

## SEASIDE COMMERCIAL CENTERS FROM 1960`S ROMANIA- A PARTICULAR DISPLAY OF MODERNISM/

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**Abstract.** Researching and reviewing modern heritage in a country as Romania - with a troubled political past linked to it - is somewhat difficult. Yet, in today` s time, with all the developments threatening the former layer, it is necessary.

The commercial centers that were once designed for each resort represent a particular type of experimental architecture (even as a whole, the entire project for the Romanian seaside started in the early 60` s had this characteristic). These shopping places are the prototype for the ones later placed inside preplanned residential areas across the country – of course, with slight changes according to the rather rough climate. They were open air pavilions, with glass boxes as stores and gardens patched along. The overall image resembled the one of the commercial strips, with neon lights and colour. It was a special kind of holiday atmosphere and freedom that was sought after. Furthermore, each of these architectural ensembles stands aside the box-like modernism of that time in Europe, by being charming and inviting towards visitors. Maybe the design team drew inspiration from the works of the European architects who went over the Ocean after the War.

Most of these early commercial centers are still in use during the summer. While some kept part of their original volume and plan close to the opening day, some lost their unique elements in a search to accommodate new features needed today.

**Introduction.** The construction of the Romanian coastline in the early 1960s was determined exclusively by the political decisions of the new leadership of the country, which had a series of particular architectural implications. In order to advance the new doctrine and cultivate a novel way of being, architects were permitted to conceptualize a utopian blueprint. Design teams engaged in experimentation with a modernist scenography in the newly constructed vacation destinations, striving to achieve a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding natural environment. In addition to the initial accommodation functions, which consisted of low-rise villas offering a unified level of comfort, there was a subsequent introduction of high-rise hotels. Ancillary programs, such as catering and commerce, were also integrated into the architectural plans.

The inaugural summer shopping complex was inaugurated in 1961 at Eforie Nord (a project by architect Roxana Katz, to be discussed in the initial case study), followed by the one in the resort of Mamaia and eventually the 1967 one at Neptun. The shops were delineated by glass boxes, with access to them provided via a shaded promenade featuring small gardens. Following 1973, a shift in stylistic register occurred along the coastline, although the

aforementioned buildings represent the prototype for the country`s facilities in its initial residential neighbourhoods.

The article will identify and highlight, through two case studies, the distinctive architectural characteristics of this architectural programme. They will consider the summer shops at Eforie Nord before examining a later variant at Eforie Sud. Establishing particular architectural qualities and elements represents a significant objective, particularly in the context of late, voluminous modernism, frequently exhibiting brutalist tendencies, which was prevalent in continental Europe during that period. The principles of relating and interweaving with the natural element represent nuances with which the architects of the time predominantly worked overseas. In the context of the time and, in particular, of the country, these functions also had an experimental role, the success of which at the time and its current usefulness are yet to be determined.

**Case Study 1 – Eforie Nord Summer Stores (arch. Roxana Katz, 1961).** *In Eforie, working people who come to Eforie to relax are in for a pleasant surprise. A new shopping centre is being built on the main road in the centre of the resort. A covered market, a large restaurant, an express self-service cafeteria, confectioners, dairy shop and more, all equipped with the latest technology* [1].

The beginning of the 1961 season marks the inauguration of another architectural programme in the series proposed for the restructuring of the central area of the Eforie Nord resort[2] - the Summer Stores or the Summer Shopping Complex, designed by the architect Roxana Katz. It is the first shopping centre of its kind to be built in Romania, and is the prototype for later commercial and catering facilities within residential neighbourhoods. Situated on the main road, Republicii Boulevard, the Summer Shopping Complex relates to the new Post Office building (P.T.T.R. Office), Block E of the first Rest Centre and the permanent shopping precinct on the north side. The rectangular volume, with openings corresponding to the internal gardens, is set back from the road on a platform[3]. In front of it is a landscaped green area, which provides a subtle transition between the busy public area and the covered promenade. The functions that the complex houses are made up of 14 different shops and a catering area [4]. A similar project by the same designer appeared in an improved version at Neptun in 1967.

The volume of the complex has a strong horizontal line due to the covering of a thick concrete slab - 130m x 40m [3] in size - supported by thin metal columns. The drill pipes supporting the slab are spaced at 4.75 m [3]. The slab is thickened at each column for economic reasons [3]. In this way, the main resistances are taken up with a reduced consumption of cement and steel [3]. The flexible and transparent vertical elements emphasize the line of the slab. At night it seems to float above the illuminated shops. The project has a particular resolution thanks to the alternation between diaphanous architectural elements - treated with materials such as glass and metal - and tectonic elements - treated with concrete and limestone.

The shops, originally only open during the summer months, have been designed to recreate the traditional shopping street in a modern context. Furthermore, the complex offers a form of recreation through the provision

of a covered promenade, which provides a strong visual stimulus. Furthermore, the fragmentation of the interior, achieved through the use of smaller, transparent volumes and the discontinuity of the slab, contribute to an enhanced perception of the large volume (note: From an aerial perspective, the scale of the proposed summer shop complex becomes apparent. It extends beyond the considerable area of the *Pescăruș* restaurant-cafeteria and is of a larger magnitude than the interwar buildings situated across the street.). The portico solution, comprising a thickened concrete slab and metal stilts, is also employed on the opposite side of Republic Boulevard at the food market. The market area, where the stalls are situated, is distinguished by its U-shaped configuration within the *Restructuring Plan* for the central area of Eforie (as proposed in *Revista Arhitectura RPR*, no.4-5/1961).

Tourists may gain access to the site via three routes: from Republic Avenue and through the side gardens on the north and south sides. The eastern side of the property is accessed via a side street, which provides convenient access for the delivery and servicing of goods. The commercial units are situated within glass boxes. The interior is characterized by the absence of conventional boundaries, with glass walls providing uninterrupted views from the street. The cafeteria, which includes ancillary functions, is situated at the northern end of the building. The serving area is enclosed in a glass box that can be opened onto a terrace that complements it. The building's facade is characterized by a geometrically cut-out wall, which allows light to filter through while providing privacy. The buffet area is situated between three shops parallel to the street, with an uncovered garden and water basin separating it from the shops. The shops themselves are constructed with movable glass walls [3], each containing a small storage space, and sell a range of products including sports goods, beach items and gifts. The courtyard wall of the sports shop is completely opaque and clad with Techirghiol stone [3]. At the geometric centre of the volume is another uncovered courtyard, elongated in a north-south direction. Additionally, the courtyard features a rectangular water basin with a crossing bridge. The plan presented in the magazine *Arhitectura RPR*, no. 4-5/1961 depicts the interplay between the concrete slab floor, finished with pebble gravel [3], the green space, and part of the planters. The horizontal finish is similarly maintained in the shops to reinforce the coherence of the space [3].

Parallel to the long central courtyard, on the east side of the building, are the grocery stores: fruits and vegetables, bread, groceries and dairy products. Each has its own storage area enclosed by solid walls. In the grocery area there is a staff toilet, a cloakroom and an office area. Then, at the southern end of the complex, there is a shoe shop and a boutique, followed by two smaller rooms for the lottery office and the perfumery. A final garden, which also marks the entrance to the portico from the P.T.T.R. direction, separates them from the tobacconist and haberdasher. The shop signs are arranged on a glass frieze integrated into the shop windows and lit from above [3].

The construction that formerly housed the summer shops at Eforie Nord continues to serve its original purpose. The self-service buffet was initially transformed into a general store and later into a grocery store. The concrete wall with geometric apertures is still extant, while a substantial portion of the former service area is enclosed by opaque walls. The terrace

area of the buffet, situated on the left side of the complex, was subsequently subdivided and sold, as was the entire rear garden. The complex is currently adjacent to a restaurant and a hotel of considerable height, which obstructs the north side of the complex. The majority of the current functions are permanently open, which has resulted in the replacement of the universal shopfront. Many of the original units now have a full front parapet and PVC joinery. The three glass boxes facing the avenue are enclosed and converted, and the transparency of the frontage has been lost due to the additional insertion of other volumes. The metal pillars of the structure can still be seen, but unfortunately the slab has suffered substantial seepage and is not in good condition.

Both the inner and outer gardens have suffered most from recent changes. To the right of the street garden on the south side, the paving slab has been removed. It has been replaced by a two-story building and commercial space. Nearby, the tobacconist and haberdashery have been replaced by a street-facing restaurant with a terrace, which also occupies a large part of the boulevard's green space. The other two courtyards are covered with cement and partly built with other units that do not correspond to the original plan. They can be identified today by the arrangement of the openings in the slab, which are also partially covered. At the rear of the ensemble, where the grocery shop used to be, there is a household goods shop and a shoe shop next to it. In the dense fabric of the center of the resort of Eforie Nord, the summer shop complex stands out on the ground plan, but it is almost impossible to see it from the street.

**Case Study 2 - Eforie Sud Commercial Complex.** At the same time, in the early 1960s, Eforie Sud inaugurated architectural programmes with a commercial or catering focus [5], as discussed in the case of Eforie Nord. The Carmen Sylva resort was first developed before the Second World War, but after 1955, with the construction of the Eforie I and II leisure centres, the main work was transferred to Eforie Nord. In Eforie Sud, there is already an established architectural fabric and image, so the new additions to the site do not alter the picturesque specificity of the seaside resort. Moreover, the works were largely taken over by the design team from Constanta and are less well documented in the specialist press of the time (note: Although Eforie Sud has seen a number of new buildings over the years, which have increased the number of holidaymakers, they have not attracted as much interest as those in Eforie Nord. The magazine *Arhitectura RPR* gives only superficial coverage to a very small part of them, probably because they were realised by the design team from Constanța and not by the already award-winning design team from Bucharest. The general press also paid little attention to them until after 1970, which is no longer relevant).

In 1961, a new shopping complex was inaugurated in Eforie Sud, which included a self-service restaurant [6]. The self-service restaurant constituted a novel concept at that time. The building is situated at the junction of Stefan cel Mare Street and Republicii Boulevard, on the south side of the street, on the same axis as the cold baths on Lake Techirghiol. The complex is oriented in a north-south direction, parallel to the road linking Constanța and Mangalia, similar to the Eforie Nord summer shop complex. However, its footprint is noticeably smaller, and it better respects the proportion of the existing subdivisions.

As in the case of the Eforie Nord example, the spatial communication with the surrounding environment is maintained through the openings in the slab, even when the environmental gardens are situated exclusively on the exterior. In terms of architectural aesthetics, the most striking element is the treatment of opaque vertical surfaces. While glass curtain walls are employed to delineate the boundaries of the commercial establishments, the opaque Techirghiol stone cladding of the partition walls exerts a dominant visual presence. The architects put forth a tectonic approach that is in close alignment with the surrounding visual context, wherein the majority of villas constructed during the interwar period exhibit a comparable treatment of their facades. Indeed, the material is employed in both the programmes constructed prior to 1960, which adhere to the realistic-socialist style, and those erected subsequently in Eforie Sud. The canteen project, designed by architect Spiridon Spirescu in 1957 [7], incorporates limestone from Techirghiol on the exterior, thereby evoking the appearance of an aged structure.

The shopping complex is organised with the pavilion, which contains the group of shops, located in the northern part, and the cafeteria situated opposite, at the southern end. The catering unit is a popular destination for tourists, offering a variety of hot and cold dishes [6]. The supporting structure comprises rectangular metal pillars, reinforced by concrete beams. The roofing is of the terrace type, accentuated on the facades by a doubled attic, which also facilitates water drainage. The concept of a unified floor treatment, a cement mosaic with geometric accents, extends from the circulation area to the interior of the shops.

Today, *Pescărușul Curios* shopping complex (as it is now called) is still open, both in the summer and part of it in the winter. Some of the original aluminium joinery has been replaced and parts of the building have been permanently sealed off, either with solid walls or by inserting additional volumes. The cafeteria has been replaced by a larger grocery store. Some of the slab voids have been filled in to make them suitable for permanent use. However, the moulded benches that originally formed the portico and internal promenade are still in place.

**Conclusions.** In conclusion, the summer shop complex has been a successful architectural program due to its prominence over time. Both seaside and neighborhood shopping centers have retained their original location and function, although they have undergone a number of aesthetic and volumetric changes over time. However, these changes are generally correlated with the failure of modern architecture to work with the local climate.

Holiday resort shopping centers can be considered universal examples of good architectural practice, technically and stylistically ingenious works. They recreate the shopping street, but are adapted to a colorful, summery, mid-20th century architectural style. However, without some form of concrete protection and at least professional recognition of their value, they risk being lost in later real estate developments.

**Acknowledgements.** I would like to express gratitude to Professor Ana Maria Zahariade for her meticulous guidance and exemplary patience. I am also indebted to Professor Irina Tulbure Moldovan for her unwavering support of my academic pursuits, which she has encouraged since the inception of my academic journey.

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6. \*\*\*, “Pe litoral - În vizită prin câteva restaurante”, in *Dobrogea Nouă*, 29.06.1962/ No.4324.
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## Figures.

FIGURE 1 - Eforie Nord Summer Stores, photo *Revista Arhitectura RPR*, nr.4-5/1961.

FIGURE 2 - Eforie Nord Summer Stores, today, photo arch. Alexandra Ioana Radu.

FIGURE 3 - Neptun Summer Stores, photo *Revista Arhitectura RPR*, nr.1/1968.

