

WHEN LEISURE ENDS IN LOSS

Revising Urban Entertainment Facilities from Socialist Romania

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ABSTRACT: The article aims to analyze how the large-scale buildings designed to host entertainment activities during the 1960s and 1970s in socialist Romania transitioned from iconic experimental architecture to an obsolete problematic heritage. During those years, leisure activities became part of the propaganda while state-funded infrastructure was built around them. Organized leisure time is directed towards shaping the 'new man'. The paper focuses on two different architectural programs that fit into the leisure section: restaurants and commercial centers within holiday resorts and multi-purpose sports halls in cities. The objects in question are defined by different types of post-war modern architecture, varying from mid-century modern up to brutalism. During the socialist period, both case studies were directly managed by the state, from financial aspects to functional ones. After the fall of the communist regime, their status changed, and they endured the transition from a closed socialist economy to a capitalist one. While the sports halls remained under public administration, the restaurants and commercial centers in the holiday resorts were privatized. Alongside a series of unfortunate events that occurred during the 1990s, the general public developed a negative perception of this kind of architecture due to its connection with the former regime. While both case studies are relevant to the entertainment of the general public before 1989, after the fall of the socialist regime, there is a difference in their management and subsequent use, resulting in their presentation in parallel in this paper. The research is centered on how the changes after 1989 led to the fragile state of this heritage today and aims to propose contemporary approaches to properly address them. The buildings suffered both reversible and irreversible transformations, lack funding, and are improperly exploited. Since the late modern socialist heritage is often disregarded in Romania, this paper aims to establish possible guidelines for preserving and adapting these buildings for the present and the future.

KEYWORDS: entertainment, leisure, modernist architecture, socialism, sports

INTRODUCTION: The paper sets out to explore the evolution of two forms of entertainment architecture that gained prominence in Romania between the 1960s and 1970s: firstly, experimental restaurants and open-air shopping centers in newly built seaside resorts; secondly, large-scale sports facilities, primarily multi-purpose sports halls, that emerged in major urban centers. Following Khrushchev's speech in 1954, the Romanian Communist Party embarked on a mission to shape the emerging 'new man'. In this quest, along with a series of social policies and new state-funded institutions, an advanced architectural scenography is employed to create an ideal image for society, as well as to host these past-time activities. Following the 1960s, both commercial and sporting programs exhibited a distinct and modern architectural language, incorporating novel materials such as glass walls, concrete, and metal structures,

as well as innovative construction technologies¹. Despite the initial momentum, the construction of both architectural programs stalled, if not came to a complete halt, after the beginning of the 1970s. Nevertheless, they had a significant impact on Romania's international recognition, leading to a remarkable improvement in the performance of our sporting teams and a substantial increase in foreign tourism to the coastal regions. The paper will also examine the subsequent decline that ensued after 1989 and explore the prospects for these buildings, taking into account their current state of vulnerability. The research is based on written materials from that period and recent years, laws and public policies, archive documents, and field investigation. Hence, the two main subjects will be treated simultaneously. Due to the changes that occurred after the fall of the socialist regime, there are different

approaches to the current use of these buildings, which has led to a parallel exposure of the two subject matters.

LEISURE OVERVIEW

Interest in leisure activities emerged across Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, gaining further popularity following the Second World War. Romania, which had a modest holiday and recreation tradition prior to the establishment of the new political regime, was not the first nation to develop architecture and social policies to accommodate recreational activities within the socialist framework. Since the 1930s, the Soviet Union sought to establish a context that would ensure rest and recreation for the working class, providing it with an annual holiday and encouraging engagement in organized sports that would “bring ethical and therapeutic benefits”, as well as “instilling hard work and collective discipline” (Karnooouh, 2024, p. 157). During the period of time this paper addresses, in Romania, the contemporary individual is instructed to cultivate a heightened spiritual dimension (by default, in the sense of the socialist spirit), through engagement in diverse social activities (ranging from sports to travel), thereby unleashing their inherent potential to the extent of a cultural act (Lăzărescu et al., 1972, p. 94). Nevertheless, leisure is supposed to be active, at least in its intention, unifying, while stimulating a meeting between professionals of different backgrounds (Pavelescu, 1972, p. 13). Propaganda was instrumental in promoting the concept of leisure as a complementary aspect of professional duties, an aspect that would be even further developed in the future society (Borgovan, 1972, pp. 2-3).

POLITICS AND PROPAGANDA

The grand master plan for shaping the untamed Romanian coastline was created by Romanian architect Cezar Lăzărescu and his team of young architects. This systematic plan was developed linearly along the coastline, north and south of the city of Constanta, with the first construction works appearing after 1955. The prototype of the resort was developed at Eforie Nord, featuring two rest centers: Eforie I (1957-1958) and Eforie II (1958-1959). The model was later extended and used for the construction of the Mamaia resort, as well as later ones built on the South side of the Romanian sea coast. This type of holiday resort was designed as a solution to a constant popular need: after a year of hard work, people seek refuge in nature, thus supporting the constant development of the tourist industry (Snak, 1972, pp. 44-45). To preserve the natural element, the architecture was specifically designed not to interfere with the landscape, by giving the new buildings a local color (Lăzărescu, 1972, p.4).

In 1955, the *ONT Carpați* (Office for National Tourism Carpați) was established, marking the beginning of the organized state-funded holidays that would shape the way the general population spends its time away from home (Snak, 1972, pp. 44-45). Following the year 1960, foreign tourists began to visit the Romanian seaside, and subsequently, the communist state signed partnership agreements with various European and international travel agencies, including Neckermann, Vingresor, Resso, and Club Med (Ștefan, 2024, p. 150).

The emergence of modernist architecture served as a symbol of the regime’s effectiveness and achievements. The architecture for both restaurants and open-air shopping centers—auxiliary functions that became main actors inside the holiday resorts—sparked interest from the local and the national press, with newspapers such as *Scînteia Tineretului*, *Flacăra* or *Dobrogea Nouă*, covering every opening, event, or even conducting on-site visits, before praising the services and the personnel. The manner in which commercial establishments were exhibited persisted in perpetuating the promoted illusion:

“[...] the socialist commerce represents the main connection between production and consumption; as such, it is obliged to consider the expectations of the working people, for whom the shops represent not only a place to shop, but also an exposition of their own accomplishments.”
(Editorial team, *Architecture RPR Magazine*, 1962, p. 4)

Subsequently, short propaganda films were produced to further showcase the entertainment provided during a seaside holiday.

As many studies assert, sports and sporting activities have been integral to the evolution of modern cities, particularly within the context of the industrial city in the 19th century, encompassing both the working class and the bourgeoisie (Edelman, 2016; Hau, 2008; Pujadas, 2012; Bolz, 2012). Following the First World War, sports emerged as a significant cultural and social phenomenon, underscoring the vulnerability of both eastern and western European populations (Hau, 2008, pp. 381-383). Consequently, sports practice came to be regarded as more than a mere form of entertainment for the masses, and it began to be incorporated into the military training of the population, particularly in totalitarian states such as Germany, Italy, and the USSR. In Romania, the development of sports activities followed a trajectory similar to that observed in the Western world until the Second World War. Society, especially in the urban areas, began to engage with sports as a form of recreation and a means of maintaining good health (Popa, 2013). Even so, the

large sports infrastructure that exists today was not built until the Communist Party came to power. Prior to the war, the model of sports organization in Romania was coordinated according to German, French, or Swedish methods. However, following the war, this changed, with the USSR becoming the main source of inspiration. Through a resolution of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the foundations were laid for a new development of sport under the careful guidance of the Party. The limited access to sport that the working classes had had until then is brought into question, with sport being accessible only to the so-called *bourgeoisie*. In addition, resolutions of the period stipulated the necessity of encouraging the development of sports fields and facilities, as well as the appointment of individuals tasked with promoting sports to the general public. The People's Councils were entrusted with the responsibility of supplying towns and villages with sports equipment and facilities, as well as sports fields and amenities, including swimming pools and halls. During the early communist period, there was a notable emphasis on mass sport, particularly within industrial and manufacturing settings. In addition to the imperative for high productivity in the workplace, there was a parallel expectation of excellence in sporting performance.

Consequently, gymnastics and other sports were introduced in the workplace, organized according to scientific (Soviet-origin) principles, taking into account factors such as the nature of work and work schedules. This approach, ostensibly straightforward and uncomplicated, was implemented to enhance productivity and ensure the physical well-being of the workforce. The nature of these activities did not necessitate the use of sports equipment, nor did they require the allocation of dedicated facilities or the employment of specialist personnel. This approach enabled the attainment of optimal results with minimal effort (Pompiliu-Nicolae, 2015).

Propaganda shows a clear connection between results in sports and industrial development, with the phrase "*First in sport, first in production*" being specifically created for this purpose². Workplace gymnastics became the norm, with physical exercise tailored to the type of work and work schedule, following scientific principles to maintain high production rates. In the same time, the concept of professional sport didn't exist in the socialist period – all top athletes had to first have a job in production, they had to belong to the working class. (Pompiliu-Nicolae, 2020, p. 913).

The relationship between dictatorial regimes and sports has been studied thoroughly. As Edelman (2016) points out, no authoritarian regime has ever been in favor of mass sports, as it is inherently difficult to control and regulate.

Indeed, mass sport constitutes an element of socialization and cohesion that serves to obscure the perception of class and ethnic differences, thereby engendering a potentially illusory sense of unity that is accompanied by significant political ramifications. In the context of socialist regimes, the function of mass sports did not pertain to control or as a means of alleviating social tensions; rather, its primary objective was educational and stimulatory in nature. Additionally, sports played another important role in providing international recognition and prestige for small states. International sporting competitions represent a unique theater in which communist and capitalist countries can compete directly: "a struggle between East and West, a battle between two ideologies for global dominance" (Riordan and Cantelon, 2001, p. 96).

ARCHITECTURE

Entertainment facilities, such as restaurants, bars, and open-air shopping centers, became architectural icons within the resorts. In 1958, the opening of the Neon Restaurant (Eforie I recreation center) marked the transition to a new architectural language [FIGURE 01]. With *pilotis* supporting the entire structure, movable glass walls connecting the inside to the outside, and a large terrace overlooking the sea, it quickly became an impressive sight. A year later, the Perla Mării restaurant (Eforie II Rest Center) was opened, taking modernist elements even further, with interconnected glass boxes for the canteen which floated above the open restaurant and service area. Later, in Eforie, the Pescăruș restaurant was built at the center of the resort, offering visitors a bar, cafeteria, and pastry shop, while resembling a mid-century American diner. Smooth lines, glass, and metal replaced the previous heavy architecture of Socialist Realism, bringing Romanian architecture in line with the international scene.

Due to the size of the resort in Mamaia, some building plans for the new restaurants were used more than once, however, the final result was still impressive. One of the most spectacular examples is the Restaurant Victoria (1960)—built twice at the resort—where the entire roof is supported by a concrete hyperboloid that splits at the bottom, marking a vertical connection with the sky. Another fascinating example is the Melody Bar-Club, where the large glass box is complemented by floating concrete volumes that intersect the façade. Other concrete details complete the composition. The examples presented, designed by the renowned collective from Bucharest, were extensively covered and praised in the *Revista Arhitectura RPR*—the most important professional publication of the time. The other works by local architects, built later, were not covered as broadly by the magazine.



01 Open terrace facing the sea, Neon Restaurant, Eforie Nord. © Alexandra Ioana Radu, 2024.

The shopping centers maintained the airy aesthetic, with interior gardens between the shops (also made of glass boxes). The most notable examples are those of Eforie Nord (1961), Mamaia (1963, built on a much larger scale, partly with two-story volumes), and Neptun (1967) [FIGURE 02]. Towards the end of the 1960s, as the southern part of the coast was undergoing construction, the vocabulary shifted to a more tectonic approach, ranging from Soc-Mod to Brutalist works. The seaside projects ceased at

the beginning of the 1970s, which spared them from the compromises the architects would have had to make from that point on (Zahariade, 2024, p. 15). Early examples of entertainment facilities were praised by the international press, including magazines such as *Architectural Forum* (1962) and *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (1962) (Popescu, 2024, p. 23).

In addition to maintaining a continuous connection with nature and taking into account the characteristics of



02 Neptun Commercial Center closed at the end of the summer season, Neptun. © Alexandra Ioana Radu, 2023.

their environment (Lăzărescu, 1972), the entertainment facilities had to be flexible spaces that could meet the needs of the different types of people that popular tourism addressed (Sechelarie, 1966, pp. 14-16). Additionally, in a propagandistic sense, these buildings, apart from providing food and various goods to their respective users, were intended to serve a cultural-educational purpose, as the tourist activity carried a socio-political role (Snak, 1972, pp. 44-45). Inspirational and unique, the model developed experimentally on the seaside was later replicated, with slight adjustments made for the commercial facilities of the neighborhoods later built in the cities.

The existing sports infrastructure did not meet the quality, but especially not the quantity requirements of the Communist Party. Thus began a vast program of planning, designing, and building numerous sports facilities. This program was part of a broader urban restructuring initiative that also involved the construction of a sports nucleus, closely linked to the development of new collective housing and industrial areas. In the context of Romania's post-Second World War socio-economic situation, the development of its infrastructure was characterized by the establishment of outdoor recreational spaces, such as the parks of culture and recreation. These were, in essence, urban parks that were equipped with a variety of sporting and leisure facilities (Rică, 1958, p. 50).

Concurrently, there has been an increase in the construction of urban sports complexes alongside these parks. These facilities, while resembling parks in many ways, are distinguished by a heightened emphasis on sporting activities. These facilities offer a blend of professional sporting activities and those intended for more general participation. Issue no. 7, 1957, of the magazine *Arhitectura RPR*, presented several sports complex projects designed for the cities of Călărași, Calafat, Giurgiu, and Focșani. The projects were complex, comprising both landscaped outdoor spaces, such as so-called red courts — namely, tennis, basketball, volleyball, soccer, and athletics nuclei — with outdoor grandstands for approximately 2,000 seats, and indoor sports spaces, including a gymnasium, a pavilion with changing rooms, and a bowling pavilion. Since 1965, the sports complexes, which were predominantly open-air fields, have been complemented by enclosed facilities such as specialized or multi-purpose sports halls. These facilities are of significant urban importance, not only as venues for sporting competitions, but also as suitable locations for various types of conferences and social events.

This type of investment became a priority for developing sports activities in urban areas, and a considerable number of Romanian cities were equipped with an entire network of multi-purpose sports halls. This strategic

realignment was to have a profound impact on the nation's landscape of sports activities. Since 1963, the Institute for the Design of Typical Constructions (IPCT) has been responsible for the study of sports constructions, including multi-purpose sports halls, which have been realized in a series of constructions in various Romanian cities (Popa, 1978). Among these, the most notable are those in Cluj Napoca, Iași, Pitești, and Deva [FIGURE 03, FIGURE 04]. It is important to note that these edifices are not isolated cases; in certain cities, the responsibility for designing sports halls and new sports complexes was assigned to architects from the county design institutes.

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed a period of significant urban growth, which gave rise to the requirement for modern multi-purpose facilities in expanding cities. This demand, coupled with the allocation of necessary financial resources, served as a catalyst for the remarkable advancement of integrated architectural-structural design at both national and local levels.

AFTER 1989

After the fall of the communist regime in December 1989, the buildings either passed into private ownership or were retained by the former state trust, IHR, the Hotel and Restaurant Enterprise, which initially managed most of them and later leased them out to various operators. Some are still in use today, with the original architecture altered to suit current tourist tastes, while others have been permanently closed or even demolished. Unfortunately, due to their size, most of the sites are not profitable in today's open market. Moreover, since they were built to operate only during the summer months, they have undergone various changes and additions to make them suitable for year-round use. The architectural changes they have undergone are partly due to their primarily experimental character, as the exposed concrete and thin glass are not suitable materials for the Romanian coastal environment.

The lack of official recognition of coastal heritage in Romania makes it almost impossible to protect these buildings. In an anonymous survey conducted in 2024 among some of the current operators of these facilities, the unanimous response was that the professionals they worked with for the renovations did not adequately explain the heritage value of the buildings. In addition, the current owners, or in some cases users, would welcome a guide to the conversion and sustainable use of these spaces. Some of them even embraced the idea of an official heritage protection measure and an official state list that would shed light on and draw attention to their respective buildings.

Following the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, there was a notable shift in the economic, legal,

03 Athletes lateral entrance,
Multipurpose Sports Hall in
Pitești. © Ruxandra Balcanu,
2024.



04 Main façade, Multipurpose
Sports Hall in Timișoara.
© Ruxandra Balcanu, 2024.



and ideological landscape of sports halls. Concurrent with this transformation was a significant shift in public perception. In contrast to other public buildings that were funded by the state during the communist period and subsequently privatized, multi-purpose sports halls, along with the majority of sports complexes and facilities, remain under state ownership. These are overseen by the Ministry of Sport and Youth. However, there was a sharp decline in investment during the 1990s compared to the communist era, resulting in the existing infrastructure requiring significant repairs. This decline can be attributed to the

fact that sports no longer constituted a priority area for the new government system.

In this context, sports halls have undergone various types of interventions. Some have been subject to minimal funding, resulting in their continued use, while others have been completely demolished to make way for new structures. In the most fortunate cases, which have undergone a major refurbishment process, sports halls have been restored to a condition that is safe for use and have been reopened. A further challenge confronting these facilities is the need to upgrade the amenities and ancillary

structures designed for athletes, which, having been constructed over half a century ago, fail to meet contemporary standards.

The ongoing interplay between municipalities, which are often unable to intervene directly, and the central authority, which lacks the necessary financial resources and a well-defined intervention strategy, further complicates the situation.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the 1950s, entertaining the masses in a controlled manner became a state policy in Socialist Romania, followed by studies and funding towards developing new architectural programs. New large-scale restaurants and bars were built, along with outdoor shopping centers opening on the seaside. Meanwhile, in the already established urban centers, new multi-purpose sports facilities opened their doors to the enthusiastic public. As this kind of architecture was relatively new throughout Europe, its aesthetic and technical aspects were remarkable for that time. Its image ranges from mid-century modern to socialist modernism, marking the shift in direction made by the entire Romanian architectural practice, which distanced itself from the realist-socialist architecture adopted by the new regime at first.

After 1989, the entertainment facilities on the seaside suffered a different fate from the sports facilities. While the sports halls remain in public ownership, the restaurants and commercial spaces are sold to different private owners; hence, a parallel approach is taken in examining them during the study.

The present situation in the two previously examined cases poses a significant threat to the immediate future of these buildings. It is evident that the absence of a formal, official list of the extended modernist heritage of the 1960s and 1970s, as designated by the Minister of Culture, renders these buildings vulnerable to loss, whether due to negligence or unauthorized alterations.

A sustainable approach to raising awareness towards these buildings, regardless of their location, can be accomplished through the update of the General Urbanistic Plan of their respective cities. Since this type of urban document contains an extensive historical study of the built layers, greater emphasis can be placed on this type of heritage. It is a small, yet safe step before an official classification, which would take years to comprise all of these buildings³³. In the context of rapid urban development that endangers the present, the necessity of establishing a form of protection, while educating the public and current users about their value, separate from the mark of the regime they bear, is paramount.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Prior to this period, only a limited number of projects had been constructed; for example, a canteen designed by architect Spiridon Spirescu, finished in 1957 in Vasile Roaita (now Eforie Sud), or the multi-purpose sports hall started in Constanta in the same year, designed by Romeo Belea, Gheorghe Dumitrascu et al. All were Soviet-inspired, with strong socialist-realist elements.
- 2 Such slogans were taken from the USSR, which was the main source of inspiration for sports and physical education organization in the first years of the Romanian socialist regime.
- 3 In Eforie (city on the Southern Romanian seaside), which is relatively a small resort, there are around 40 modernist buildings that would meet the criteria to be classified as monuments. They are all included in the historical study made for the Urban General Plan, which is yet to be approved.

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