

REVIEW

A Disenchanted World? A Review of *Holidays After the Fall: Seaside Architecture and Urbanism in Bulgaria and Croatia*

Holidays After the Fall: Seaside Architecture and Urbanism in Bulgaria and Croatia, Elke Beyer, Anke Hagemann and Michael Zinganel (eds.), Berlin: Jovis, 256 p. + 25 colour plates, 2013, ISBN: 9783868592269

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In recent years, the number of studies analysing the architecture from the former Communist bloc has increased, starting to fill in the blanks of what appeared until not that long ago as a historiographical no-man's-land. Most of the publications in this field discuss the period related directly to the political regime, while some address the question of the transition years.¹ The book edited by Elke Beyer, Anke Hagemann and Michael Zinganel, *Holidays After the Fall: Seaside Architecture and Urbanism in Bulgaria and Croatia*, deals with both the socialist and the postsocialist situation. As a matter of fact, not only is the chronology expanded but also the way its topic – seaside architecture – is looked at. Hence the book attempts to bring together different perspectives, mixing issues of architectural history with politics, economy and sociology. The intent is to present the reader with the bigger picture, offering the possibility of understanding this architecture in its complex framework, conditioned by aesthetic and doctrine-oriented trends, ideology, market economy and everyday life.

(Socialist) Seaside Architecture in a Larger Frame

If the context of the two countries behind the Iron Curtain is hardly known to the Western reader (nor, in many cases, to the Eastern European), the topic of seaside architecture, as it was developed in Bulgaria and Croatia, is a total novelty. The subject of seaside architecture has been very fashionable during the past two decades, mainly for its cross-disciplinary dimension, when many studies were published on the genesis and the development of seaside resorts in the Western world, the largest bibliography likely being that on English and French cases.² However, one cannot say that *Holidays After the Fall* took these publications as a precedent, as it focuses less on tourism practices and cultural aspects than on the connection between

architecture and politics. This approach is closer to two other more recent topics. On the one hand, the publication's engagement with social issues, revolving around mass-planned territories and social tourism, relates it to studies on welfare architecture. On the other hand, the 'fall' evoked in the title refers as much to the breaking point of 1989 – when the fall of the Wall was followed by dramatic mutations in the former socialist states – as to the disenchantment with and lack of fulfilment of the ideals of the collapsed regime. This is the metaphoric message of the pictures that open and close the book. The idealized image conveyed by the 1970s postcards of the Adriatic coast might reflect the political propaganda of the socialist regimes (here, the self-promotion of the Yugoslav 'Third Way'), but meanwhile this image is also reminiscent of what the citizens of those regimes were aspiring to (**Fig. 1**).

Opposed to those postcards, the photos of Bulgarian resorts, taken in 2012 by Nikola Mihov, illustrate not only the end of these ideals, but more generally the dissolution of the mass-society values: the end of the season parallels the drifts of this society, as captured in the uncontrolled sprawl of the littoral architectures, their megalomaniac scale and their bling aesthetics (**Fig. 2**).

Ultimately, this speaks about the crisis of modernist principles and its broken promises – a subject that has nurtured both architectural history, with the development of an entire new area of studies, and the visual arts, with the many works questioning, through the limits of modernist architecture, the failure of the society which produced it. It is symptomatic in this sense that one of the authors of *Holidays After the Fall*, Maroje Mrduljaš, was a principal actor of the research project 'Unfinished Modernisations'.³

The unfinished modernisation of the seaside architecture in the former Communist bloc should be understood in terms of a suspended, rather than an unaccomplished, process. The undeniable success of the operations developed on the socialist shores was tightly connected with the exceptionality of such places. The seaside as a site, as

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Figure 1: Hotel Astarea in Mlini (architect Bogoljub Kurpelj), period post card. Reproduced from Elke Beyer, Anke Hagemann and Michael Zinganel, *Holidays After the Fall: Seaside Architecture and Urbanism in Bulgaria and Croatia* (Berlin: Jovis, 2013), colour plate 5. All images are from this publication.



Figure 2: Hotel Victoria Palace, Sunny Beach. Photo by Nikola Mihov, 2012. From *Holidays After the Fall*, colour plate 8.

we have learned from the rich bibliography mentioned above, is both embedded, given the powerful presence of nature, and suspended – a place between reality and an imaginary world, where urban planning and especially architecture contribute massively to this blurring of frontiers. This is a feature that explains why modernity, as an attitude based on the idea of rupture, but also of authenticity, so cherished the seaside as a *locus* of perfect escape, projecting on the architecture erected here both the sense of the place and a radical abstraction. During the socialist period, the space produced in these locations enhanced its escapist potential on a political level, since the rigour of the ideological control appeared to be replaced by a different kind of logic.

Experimentation was allowed, and often encouraged, in the new architectural designs, while the particularity of holiday practices indulged a different way of life. To put it briefly, in the new resorts of different socialist shores, East met West, which was good news both for the State and for the population. Indeed, the mass tourism that developed here provided a twofold benefit for the State, as both a significant source of hard currency for

its economy and an invaluable showcase for its politics. Meanwhile, the important investments in quality architecture and urban planning and in exceptional infrastructures, along with the presence of capitalist holiday institutions and Western tourists also benefited the locals, who were thus confronted with a totally different reality. East met West in terms of architecture as well, because the urban planning and the architecture developed in the seaside resorts were as close to the Western tendencies and practice as one could have imagined in the restrictive conditions of the socialist regimes. In the particular case of former Yugoslavia, and its position of in-betweenness,⁴ some of these developments involved collaborating with Western specialists.

Working on socialist seaside architecture therefore implies a cross analysis, going beyond the polarized borders of the two former blocs. What began as a methodological approach in the past few years – triggered by historiographical needs, first in terms of uncovering a distorted history and then of situating it within the ‘greater’ discourse – in the case of this topic appears as a necessity. Even if it might remain on the surface of things in some situations – as precise references to Western examples were hardly ever acknowledged – the comparison East/West is unavoidable.

And this is for the best, since architectural historiography today needs common ground.

Sea, Sun and (Post) Socialism: More Closely on the Book

Holiday After the Fall focuses on two case studies: Croatia and Bulgaria. This is an inspired choice, since the two embody almost opposite examples: Bulgaria, ‘centrally governed and arguably the Soviet Union’s closest satellite in the Cold era’, and Croatia, one of the republics of the former Yugoslavia, ‘pioneer of the Non-Aligned Movement and the “Third Way”’ (26). It should be added that within the former Federal Republic, Croatian architecture came with a solid Western and Central European heritage in terms of both doctrines and aesthetics.

This difference between the two case studies is at the origin of the structure of the book. Its symmetrical construction – one section for each case, framed by images at the beginning and the end of the volume, grouped according to the same logic – seems to indicate that the authors favoured more the contrast than the comparison. Still, as they affirm in their introduction, there is a common point between the two – and this is what they call the ‘Fordist conception of leisure’ (26). To put it differently, but without contradicting the authors’ point of view, the common fact between the two examples is social tourism turned into mass tourism and instrumentalised in favour of a powerful propaganda, both internally and externally. In fact, Bulgaria and Croatia constitute two distinct models, almost on all levels, from the geographical particularities and political settings to architectural approaches and forms of ownership. If the reader is not presented with a synthesis (a possible reason being the need for more specific documentation), (s)he gets instead the chance to

learn more about Bulgarian architecture, which is today, together with Albanian architecture, the least studied within the recent historiography on Eastern Europe.

Nevertheless, the chapter opening the book attempts such a synthesis, offering a brief historic overview of modern seaside tourism, in terms of politics and of architectural answers to political lines. The authors insist (and they are right to do so) on the role of the seaside as a producer of space, but by doing so they curiously minimize the importance of the social aspect in the short history they provide and focus instead on the political instrumentalisation of it, hence the emphasis on the solutions developed by the totalitarian interwar regimes in Germany, Italy, and USSR. Analysing – even if very rapidly – the situation in France and particularly in Spain (where the Grupo de Artistas y Técnicos Españoles Para la Arquitectura Contemporánea (GATEPAC) did everything possible to materialise the modern idea of leisure) could have shed light on the connection between modernity and the social dimension of tourism all along its history. Moreover, what is also lacking is the background for understanding the seaside as a paradigmatic space of modernity in general, which is essential for examining the specificity of the urban planning and the architectures of the coastal places. The authors identify connection with nature, experimentation (in terms of new urban solutions, architectural fantasies and radicalness), and escapist space as important traits of only socialist seaside architecture. What they miss is that these same features are actually a legacy of the very concept of seaside architecture that was developed during decades of experimentation. It is true that politics have been crucial in defining the architectural development and the economic targeting of the littoral resorts in Bulgaria and Croatia, but at the same time, the conception of these resorts bore the imprint of all the heritage of seaside architecture in general.

This short overview of the opening chapter reveals an interesting point: the way seaside architecture developed after the Second World War under the pressure of mass tourism placed the socialist countries in a better position to fulfil the needs of mass tourism. It might seem obvious that the framework of a planned economy was more appropriate to respond to such needs (53), but actually this statement implies further interpretations. Not only does it indicate the field of postwar seaside architecture is a topic of priority for the architectural historiography of Eastern Europe, but it also opens a boulevard for fruitful speculations on why these ‘architectures of global longing’ (35) were so successful in the specific context of the former Communist bloc.

Though separately constructed and authored by different scholars – Elke Beyer and Anke Hagemann on Bulgaria and Michal Zinganel, Maroje Mrduljaš and Norbert Mappes-Niediek on Croatia – the sections presenting the case studies discuss several common elements. One can but regret that the Bulgarian section is less substantial and lacks more general background (in order to situate the coastal architecture within the overall production of the country at that time), but most probably it suffers

the consequences of a very meagre pre-existing bibliography on the subject. Speaking of bibliography, one should mention the book’s rich documentation of period articles, with a special mention for Bulgaria, and also the cross-disciplinary entries, with numerous titles concerning tourism after 1989, a bibliography that allows the five authors to articulate a more complex image of the two countries (for example, MacCannell (1999); Gorsuch and Koenker (2006); Zuelow (2011); Gosseye and Heynen (2012)).

Among the shared elements of the architectures developed on the Adriatic and the Bulgarian Black Sea littorals, the most important were, as I have already mentioned, its tight relationship with nature and its value of experimentation. The particular character of the resorts – suspended place, suspended time, out of the everyday reality – turned them into perfect testing grounds, not only in terms of introducing the latest tendencies from outside the Eastern bloc, but also testing them before applying them (if ever) to the real-size life. What was happening here was almost always one step ahead the general pace of architectural practice.

Of course the two countries were not equal in this process, even if for both modernism appeared to be the favoured expression for the first seaside developments. Bulgarian architecture was subject to a tight ideological control, hence introducing for the first time an affirmed modernist aesthetic, after very moderate examples of the interwar years and, especially, after the strictness of socialist realism. This aesthetic represented a tremendous change, which for Bulgarian architects came as a new hope, as they discovered a certain freedom of expression, while for Western professionals, the change came as a surprise. Important architectural magazines such as *L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui* and *Architectural Forum* published laudatory articles about the developments on the Black Sea Coast (also including Romania as a much admired example), which was actually a premiere for those times of political polarization. Their admiration was genuine and objective, since it allowed room for critical assessments, such as when the *Architectural Forum* noted that the hotels were designed by ‘a new generation of Bulgarian architects [...] whose eyes are turned toward the West but whose hands are heavy’ (‘Communism’s New Look’, 1962). In 1966, *Architectural Review* entitled its essay on the Black Sea resorts ‘Bulgaria Builds’, thus recycling a famous formula used already in the modernists milieus for illustrious examples like the United States, Brazil, etc. (Fig. 3). In the same decade, the Bulgarian facilities were looked at as a model by the Soviet experts in charge of the future of the Black Sea resorts in their own country (60).

The situation was completely different in former Yugoslavia. First of all, the architects here, especially the Croatians, had extensive experience of exchanges with the Western world. The Zagreb Working Group, for example, was among the very first to adhere to the principles of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM), establishing a steady tradition for the methodology and ideology of modernism. The Yugoslav position within ‘State-socialism’, to use the author’s term, clearly

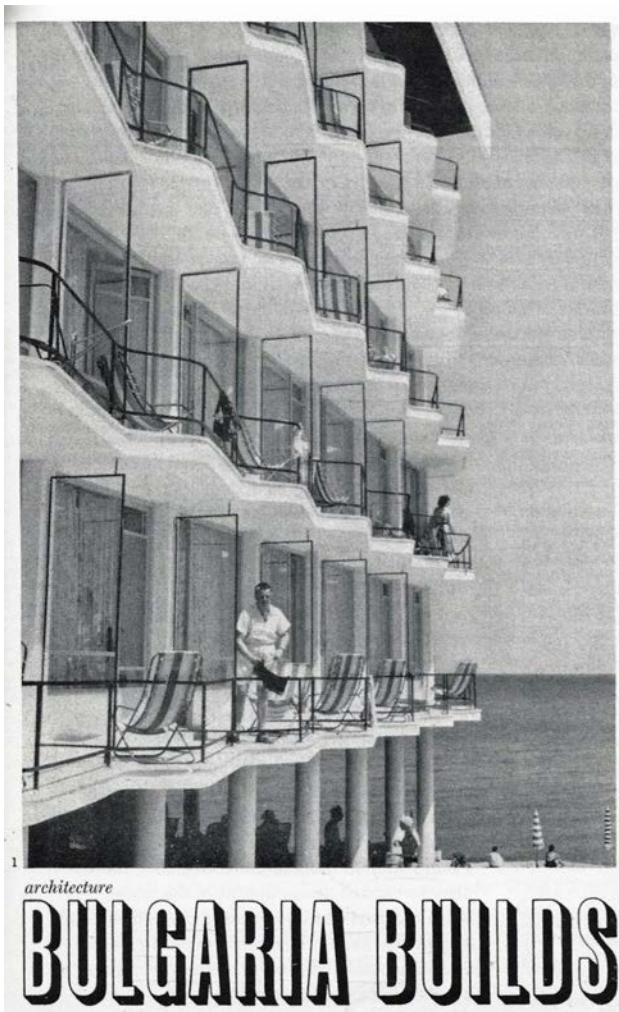


Figure 3: The hotel Glarus in Golden Sands (architects Georgi Ganev, Diana Popova, 1960), an example of modern Bulgarian hotel architecture, as featured in the British journal *Architectural Review* in 1966. From *Holidays After the Fall*, 59.

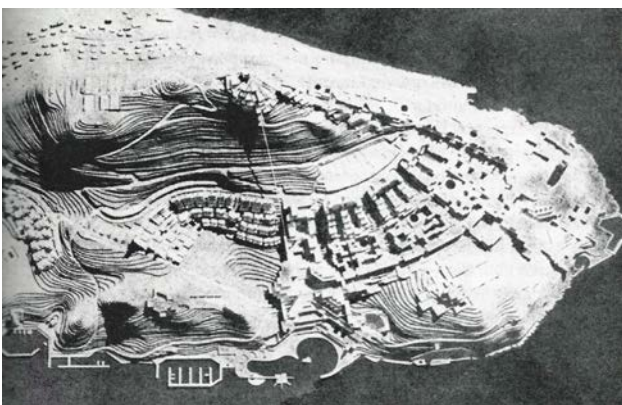


Figure 4: Model of the urban planning scheme for Babin Kuk (1963–69), showing the collaboration of the Yugoslav architects with experts from the Western bloc (here from Sweden, France, Italy). From *Holidays After the Fall*, 175.

oriented architectural development towards the Western model. Moreover, the former Yugoslavia, being interested in attracting foreign tourists to the Adriatic coast, as were

the Bulgarians and the Romanians, encouraged direct collaboration with Western specialists, be it for urban planning or for designing new hotels and infrastructures. Thus the architecture from the Adriatic coast appeared from the very beginning to be totally in tune with what was happening outside. The State's plan for the development of architecture along the Adriatic coast in the former Yugoslavia began in the early 1960s, later than in Bulgaria and Romania, which had launched their master-plans for the littoral in, respectively, the mid-1950s and the late 1950s. The reason the authors give is that the Adriatic coast already benefited from a dense network of architectural facilities and of alternative solutions for tourism, where the private sector also played an important role. However, another reason, which is not discussed in the book, might have been the competition for foreign tourists, and their hard currency, a ground where Romania and Bulgaria were already very serious adversaries. As a matter of fact, France reacted, too, to these two successful emerging destinations on the Black Sea by launching, almost at the same time as Yugoslavia, a master-plan which gradually incorporated all its coastlines within an authoritarian vision inspired precisely by State-socialism (Prélorenzo and Picon 1999: 26–29).

At the end of the 1950s, Croatia discussed a long-term development and spatial planning programme for the Adriatic coast and began it a few years later. The interest in nature was already present in the first pilot studies (Makarska Riviera and Šibenik region), which advocated an integrated architectural and urban approach, and was further enhanced by the request of the Yugoslav government, in 1963, for assistance from the United Nations for defining the development plan for the Adriatic region (Fig. 4). Nature, as well as the built environment, was a major preoccupation for the new voices of postwar modernism, such as Team X, who were seeking for solutions against its crisis. Integrating nature into the master-plans of the seaside regions was thus both logical and progressive. (In Romania, for instance, architects involved in the littoral developments were questioning the viability of the Athens Charter through their architectural and urban planning work (see Popescu (2015) and Stancu (1968) for more details.⁵) Bulgaria clearly promoted an integrated approach for the new resorts (such as Druzhba – ‘Friendship’ – in 1956) from its first master-plans, insisting not only on embedding architecture in the site but also on further extensive landscaping. If the approach was certainly modern for its time, its origin should be seen less in the Western examples, as the authors suggest, and more in the Soviet urban theories of the 1950s that advocated for connecting architecture with its site and incorporating more vegetation into the city.

As for the architectures built on the Black Sea and the Adriatic coasts, their inspiration came unmistakably from the capitalist world. Modernism – in a simplified version, as in the first Bulgarian hotels, such as the Journalist in Chayka (1956, 1967) (Fig. 5a), and also as a sophisticated expression like that adopted by Adriatic architecture, such as the hotel Marjan in Split (1963) (Fig. 5b), reminiscent of the Hilton Teheran, built in the same year) – represented



Figure 5a: The Hotel Journalist Chayka (phase II, 1967 – architects Nikola Nikolov, Lilyana Stoynova). From *Holidays After the Fall*, 123.

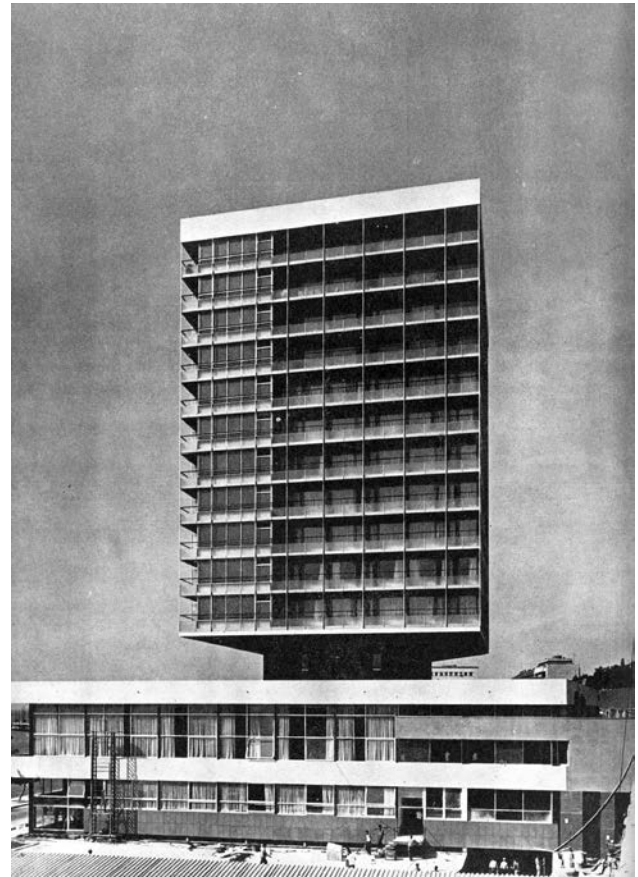


Figure 5b: Hotel Marjan, Split (architect Lovro Perković, 1963). From *Holidays After the Fall*, 224.

the major referent for the first period. But it was not the only one, since in Yugoslavia it was soon paralleled by structuralist principles which allowed a more sensible attitude towards the landscape, as well as an efficient response to the increasing demand for accommodating capacity (192). While on the Adriatic coast architects favoured an organic approach, one of the most consummate examples being the Rixos Libertas Hotel in Dubrovnik (1968–74) (**Fig. 6a**), in Bulgaria, they preferred structures with a striking landmark presence, such as the pyramids at Albena, completed in the 1970s (**Fig. 6b**). These latter were inspired by Jean Balladur's La Grande Motte, which, in its turn, looked to the Bulgarian and Romanian developments.

The array of architectural expressions displayed on the two coasts, the Adriatic and the Black Sea, covered the most important tendencies of the moment, from brutalist aesthetics to different kinds of regionalism, whose use, and especially abuse, reminds one how close seaside architecture is to the *société du spectacle*. Meanwhile, through clusterisation, interior streets, patios, etc., many of these architectures explored new manners of inhabiting, thus contributing, together with the planning of the resorts, to advance reflection on this subject.

Paradise and Disenchantment

At the beginning of all these architectures and planning operations was social tourism and the attention that the socialist governments paid to the working class,

rewarding it and keeping it in good health. *Holidays After the Fall* offers an insightful view on the politics of the two countries. The reader is delighted to learn that the Bulgarian socialist vision of the 'tourist product' (that is, a 'completely organized package', comprising accommodation and three meals per day) anticipated the successful 'all-inclusive' formula of the postsocialist years (60, 65, 70). The reader also learns how the ownership of the littoral facilities, state-owned in Bulgaria and partly administrated through workers' self-management in Yugoslavia, affected the fate of these resorts after 1989 (mainly 209–221).

Social tourism evolved progressively and steadily into mass tourism, a phenomenon reflected directly in the architecture, both in terms of enhanced capacities and of diversification of the different types of accommodation. In order to build an 'affordable Arcadia', to use Mrduljaš's expression, facilities were adopted, from the luxury hotel, designed for the political elite and special foreign tourists, to bungalows and camping places. In Yugoslavia, seaside tourism became so extensive that starting with the 1970s, some architects from the new generation were able to build their entire career on tourism design (188). Of course this tremendous growth was due not only to the local tourists, but also to the foreign ones, who represented privileged targets for the two countries (and remained so after 1989). Along with foreign tourists came foreign societies, such as Club Med or, in libertarian Yugoslavia, Penthouse, whose specific practices



Figure 6a: Hotel Rixos Libertas, Dubrovnik (architects Andrija Čičin-Šain, Žarko Vinček, 1968–74). From *Holidays After the Fall*, 230.



Figure 6b: The Albena resort, developed in the 1970s; period photo. From *Holidays After the Fall*, 91.

interfered with the local production of space, contributing even more to its illusory and escapist character.

Eventually mass tourism became a tourism industry, a turn which was not left unsanctioned by local criticism. In former Yugoslavia, where the political system allowed it, criticism of the move toward a tourism industry appeared before 1989. Intellectuals advocated, in the midst of the enthusiasm for leisure civilisation, for a responsible tourism architecture, which would replace the notion of industry with that of a culture of tourism, endowed with an educational value (187). In Bulgaria, the disenchantment came only after the political changes, strengthening the general disillusionment with the societal mutations they produced. On the Black Sea shores, the success of seaside tourism burst into a chaotic architectural image, deprived of any concerted planning or aesthetic rules. On the Adriatic coast, the liberal tradition of local tourism partially prevented such disorderly developments, but could stop neither the decay of many ancient facilities, often used as refugee camps during the Balkan wars in the 1990s, nor the spread of mega-structures.

Nevertheless, it is symptomatic that the authors illustrate the two faces of the seaside architecture they are analysing in this book – Arcadia and the disillusionment – with Croatian examples in the first case and the Bulgarian drift in the second. Once more, the socialist system in its ‘purest’ expression (if I may say so) appears as a failure not only in itself, but also on its long-term consequences. While the book describes an objective situation, one would have expected a subtler distinction between the two case studies. Otherwise one risks perpetuating the Manichean scheme which is still active in the current architectural historiography.

A Few Historiographical Reflections

Speaking of historiography, *Holidays After the Fall* is a book that lays on the table numerous valuable issues, starting with its topic, seaside architecture on socialist shores – a topic that is about to develop into a rewarding subfield.⁶ I have already mentioned its important contribution to the historiography of the former Communist bloc, but the authors have also taken great care to search

for the most precise terms, proposing alternatives (such as State-socialism or the Comecon bloc) to the more ambiguous ones that are currently used in this field. Moreover, the topic is treated from the perspective of an East/West dialogue, which is highly significant for writing a comprehensive architectural history.

Since the architectural history of the former Eastern bloc is a field that undergoes rapid changes, given the amount of new studies and the new methodologies they entail, the book is affected by this rapid evolution. I have already pointed out how the lack of a solid bibliography can affect the analysis of certain topics, which is the case not only for the Bulgarian architecture – though the work of the authors is certainly laudable – but also for the East/West cross-references, a field which still awaits to be properly developed. The several solutions proposed by Team X, for instance, as a meaningful alternative to modernism’s errors and inadequacies, found a good terrain of experimentation in the socialist seaside architecture. However, the book hardly mentions them, which probably would have not been the case had it been published after the volume edited by Łukasz Stanek on the influence of Team X in the former Eastern bloc (Stanek 2014).

Another problem is the hybrid approach that the book proposes: the mixture of socialist/postsocialist periods unbalances the quality of the analyses. Hence, the parts treating the post-1989 situation lack a certain rigour, and they lack a certain distance and documentation, as well, which turns them merely into reports.

These minor imperfections do not diminish the contribution that *Holidays After the Fall* brings to current architectural scholarship, for the many reasons already mentioned. As the seaside architecture in the former socialist countries is about to develop into a rewarding subfield, as I have suggested, this book is already taking its place as a valuable resource.

Notes

¹ Among the recent publications, see Zarecor (2011), Kulić, Mrdulaš, and Thaler (2012), Molnár (2013), and Lebow (2013). Of the few publications that treat postsocialism, see Bérard and Jacquand (2009) and Kliems and

Dmitrieva (2010). Finally, Stanek (2012) deals with both periods.

² From the rich literature on the topic, I will mention here only two books: a synthesis of the French cases, Toulhier (2002) and a general survey, Gray (2006).

³ Launched in 2011 and directed by Maroje Mrdulaš and Vladimir Kulić, the research project comprised a series of exhibitions and conferences, as well as an edited volume (Mrdulaš Kulić 2012).

⁴ Developed recently as a concept of the architectural scholarship concerning the former Yugoslavia (see Kulić, Mrdulaš and Thaler 2012), the idea of 'in-betweenness' has been, as a matter of fact, the object of thorough theorisation in the field of Balkan studies in the late 1990s.

⁵ Stancu was one of the architects working on the Romanian Black sea coast since the early 1960s.

⁶ See the exhibition curated by Kalliopi Dimou, Sorin Istudor and Alina Șerban, *Enchanting Views. Romanian Black Sea Tourism Planning and Architecture of the '60s and the '70s* (Bucharest: Salla Dalles, October 10–November 23, 2014). Related to the exhibition, Șerban is editing a volume with the same title, dealing with the Romanian and Bulgarian seaside architecture (quoted above).

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