of national modernization strategies, targeting especially rural and underdeveloped regions (ZINGANEL et al. 2013; MRDULJAŠ 2013). Architecture and urbanism played an important role in this modernization project and in creating the tourist product – in a physical, but also in a symbolic sense (cf. MOLNÁR 2013).

In Bulgaria, the planning and construction of entirely new holiday resorts provided the opportunity for realizing an uncompromisingly modern urbanism and architecture – right after the dominance of 'national traditions' in architecture during the Stalinist era (BULEV 2007). The seaside resorts could be called 'modern' in many respects: regarding the com-

prehensive masterplanning including all scales from the regional plan to the interior design; regarding the functional and rational layouts of entire resorts as well as single hotels; regarding the contemporary accommodation standards, services and leisure facilities; and, last but not least, regarding the architectural designs, that refer to classical Modernism and international late-modern movements and styles.

Tourism planning allowed Bulgarian architects considerable leeway in design matters, above and beyond the practical constraints of everyday architectural practice (GROSS et al. 1962). The resorts served as testing grounds for modern urbanism and architecture, even before Bulgarian cities were modernized (BULEV 2007), and they became models for other planning and building projects in Bulgaria. For example, industrial pre-fabrication was initially tested in hotel buildings before being applied in housing construction (AWRAMOW 1971). Thus, holiday resorts and tourism infrastructure became the prestigious flagship of Bulgarian architecture, and were proudly presented as such, for instance, at the 11th Congress of the UIA (Union Internationale des Architectes), held in Varna in 1972 (ARHITEKTURA 1972; INTERNATIONAL UNION OF ARCHITECTS 1975).

At the same time, the resorts provided frameworks and images for a modern, progressive lifestyle; within rural Bulgaria, they developed an urban, cosmopolitan flair (Photograph 4). In the context of extensive urbanization processes in Southeast Europe, domestic tourism played an important role 'in the project of "making urbanites" in a cultural sense, by transforming ways of life' (TAYLOR 2011, p. 12). A 'holiday represented a trip to modernity – to a newly built tourism complex or a resort boasting fashionable restaurants, bars, discos and boutiques' (ibid., p. 23). Many Bulgarians remember the 'Red Riviera' as a 'most fashionable place' (GHODSEE 2005, p. 85) and international travel guides from the 1960s printed enthusiastic reports. Modern lifestyles could be exercised here in fully or-

<sup>5</sup> However, LÖFGREN remarks that at the same time as the tourism industry anticipated post-Fordist modes of production, it learned to differentiate the standardized holiday and to market immaterial qualities such as 'local atmosphere and exotic adventure' (LÖFGREN 1999, p. 275). This can be witnessed in the development of Bulgarian seaside tourism during the 1960s and 70s, as described above.

ganized and controlled environments – in collective holiday homes as well as in luxury hotels. ‘The beach itself was so modern. [...] On this classless terrain of new and healthy democratic mass tourism, the tanned body in overalls and sandals or just a swimsuit represented modernity, not class’ (LÖFGREN 1999, p. 240). As the Bulgarian beaches remained, legally, accessible to everybody, people from different origins and social backgrounds could mingle. From the very beginning, the resorts were designed for both local and international holidaymakers, providing a common space for the camping site and the luxury hotel. This way, the resorts became ‘a vibrant interface between the socialist and capitalist worlds’ (TAYLOR 2006, p. 111) as well as between tourists, locals and service personnel.<sup>6</sup> Within these hybrid spaces – consumerist enclaves within the socialist system – Modernist buildings functioned as symbols of the progressiveness and achievements of the socialist system and at the same time they were signalling to an increasingly international public that the resorts could compete with Western standards and comfort.

From a comparative perspective, it is hard to detect a distinct ‘socialist Modernism’ in the holiday architectures of Bulgaria or other Eastern European Countries (such as Romania or Yugoslavia). Instead, you can find different expressions of a modernist mainstream, which was practised in East and West at the same time. Similar interests, demands and problems concerning the development of mass tourism led to similar ideas and concepts in planning and architecture on both sides of the Iron Curtain: the same types of hotel architecture could be found in Bulgaria and Greece, or in Croatia and Portugal, for example (ZINGANEL et al. 2013). Even cen-



Photograph 4: Sunny Beach: beach café, 1960s

Source: 1960s photobook of Bulgarian resorts (no author, no date), collection Nikola Mihov

tralized large scale planning was not an exclusive feature of the socialist systems, as the French national planning scheme for the coastline of Languedoc-Roussillon, which was developed and implemented from the 1960s onwards, illustrates (FURLOUGH 1998; CANDILIS 1972). Moreover, the many similarities between the French and the Bulgarian resort plans and architectures are just one indicator of the extensive professional exchange across the Iron Curtain, that can also be documented by mutual articles and reports in contemporary architecture magazines on both sides (SOUGAREV 1960; ARCHITECTURAL FORUM 1962; ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW 1966; AWRAMOW 1971; SAUER 1973).

### The physical and economic transformation of the Bulgarian seaside resorts since the 1990s

After 1989, the numbers of international tourists dropped significantly, for the tourism sector was confronted with the abrupt end of Bulgaria’s established rapport with other Comecon countries and the uncertainties prompted by political and economic upheaval (KASATSCHKA et al.).

In the following decade, organizational structures and property relations changed in many regards, as did vested interests in marketing the tourist product. After several years of stagnation and halting privatization, an investment and construction boom set in at the turn of the millennium, and radically altered the face of holiday resorts and tourism architecture in Bulgaria. While during state socialism, tourism was concentrated in a number of designated and thoroughly planned places along the coast, now there were no more effective restrictions to urban sprawl, because political upheaval had robbed centralized planning of its institutional and legal powers. New planning structures had to be established, and to date, spatial planning and building regulation is still weak in the face of powerful economic interests. Two case studies will be discussed here as contrasting models of privatization and structural development in postsocialist times: the resorts of Sunny Beach and Albena.

Sunny Beach (Slanchev Bryag), close to the historic town of Nessebar, is the biggest seaside resort in Bulgaria. Planned

<sup>6</sup> This ‘socialist egalitarianism’ (GHODSEE 2005, p. 87) was not without problems, though: GHODSEE (2005) describes the poor quality of service and the lack of social distinction that deterred wealthier Western tourists from visiting the Bulgarian resorts, and TAYLOR (2006, p. 111) reports that there were even efforts to fence off Westerners from Bulgarians. Likewise, these encounters were always under surveillance: the GDR’s central travel agency, for example, was closely linked to the state’s secret police and often snitches were among the tour groups (APPELIUS 2011).

initially for a maximum of 27,000 hotel beds, it now has merged with Nessebar and the neighbouring villages to form a coastal agglomeration with an estimated capacity of around 300,000 beds. Today, it is often referred to as a worst case example of excessive densification and overcrowding (interviews Neshkov 2010, Hristov 2010): a 'tourist trap'.

In the course of its privatization, the state tourist agency Balkantourist – which owned most of the hotels and infrastructures in Bulgaria – was broken down into 130 smaller companies in the early 1990s (BACHVAROV 2000). In Sunny Beach, the hotels and hotel complexes were offered for sale individually, as was the case in most Bulgarian resorts. This way, the most attractive and valuable objects changed owner very soon – often under intransparent and rather dubious circumstances (GHODSEE 2005, p. 130). Meanwhile, most of the hotels stayed in state ownership for years; a lack of investment in an unstable situation impeded the development.

Then, in the late 90s, the new conservative government rushed to privatize state-owned companies by launching other models of privatization, and it introduced long-awaited tourism legislation (interview Hristov 2010). This brought forth new investment in the tourism sector by local and international players, including major global tour operators such as TUI, ITS and Neckermann (DÖRRY et al. 2009). Simultaneously, after Bulgaria became a candidate for the EU accession, EU funding was pumped into improving regional infrastructures. In the early 2000s, many run-down hotels were renovated to international standards, and visitor numbers steadily increased. Bulgaria's Black-Sea coast was back on the map and in the holiday brochures for very affordable package-deal beach tourism. This in turn triggered a veritable construction boom, initially in the big resorts, then in other coastal areas – and later even inside the boundaries of important nature reserves.

In 2004 alone, over 20 new hotels opened in Sunny Beach (Dnevnik.bg

2004). Investors could build on the resort's established reputation and existing infrastructure, and the flat topography allowed for easy expansion. The new constructions were generally undertaken individually, with total disregard for urban planning and the bigger picture. Moreover, the developers frequently contravened building regulations regarding the hotels' position, size and distance from one another to attain maximum capacity and profit. There was no clear legislation and no comprehensive master plan for the resort and the coastal area. In addition, local authorities lacked the compe-

transformations can be observed: some hotels and facilities from the 1960s remain nearly unchanged today, others received a post-modern facelift or were modified beyond recognition, while next to them, different types of new construction replaced older structures or green areas. The following individual, but typical examples of modification and new construction in Sunny Beach give an impression of the various transformation types in the resort's built environment:

Hotel Kontinental (Photograph 5) is a hotel complex that remained more or less the same as in the late 60s, when it was



Photograph 5: Sunny Beach: Hotel Kontinental, 2012 (Nikola Mihov)

tence or the will to monitor planning and enforce regulations. This led to a massive densification of the original resort and to an extension of the built areas along the coast and on agricultural land in the west of Sunny Beach, creating an enormous urban sprawl (ERMANN et al. 2011).

It was not until 2008 that new building legislation for the Black Sea coast came into force and slowed this development down (interviews Neshkov 2010, Hristov 2010), but it took the global economic crisis of 2009 to burst the real estate bubble. Today, Sunny Beach is a dense conglomerate of hotels and apartment buildings of diverse dimensions, categories, building ages and styles. Quite different kinds of post-socialist building

built – apart from its slight degeneration, some paint or new windows. Regarding its architecture, the complex is remarkable for its overall layout, forming an internal street between the hotel wings and its use of plain materials such as wood, steel and eye-catching precast concrete elements.

Hotel Globus (Photograph 6) used to be a major landmark of Sunny Beach in the 1960s, with its shiny white International Style design, its 10 floors of hotel rooms towering over the resort, and its spectacular folded sun roof on top. Today, it has been face-lifted, switching to a moderate post-modern look, structuring and coloring the facade, but keeping the basic volumes and the signature roof-top. The Bar



Photograph 6: Sunny Beach: Hotel Globus, 2012 (Nikola Mihov)



Photograph 7: Sunny Beach: Bar Variété and Colosseum hotel and apartment complex, 2012 (Nikola Mihov)



Photograph 8: Sunny Beach: Hotel Victoria, 2012 (Nikola Mihov)

Variété (Photograph 7) is another important landmark from the 1960s, featured internationally in many of the architecture reviews on the Bulgarian Black Sea resorts. The circular building was created as a central place for nightlife entertainment in Sunny Beach. Today's situation is an example of maximum exploitation of building land in the center of Sunny Beach: a multistorey hotel and an apartment complex – named Colosseum – were attached to the variété theater, forming a terraced ring around the central structure, leaving only the entrance area open. The Bar Variété itself contains a Casino now, but has not changed much since the 60s.

During the Sunny Beach construction boom, some of the first new construction projects were luxury hotels of huge dimensions (Photograph 8) at prime beachfront locations. At the northern end of the bay, for example, a whole string of palatial hotel complexes was built, presenting garish architectures, richly decorated in various eclectic styles.

The latest type of new construction in Sunny Beach is typified by apartment complexes and the so-called 'apart-hotels' (Photograph 9). They were built in large numbers by professional developers to be marketed internationally as holiday homes. Typologies range from very simple studios in apartment blocks to private villa compounds with marinas or golf courses. When not used by the owners, the apartments are rented out to other tourists, just like hotel rooms. However, the apartment complexes are not rated as hotels and are not restricted by legislation on holiday accommodation. This loophole produced an immensely profitable real estate bubble and large overcapacity of holiday apartments in Sunny Beach and beyond.

'The Black Sea Coast is the new Abu Dhabi of Europe' (FILCHEVA 2008) is what a Bulgarian architect stated in an international architecture magazine. Her article was part of growing criticism of the coastal developments within the architectural profession (BULEV 2004; POPOV 2012). Sunny Beach's densely built mix-



Photograph 9: Sunny Beach: new construction of apartment complexes, 2010 (Anke Hagemann)

ture of more or less spectacular eclectic architectures reflects the tastes and strategies of the many individual hotel owners as well as the demands of the global players in the tourism industry.

This dominance of individual economic interests and the lack of comprehensive planning resulted also in neglect of public utilities and infrastructures. The company that manages the public infrastructures of Sunny Beach since its privatization, 'Sunny Beach AD', has invested little of its income in infrastructural

projects and repeatedly faces serious corruption charges (Novinite.com 2010). Since the infrastructures were designed initially to serve only a fraction of today's holidaymakers, sewage systems and power supplies, for instance, are totally inadequate during the high season (Dikov 2012). For the same reasons, the resort also lacks public spaces, green areas, pedestrian routes and a comprehensive concept for traffic access and parking (Photograph 10).



Photograph 10: Sunny Beach: commercialized public spaces, 2010 (Anke Hagemann)

The tourist product that Sunny Beach stands for today is the low-budget, all-inclusive package deal holiday for the younger generation, luring with cheap prices for drinks, dining out and other entertainment. Mass tourism has morphed into overcrowding and commercialization and the architecture takes part in this fierce competition for the consumers' attention. Thus one can speak of a sell-out of the tourist product as well as of the slow destruction of its resources: firstly, its natural resources – such as an unspoilt natural landscape and clear water – and secondly, the structural resources – such as the qualities of urban planning and architecture – that had been carefully developed since the 1960s.

If Sunny Beach is often referred to as a worst-case scenario, then Albena is usually described as an example of successful transformation in both aspects, economy and urban planning (interview Neshkov 2010; GHODSEE 2005, p. 133). Albena is the third largest Bulgarian seaside resort, located at the northern part of the coast. It was designed and built in the late 1960s and early 70s as a self-contained urban composition of hotels, cabins and camping sites, complemented by additional functions such as restaurants, shopping, sports, health and cultural facilities (ARHITEKTURA 1967; RAHNEV 1971). Albena's hotels were designed in a consistent architectural language that has become a trademark for the resort (Photograph 11). The beachfront hotels are characterized by their terraced floors and pyramid shapes and the decorative prefab facade panels in front of the balconies and galleries – architectural features reminiscent of Jean Balladure's designs in the French holiday resort La Grande Motte, the construction of which started a few years earlier.

After 1989, for the purpose of privatization, the resort of Albena was turned as a whole into a state-owned stock company. The management could prevent the resort from being divided into smaller pieces for privatization, but as the resort was far too big to be sold as a whole, it stayed under state ownership for years.



Photograph 11: Albena resort, around 1970  
Source: BTA (Bulgarian News Agency)

boom years after 2000, the management decided not to increase accommodation capacities by squeezing in new hotels. Instead, they gradually upgraded the resort by renovating or, at the most, replacing the existing buildings with respect for the original urban composition (interview Todorova 2010) (Photograph 12). The green spaces, public areas and service facilities are well maintained, and potentially annoying or noisy commercial functions – such as markets, bars and night clubs – are restricted (Photograph 13).

This way, the Albena company has developed its tourist product as a pleasant and relaxing package holiday destination,

Then, the Bulgarian state introduced new forms of privatization in the mid 1990s, namely, the buyout of the company by its employees and the mass privatization model, based on the distribution of vouchers for investment to the population. Both methods were applied in the privatization of Albena in 1997. The majority of the shares was bought partly by an association of staff members, supported by a 50 million USD investment from the Banque Nationale de Paris, and partly by a mass privatization fund based on the vouchers of the employees and the region's inhabitants (GHODSEE 2005, p. 132; interview Todorova 2010). As a result, the entire resort including its hotels, restaurants, parks, sports grounds, utilities and service facilities, etc., stayed in one hand and continued to be operated by a central management.

The management and shareholders were convinced that the original concept of Albena was still offering a tourist product of high quality – even almost 30 years after its masterplan was conceived – including valuable features such as the architectural and urban designs, the combination of different accommodation types and categories, the strict separation of motorized and pedestrian traffic, the abundance of green areas for recreation and the central coordination of dining, sports and entertainment opportunities. These qualities have been retained up to the present day; even in the construction



Photograph 12: Albena resort, 2012 (Nikola Mihov)



Photograph 13: Albena resort: public spaces, 2012 (Nikola Mihov)

marketed mainly through exclusive contracts with West European tour operators. Here, the original concept of the holiday resort has been brought to perfection and is economically exploited with a more sustainable strategy. The resort is a self-contained and completely controlled holiday world, with the 1960s architecture still functioning as a corporate trade mark.

Sunny Beach and Albena represent two sharply contrasting examples within the wide range of economical and physical forms of transformation in the Bulgarian Black Sea resorts. But while Sunny Beach can be called the extreme version of a more typical development, the large-scale privatization of Albena is an exceptional case. Since the crisis which interrupted the construction boom, stakeholders in the tourism industry are apparently realizing the importance of more sustainable tourism development and of comprehensive masterplanning and building regulation. Now, efforts are being made by government and non-government organizations to initiate a change, be it more state legislation and regulation, a quality upgrade or alternative forms of tourism (interviews Neshkov 2010, Hristov 2010). Most remarkably, the sell-off of the Black Sea coast and the destruction of precious nature reserves have galvanized what was probably the largest and most broad-based social movement for civil rights seen in Bulgaria since 1989. Since 2006, outrage over several illegal, ecologically unsound property developments has led to lively street protests, media campaigns, and national and European lawsuits (Novinite.com 2011; Novinite.com 2012, see also daspasimirakli.org, and forthenature.org).

### Conclusion: modernizing Modernism?

When studying the forms of urban and architectural transformation of the Bulgarian seaside resorts after 1989, one can speak of 'modernization' only in terms of a technical overhaul of the building fabric or an upgrade to the contemporary accommodation standard.

Compared to the recent developments, the main feature of the original Modernist resorts was their comprehensive masterplanning from the large scale strategies (which allowed for the concentration of tourism in designated areas), down to the urban layouts and the architectural styles and details.

While in the exceptional case of Albena this overall planning could be further practised (although not with comparably innovative ideas), on large parts of the coast the most striking difference to former times is their widely uncontrolled development after 1989. After 'the changes', there were no collective urban visions, no masterplans, no effective planning instruments or institutions; all construction projects were based on individual ideas and profit interests, neglecting overall demands and common concerns. As illustrated in the case of Sunny Beach, this development is neither progressive nor sustainable (both in an ecological and an economic sense). Today, the first step towards more sustainable tourism planning should be to recognize – and build on – the resorts' original qualities as thoroughly planned destinations of mass tourism, in order to really 'modernize modernism'.

The architecture of the new tourism constructions is equally regressive: eclectic, decorative, pretentious and of low design quality; few projects can keep up with contemporary architectural currents and design standards. In general, Modernist images and styles appeared no longer desirable after 1989: for Bulgarians, they referred to the obsolete socialist system, and for international tourists they referred to an out-dated, rational form of mass tourism, which – according to today's images in holiday brochures – has been replaced by themed environments, historicizing images and more vernacular-style architectures. As in other (Western) European countries, there is only a very slow rapprochement with the modernist architectures of the 1960s and their specific qualities – mainly within the architectural profession (POPOV 2012). Unfortunately, not many buildings

from that period have survived unscathed to the present day and few can expect respectful treatment in the future.

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## Interviews:

Information in the text is based on the following interviews conducted during field studies in 2010:

Interview with Todor Bulev, Professor of Urban Planning and former Vice-President of the Bulgarian Chamber of Architects and Liliya Lutskanova, lecturer in Urban Planning at Varna Free University, 24 August 2010, Varna.

Interview with Marin Neshkov, chairman of the Varna Chamber of Tourism, Varna, 24 August 2010.

Interview with Margita Todorova, Director, Marketing and Sales Department, Albena JSCo, Albena, 27 August 2010.

Interview with Elena Ivanova, chairwoman of the Hotel Owners' Association, Sunny Beach, 30 August 2010.

Interviews with Polina Stoykova, Chief Operations Manager and Evgeni Zlatev, General Manager Varna Office, Bulgarian Properties, Varna, 25 August, and Sofia, 1 September 2010.

Interview with Hristomir Hristov, State Expert, Tourism Policy Directorate, Ministry of the Economy, Energy and Tourism, Sofia, 1 September 2010.

Interview with Yanina Taneva, Manager, Art for Social Change Programme, Red House, Sofia, and Petko Tsvetkov, Coordinator of the Green Belt and Natura 2000 campaigns, Bulgaria Biodiversity Foundation, Sofia, 1 September 2010. Both were organizers of the Save Irakli! campaign.

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## Резюме

АНКЕ ХАГЕМАН

### **Формирование притягательных туристских центров? Старый и новый архитектурный дизайн современных морских курортов в Болгарии**

С середины 1950-х до начала 1970-х гг. В Народной Республике Болгарии были спроектированы и построены четыре крупных курорта на побережье Черного моря – как для болгарского внутреннего, так и иностранного туризма. Согласно фордистским принципам, солнце, песок и море были преобразованы в комплексный «туристический продукт», причём архитектура и градостроительство играли особую роль: Прибрежные курорты были лабораторией бескомпромиссной современной архитектуры, планирования и образа жизни – с комфортабельными гостиничными комплексами, ресторанами и развлекательными заведениями, выполненными и оформленными в различных архитектурных стилях. Так возникли современные пространства для международного планировочного дискурса *par excellence* и встреч для отдыхающих с Востока и Запада. С тех пор туризм стал одним из самых важных секторов экономики Болгарии. Трансформация экономической структуры и структуры собственности после 1989 г. привела также и к глубокой градостроительной трансформации курортов. В статье обсуждается, как практика планирования и язык архитектуры изменились на протяжении десятилетий, начиная с основания курортов в 1950-х и распространения массового туризма в 1960-х гг. Затем рассматривается приватизация и строительный бум на побережье Чёрного моря после изменения социально-экономической системы. С помощью сравнительных примеров курортов Солнечный берег и Албена представлено, как поступили с архитектурным наследием модернизма в последние два десятилетия: с одной стороны, абсолютный неучёт существующего положения и бессистемное уплотнение застройки, а, с другой стороны, далеко идущие стратегии улучшения современного фонда

Болгария, Чёрное море, туризм, курорт, архитектура, градостроительство, планирование, модернизм

## Résumé

АНКЕ ХАГЕМАН

### **Du terrain de jeu polyglotte au piège à touristes? Construction et transformation des complexes de bord de mer modernes en Bulgarie**

À partir du milieu des années cinquante jusqu'au début des années soixante-dix, la République populaire de Bulgarie a planifié et construit quatre complexes touristiques de grande échelle sur la côte de la mer Noire – une aubaine pour le «tourisme social» bulgare mais aussi pour les vacanciers internationaux. Selon les principes fordistes, le soleil, le sable et la mer ont été transformés en un «produit touristique» complet, l'architecture et l'urbanisme ayant joué un rôle particulier: les complexes de bord de mer ont été les laboratoires d'une architecture, d'une planification et d'un mode de vie moderne et sans compromis – avec de confortables complexes hôteliers, restaurants et installations de loisir aménagés selon des styles architecturaux et des thèmes variés. C'est ainsi que des espaces modernes par excellence ont vu le jour, ainsi que des carrefours pour les discours de planification concernant l'ensemble du bloc de l'Est et des lieux de rencontre pour les vacanciers venus aussi bien de l'Est que de l'Ouest. Depuis lors, le tourisme est devenu l'un des principaux secteurs économiques bulgare. Toutefois, l'évolution des structures économiques et de propriété après 1989 a également mené à une transformation profonde des complexes. Cet article retrace l'évolution des pratiques de planification et des langages architecturaux au cours des décennies, en commençant par la construction des complexes dans les années cinquante et l'expression du tourisme de masse durant les années soixante. Nous abordons ensuite la privatisation et le boom du secteur de la construction sur les côtes de la mer Noire après le changement de régime. En nous appuyant sur deux exemples contrastés, les complexes touristiques Sunny Beach et Albena, nous exposons la manière dont le patrimoine architectural du moderne a été géré durant ces deux dernières décennies: mépris radical de l'existant et concentration architecturale désordonnée d'une part, stratégie de valorisation plus prévoyante pour les bâtiments modernes existants d'autre part.

*Bulgarie, mer Noire, Tourisme, complexe, architecture, urbanisme, planification, moderne*